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“Lived religion” in youth ministry: a pragmatic reflection from Nigeria

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Abstract

Lived religion is a reflection on the influence of religion on how people live their daily lives in the community, school, society, and other religious and social institutions. This paper investigates the practice of lived religion within the Nigeria youth ministry. Praxis entails what people do daily, oriented and guided by action, and not just theoretical knowledge or the dogma of a religious tradition or rituals. In investigating the youth ministry praxis in Africa (with a focus on the Nigerian context), this paper engages with Gregg and Scholefield, and Osmer’s pragmatic theological task, because the framework is action guided, thus investigates what youth ministry is actually doing among African youth.

Introduction

Compared to dogmatic religion, lived religion is a multidimensional religious practice that creates a multi-religious society and a community with different forms of religious praxis. Harvey (2013:192), Ammerman (2007:229) and Pace (2007:37) note that lived religion can be studied and lived as a practice of religion that invites the religious cross-fertilisation of different religious traditions. Gregg and Scholefield’s exploration of lived religion shows that lived religion can also be studied as a contemporary religious syncretism – the

synchrony of religious worldviews to give a common understanding (Gregg & Scholefield 2015:2). In this regard, Beyers (2010:2), and Gregg and Scholefield (2015:13) contend that lived religion can also be considered as comparative or interreligious dialogue/theology. Gregg and Scholefield (2015:7), Pace (2007:37), and Beyers (2010:8) argue that a religious organisation or affiliation can be investigated using the lens of lived religion to understand the religion. This paper seeks to investigate how Christian youth ministry is viewed through the lens of lived religion in the everydayness of Nigerian youth.

The crux of this paper is to argue for lived religion as an overriding praxis in church youth ministry. Roeland and Ganzevoort (2014:91, 93) situate, and we infer: praxis is the domain of lived religion. Entailing that, praxis is primarily concerned with what people do rather than focusing on theological dogma of religious institutions.

Although not undermining the cogent significance of theological dogma and doctrine for youth ministry in Africa, and especially in Nigeria, this paper argues for an action-guided and pro-activeness in youth ministry that touches the practical, everydayness of the young people in Nigeria.

In the current context of a pluralised religious society in which religious traