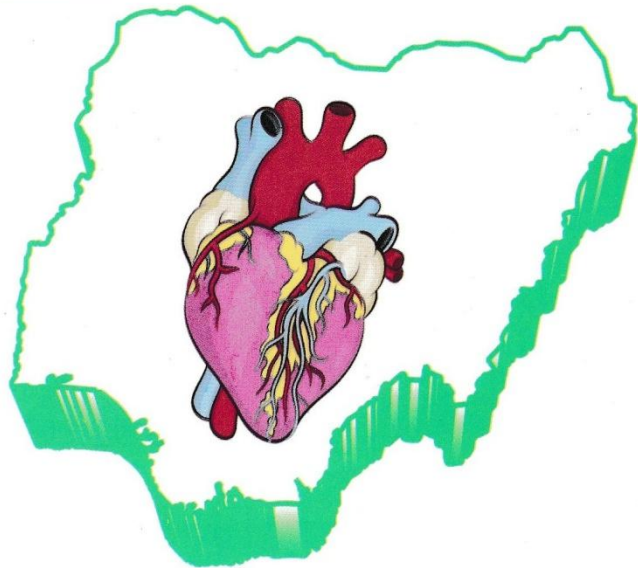


# **DIALECTICS OF RELIGION AND NATIONAL CONSCIENCE**



**ANTHONIA ESSIEN  
DONATUS PIUS UKPONG**

*DIALECTICS OF RELIGION AND NATIONAL CONSCIENCE*

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## CHAPTER TWO

### RELEVANCE OF RELIGION IN THE SOCIETY: FROM THEOLOGICAL AND PHENOMINOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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#### Introduction

The relevance of religion in the society cannot be overemphasized. This becomes more pronounced in societies like traditional Africa where the sacred and the secular are interrelated. Religion exerts a profound influence on all societies and it is alive and active in all areas of human activities; in maintaining law and order and promulgating unity and progress in the society. Religion plays active roles in that it regulates the social, moral, economic and political system of the society (Onunwa 2005:p.157). Religion has proven itself as a catalyst motivating individuals to develop spiritual qualities and empowering them to become care-givers to their fellow human-beings and to contribute to the betterment of their communities.

Religion, by its very nature is multidisciplinary and poly-methodic discipline. In other words, there are many approaches through which religion can be studied and assessed effectively in order to gain an insight of what the subject stands out to be and applied in the society. Many disciplines are concerned in explicating the subject using their own peculiar methods. The way sociology sees religion is different from the philosophical viewpoint about religion. Also, theology and phenomenology are not left behind in the study about religion. But theology and phenomenology are two extremes that consider the essential elements of religion otherwise of its relevance in the twenty-first century

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to faith and secular borders respectively. Therefore, approaching and assessing the relevance of religion in the society on the perspective of theology and phenomenology is the main focus of this work.

#### Conceptual Classification

Religion: Even though religion has no universal acceptable definition because there are legions of definitions and no single one of them can satisfy everyone. But, it could be examined according to how it is used in any context. This attempt serves as a working definition that keeps the researcher from wandering off the point. In fact, the definitional attempt guides the researcher from the beginning of the research to its conclusion.

Since this work deals with two approaches to religion namely theology and phenomenology, it also considers two definitional approaches such as ontological and functional definitions respectively. Ontological definition looks at the religion predominantly from what it is while functional definition thinks primarily about the roles of religion. Emile Durkheim as cited by Umoh (2015:p.17), defines religion as “a system of beliefs and practices which concern sacred things, that is things set apart and forbidden, which unites into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them”. Again, Bolaji Idowu as cited by Anyanwu (1999:p.3), puts “religion as the means by which the transcendent God as spirit and man’s (human’s) essential self communicate”. These two examples represent ontological definitions of religion that deals with the isness or essence of religion. The substantive elements in the definitions above are sacredness and transcendence. In other words, any activity that connotes sacredness or any association that involves transcendence is utterly religious.

Functional definitions of religion see religion not from its essence but in terms of the functions it performs in the society. Hence, Emile Durkheim (1915:p.207) sees religion as a means of social control in the society. For Anyanwu (1999:p.4), Karl Marx’s definition is that religion is the opium of the people. Going through the legions of definitions of religion, it could be deduced that majority of sociologists define religion

functionally than they define ontologically that is, looking at its essence. Functional definitions are endearing to phenomenology. Here, Umoh (2015:pp.18-19) concedes, "Definitionally, the sociology of religion is the study of the phenomenon of religion as a social institution, that is, in so far that it has meaning, function and consequence for society".

The two definitional strategies serve the curiosity of the two kinds of adherents of religion in the society namely the pious dogmatics who are concerned with the content of religion giving its meaning from what religion is as well as what it is not; and others who may be non dogmatics, agnostics, or secular people who see religion as one of the institutions of the society just like family, education, politics and others that need to produce social functions for the development of the society.

Moreover, etymological definition could be useful in this work too. Religion is derived from the Latin *religio* which means relationship and moral bond. Religion is also said to come from *relegere* which means to unite or link together and *Ligare* which means to bind together (Omogbe 2000:p.3). Tertullian as cited by Imasogie (2009:p.123), sees religion from the angle of "religare", which means to "connect" which refer to the bond of piety that bends to God. Therefore, this work sees religion very relevant in the society; a tool with a dialogical relationship between the transcendence and human and among humans. It also defines the worldview of a people, the totality of life of a people reflecting in the spiritual-theological as well as secular-phenomenological spheres.

Theology: The word theology comes from the Greek words *theos* and *logos* that are combined to mean the study of God. Christian theology is an attempt to understand God as He is revealed in the Holy Bible. Therefore, theology is the art and science of knowing what we can know and understand about God in a systematic and reasonable manner.

Till today, the definition of theology by Anselm of Canterbury stands out very useful to describe theology, "theology is a science seeking understanding" (Arkinson 1995:p.162). Karl Barth (1963:pp.49-50) has an expanded version of the postulation of Anselm. For him,

Theology is the science seeking the knowledge of the word of God spoken in God's work. It is also a science of learning in the school of Holy Scripture that witnesses to the Word of God, science laboring in the

guess for truth which is inescapably required of the community called by the Word of God.

Originally, *theology* was referred to as a Christian enterprise, at least, it was inherited by the Christians from the Greeks and applied to God and Trinity. Later on, Thomas Aquinas (in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*) developed a theology that includes ethics, doctrine, philosophy, spirituality, etc. then *theology* became the queen of sciences mediating between humanities and sciences (American Catholic University 1967:p.52). At present, theology as a term has a widespread claim by all religions referring to deity and relationship with the universe. Today, there is Christian theology as well as the theologies of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, African Traditional Religion, etc.

Society: The term, society is a group of people involved in persistent social interaction, or a large social grouping sharing the same geographical or social territory, typically subjected to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectation (Akama 2008:p.68).

According to Luchmann (1975:p.283), society is a social group that manages to meet most of its own needs, maintains a system of social interaction across generations, and has a discernible internal organization.

Phenomenology: Phenomenology as a term was first coined in 1764 by the Swiss-Germans Mathematician and Philosopher, Johann Heinrich Lambert from two Greek terms *phenomenon* which means "that which appears" or "the setting for the articulation of what shows itself" and *logos* which means science or study. Therefore phenomenology refers to the science that studies the nature of human experience and activities as it appears and seen by the people (Ekeke 2011:p.248).

### Theological Approaches to Religion

Whaling (1999:pp.238- 239) gives four points of theological approaches to religion. These approaches are summarized below:

- i. Descriptive, historical, positivistic approach focuses on description of religion rather than confessing the faith of religion. It is epistemological rather than soteriological which applies more to reason than faith.
- ii. Systematic theological approach which attempts to summarize the doctrine of the faith community in a confessional sense. The element of the belief are shown so that despite different denominations, all of them still affirm their basic doctrines. Such doctrines include belief in God (theology proper), belief in Christ (Christology), belief in the Holy Spirit (Pneumatology), belief in Trinity (ontological oneness-functional threeness of God but One), belief in humanity (anthropology) belief in salvation (soteriology), belief in one catholic church (ecclesiology) and belief in the final ends of humans (eschatology).
- iii. Philosophical theological approach which attempts to engage positions in theological- religious debate with the aim to create doctrinal positions and confessions for the faith community. It also creates a dialoguing interest with the surrounding cultures to establish some sense of contextualization.
- iv. Dialoguing theological approach otherwise known as theology of dialogue with great desire to understand other religion not for apologetic reasons but for peaceful coexistence of different religions in a multicultural society like Nigeria.

Theological approaches to religion as demonstrated above can refer to the basic methodology of theology, especially, faith and reason among others. Loosely put, faith is often used for any set of religious commitments or even secular commitments such as Marxism. Faith is also used as a synonym for religion, for example, "The World major faith". In the contemporary sense, faith is a lower form of knowledge or partial knowledge characterized by a degree of uncertainty and based on either a lack of evidence, or evidence which is inadequate for a full

conviction. But relating faith to theology, we can simply say that "faith is belief in God". It is the fundamental cognitive attitude of trust in the Transcendent Being or Sovereign God who is believed to exist.

In Christian theology and tradition, faith is both epistemological and soteriological. The question is "How do you know that God exist?" In trying to prove the existence of God, one tries to acquire certain knowledge outside the scripture about God. This kind of faith is known as epistemological faith. Here, Erickson cited Karl Barth (2006:p.218) to point out that "faith is *fiducia*, but also includes *notitia*", *fiducia* represents faith and *notitia* is Knowledge.

Soteriologically, it speaks of how salvation may be grasped. To have faith in God is an indication of belonging to the family of God. Faith unites the believer with Christ (John 1:12, 3:3,16, Rom. 1:17). Luther's work on "The Freedom of a Christian" upholds that faith unites the soul of the believer with Christ as a bride is united with the bridegroom (Luther 1961:p.43). This points to mutual commitment and union between Christ and the believer.

What is faith in a philosophical question is the meaning of reason. It is like a child's answer to this question thus: faith is believing what is not true. Philosophy uses reason, being rational about the subject. Just as science refuses to accept authorities and their pronouncements at face value, but depends on experiments. Philosophy likewise, refuses to accept what authorities say without analysis and evaluation. Instead of the experiment of the scientist, the philosopher uses reason.

Philosophically, reason is the faculty or power that allows humans to think or deliberate rationally, to see the connections between propositions and draw proper inferences. Reason is often contrasted with sensation and memory as the power to make inferences.

### Phenomenological Approaches to the study of Religion

Unah and Osegenwune (2010:p.117) have advised that at any point of doing research on phenomenology, the two Greek words that form phenomenology should be combined and methodological conception would emerge. That is combining *phenomenon* and *logos* to arrive at the

methodological conception of phenomenology. *φαινόμενον* (*phainomenon*) is that which displays itself as it is in itself. It is a way of thinking and cognizing reality. Another word is *λογος* (*logos*) that has competing connotations and allusions in the Greek usage with *phainomenon*. It means word, concept, reason, judgment, ground, definition, or relationship. But the literal fundamental meaning of *logos* as discourse means the same thing as to show, that is, to make manifest what one is talking about in one's discourse (Unah and Osegenwune 2010:p.117). It therefore implies that the function of *logos* as discourse is to let something be seen, that is, to let us see clearly what it is that the dimension is all about. Discourse as *logos* is capable of letting what is talked about stand necked and clear. Martin Heidegger (1959:p.56) posits, "What is said...is drawn from what the talk is about, so that discursive communication, in what it says...makes manifest what it is talking about, and thus makes this assessable to the other party".

Nevertheless, when *logos* as discourse is properly conceived it has the character of speaking objectively. For instance *logos* is added to a number of disciplines namely, theology, anthropology, and biology, just to mention these few. Rather being subjective, *logos* as suffix added to these disciplines make them objective. Therefore combining *logos* with *Phainomenon* yields phenomenology, the science of setting aside metaphysical questions and observing the phenomenon the way it is being shown. Then the following approaches of Religion:

(a) Phenomenological reduction or Purified consciousness: In looking at religion Unah and Osegenwune (2010:p.118) cited Heidegger and declare: Only when the meaning of something is such that it makes a pretension of showing itself – that is, of being a phenomenon – can it show itself as something which it is not. Only then can it merely look so and so.

Kant as cited by Unah and Osegenwune (2010:p.117) posits that "what appears" is phenomenon. Many times, what appears of religions suggest a kingdom of what does not appear to be especially when prophecies, dreams and visions fail to be fulfilled. Here, the human mind may be confused. Why should religion be seen as a phenomenon when some elements of religion is subjective? Unah and Osegenwune (2010:p.112) suggest that the human mind should be orientated on what appears of

religion which is the objective part of religion. While in the field observing the religion, the mind should be unburdened of obscuring preconceptions about religion. Bamboozling the mind from preconception is known as "eidetic vision" (Unah and Osegenwune 2010:p.112) or in our context, phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction requires intellectual purification so that the phenomenon, or religion which shows itself will manifest itself to our free openness. It also requires purified consciousness which is the free openness, which lets the religion studied be seen clearly and distinctively as it is.

(b) *Epoche* or Bracketing: *Epoche* or bracketing is another phenomenological methodology which requires the suspension of one's pre-knowledge over the phenomenon. *Epoche* is a Greek term which means to hold back or control one's reaction. For Unah and Osegenwune (2010:p.115), bracketing is about "the character of the researcher, the one who ventures into the unfamiliar difficult terrain, the region of what really is, the territory of the subject, religion". Although, it is a difficult venture, bracketing requires that the researcher should be objective and thorough toward the religious tradition that is studied. It holds that the knowledge that one has acquired from childhood about one or more religious traditions is bias or partial knowledge. So the researcher needs intellectual learning which is phenomenology in order to avoid those biases. Husserl cited by Ekeke (2011:p.251) holds that this approach promotes "methodological neutrality or objectivity". Here the researcher must suspend all prior beliefs and value judgment and be totally open to matters concerning religion. A phenomenologist takes side with no religious tradition

(c) Comparative Approach: The phenomenological study of religion is comparative, but only in a limited sense. Because of phenomenology's emphasis on data, the more data incorporated the more potential significance of the study. Meaning may best be found in the data by using comparative approach; but phenomenologists do not seek to describe similar practices across diverse religious traditions for the purpose of rating them from best to worst. Having divorced themselves from the evolutionary approach to religious development in the twentieth century, and having bracketed off truth questions, phenomenologists are loathe to

return to a form of comparison which might imply superiority or inferiority of one type of experience within a religious tradition as opposed to a similar practice in another religion.

(d) Straitjacketing: this method simply means putting the record straight without bias. It is very useful in reporting about the research in religion. A religious tradition studied may look subjective but the phenomenologist is to open up close ends of such religious tradition. From the recording of the raw data to the analysis should follow the format of the descriptive research. Unah and Osegenwune (2010:p.120) assert that this method persisted through the ages until the advent of phenomenological mode of treating a thing making it necked, clear, and formulating the proper access to a being(s).

### Appraisal of Phenomenology of Religion

Phenomenology of religion looks at religion as being made up of different components. It allows this components to be studied in order to gain insight of the phenomena. According to George James, when he studied Pierre Daniel Chantepele de la Saussaye, W. Brade Kristensen and Gerardus van der Leeuw (1995:p.45) on the subject postulates that phenomenology of religion deals with two areas namely the “essence and manifestation”, what consist the phenomena and what it can do.

James (1995:p.43) adds that “phenomenology of religion prepares historical data through which philosophical analysis could be done”. Phenomenologists do not seek to evaluative judgments, which are considered the domain of philosophy of religion. Rather, it seeks accurate and appropriate descriptions and interpretations of religious phenomena. Such phenomena include rituals, symbols, prayers, ceremonies, sacred persons and places, art, creeds and other religious exercise. Ideally, the phenomenological approach is a more productive one in which the researcher’s goal is to allow the phenomena under investigation in some sense to speak for themselves, and issues of external validity are considered.

Phenomenologists have as a goal, the maintenance of a descriptive outlook in gathering, sifting, comparing, and analyzing the data of their studies. Above all, in the phenomenological approach one attempts to describe as accurately as possible the phenomena under consideration, and may include not only the events that occur but also the motives behind the events.

Also, “phenomenology of religion avoids reductionism” (Ekeke 2011:p.258). This is so significant that the criticism of reductionist tendencies in the study of religion has occupied a significant amount of the phenomenological literature. Also, people who fall victim of reductionism try to reduce and eventually trivialize religious phenomena to purely sociological, psychological, anthropological, economic, or environmental terms is a fundamental mistake. “Such reductions ignore the complexity of the human experience, impose social values on transcendental issues and ignore the unique intentionality of the religious participant” (Moreau 2001:p.225).

Phenomenologists of religion suspend question of truth for the sake of developing insights into the essence of religious experience. The emphasis is on developing a genuine empathetic understanding of the experience in question, at times involving participation in the experiences under consideration to gain first-hand information (Walter, 2012: pp.40-45).

However, phenomenology of religion as part of human adventure cannot exist without blame. Human biases or what Ekeke (2011:p.260) calls “hidden agendas” can cripple the phenomenologists of religion negatively from doing a purely descriptive research. Human bias does not exclude anyone from the blame, no one is above mistake. Omeregbé (2000:p.310) sees every human being as being affected by subjectivity described as “the inner dimension of (hu)man’s being: (hu)man’s interior being”. This implies that instead of being descriptive, phenomenological research in religion could emerge to be subjective.

Also, culture, historical setting, and social, situation and economic recession may drive a subjective research at the end. The phenomenologist is expected to be open minded in the field but if the

researcher is sent to work on a tradition or culture he/she is familiar to, the research may not purely be objective.

### **Relevance of Religion in the Society**

Religion considered from the perspectives of theology and phenomenology has relevance in the society such as

(i) Dialogue and tolerance among religions in the same society: dialogue among religions can be expressed in two major dimensions known as inter and intra religious dialogue. Inter religious dialogue promotes desires for the understanding and toleration of different religions in the society. While intra religious dialogue creates understanding with the different units in a particular religion. For example, it provides a platform for different denominations in Christianity to interact and understand themselves. Any society with diverse cultures is bound to have many religions. Omoregbe (2002:p.12) accepts this postulation when he argues that culture plays a part in the choice of the religion of a people. In this sense, the culture which gives birth to a particular person preferably chooses the religion that such a person belongs to.

Theology applies an approach known as dialoguing theological approach otherwise called theology of dialogue with the view to understanding other religions so that the adherents of different religions can relate with and tolerate one another for peaceful coexistence in the society they find themselves. Descriptive, historical, positivistic approach which focuses on the description of religion rather than confessing the faith of religion sets a paradigm for dialogue and understanding of another faith tradition. For instance, the fatherhood of Abraham in Judaism, Christianity and Islam becomes the paradigm to tolerate them as brothers or sisters. Today, some adherents of African Traditional Religion claim the fatherhood of Abraham by mythically thinking that they migrated from Palestine to occupy some places in Africa.

In the area of phenomenology, its method of Purified consciousness is applied. This method requires free openness to different religions in the community. Often times what shows itself in religion is

pragmatic (what works out to be good). Phenomenology hereby requires different adherents of religion to be pragmatic to what is visible in the religions that may serve good purposes in the society.

Moreover, the socio-economic and political significance of dialogue in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Nigeria is an example of a heterogeneous society with multiple cultures and religions. If the citizens of Nigeria could gain proper understanding of religion from theological and phenomenological approaches and their valuable lessons about inter and intra religious dialogue, the country would have been saved the alarming socio-economic and political brutality in the country today.

(ii) Interdisciplinary Relevance: Religion itself is an interdisciplinary discipline. There are disciplines such as philosophy of religion, psychology of religion, anthropology of religion, phenomenology of religion, sociology of religion, history of religion, ethics of religion, science and religion, politics and religion, religion and law, religion and music, etc. the list of discipline that relates directly or indirectly is very long and cannot be covered on the pages of this work. The emphasis is that very many disciplines study religion. What do they see in religion? Some of them give religion an area of prominence in their field of endeavor. What endears religion to these disciplines? Moreover, religious relevance is found in every field with peculiar interest to each of the field. This is true because the way sociology studies religion is different from how philosophy studies religion and the roles religion plays in sociology are different from the religious roles in philosophy. With the large number of disciplines that engage religion, religious relevance cannot be limited.

Religion serves concrete relevance in the areas of theology and phenomenology that concern this work. In one of the approaches of theology notably the systematic theological approach which attempts to summarize the doctrine of the faith community in a confessional sense and philosophical theological approach which attempts to engage positions in theological- religious debate. Religion provides succor to the adherents and gives them a platform where they can anchor their faith. Human beings are plagued with metaphysical questions about the world, life, death and even life after death. Science and all forms of technical know-how cannot answer such questions. Religion through theology

provides answers that satisfy the adherents. In the area of phenomenology, religious relevance is epistemological. Phenomenology uses eidetic reduction and bracketing to address the agnostics, those belonging to no religion and free scholars of religion giving them information about the existence of religion in the society. Eidetic reduction and bracketing propel proper understanding of religion and neutrality. This promotes respect to religions.

(iii) Provision of Humanpower needs of the society: this is the area of concern to most students of religious studies and philosophy as they present their worry about their carrier after course of study. To satisfy their curiosity, religion trains scholars to serve anywhere human beings are found.

In the field of theology, religion provides religious elites and missionaries to serve in different religious traditions. Today we have pastors who are serving Christianity and imams serving Islam. In phenomenology, religion provides humanpower to serve in ministry like culture and tourism, women affairs, social work, education, religious affairs and others. The employees of religious studies receive equal treatment as other graduates from other disciplines. Job opportunities are enormous. For example, scholars of English language and mathematics do not complain where they will serve after school just because these courses are offered in all levels of education. Religion is also offered in all levels of education, from kindergarten to the university as mathematics and English language. Scholars of religion have wide range of opportunities to serve.

Religion in phenomenological study provides teachers suitable to teach academic religious studies in such a way that will imbue mutual respect and understanding, tolerance of religions among teachers and students. This is to say that pious dogmatics should not be found in the department of academic study of religions. The reason being that pious dogmatics are influenced by the faith they professed. If their commitment to their faith is very strong, they may find it very difficult to deal with issues of other religion or faith objectively.

(iv) Promotion of Social and Moral Values: Religion especially from the theological perspective promotes social and moral values like truth,

honestly, non-violence, service, love, discipline etc. True adherents of the religion with religious academic exposure in theology internalize these virtues and become disciplined citizens of the society. In phenomenological teaching in religion, scholars are taught about the essence of religion basically how to understand what religion stand for and its manifestations. Here the values are explicated.

Gamede and Iwen (2015:p.835) portrays religion with bad light. For them,

Religion... retards social change, religious believes are conservatives as a result; religion has become source of conflict between the individual and the society. It is on this basis that religion is seen today in Nigeria as a deciding factor of one's fortune, an intoxicating mixture in the contemporary Nigeria.

Empirically, the above submission is somehow true, many religious mayhems are taking place in Nigeria and outside the country. For instance, the recent killing in Kaduna State in January 2017 is described as religious insurgence. But this way of describing religion in term of relevance is itself irreligion. Unfortunately, not every religious practitioner obtains academic training and discipline of religious study.

Some people claim that it is frivolously a waste of time and other resources to be subjected for training in academic religious studies reason being that everybody in some way or the other is involved in or with religion. So religion should not be given a special recognition with others as a discipline worthy of study in the university. Is it not that mathematics seems familiar to people? Every day's affairs need calculation and miscalculation results in failure. Yet mathematics that is offered in our school system proves that it is an unfamiliar discipline. Graduate of mathematics who spared no pains in doing mathematics makes little or no mistake in calculation. Similarly, music and language are most familiar disciplines but these disciplines are given prominent attention in the school system so that those who enroll for these courses will gain mastery and became skillful in their uses. This implies that those in the



forefront of the so called religious violence and insurgence are not religious academically.

It is worthy of note that academic religious studies is capable to enhance its scholars with comparative religious values. A student of academic study of religion comes to the department with values from one religion. During his/ her training, the student is exposed to the values of many other religions therefore gains an all-round experience about religious traditions practiced around the world as well as those practice within the cultural area of the learner.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

Religion has come to be part of human existence. Any discipline that has much to do with human beings has contributed enormous relevance and should be given prominent attention. Theological study approaches religion basically acting as a guide in providing grounding knowledge about the nature of God, universe and humanity, how God relates to the entire world especially humanity and how human beings relate with one another. Phenomenological study of religion is the approach that considers the essence of religion, in other words, the meaning or description of the religion. Its aim is not to function as a world-view or an ideology but as a means to achieve a goal that are not themselves proven or affirmed as self-evidence and absolute.

Theological study and phenomenology of religion in their academic learning and research reveal that religion is a discipline that utterly influences human beings and deals with the question of what it means to be human. Since it is multidimensional, it also influences various dimensions of human activities such as education, culture, economy, politics, governance, etc. Therefore, religion should be given a prominent attention in academic syllabus.

The Government should ensure that practitioners are not fanatical but be subjected to training in different approaches of religion. This will enhance correct understanding of religion and resultantly strengthen the

possibility for dialogue and peaceful coexistence in multi-cultural society like our in Nigeria.

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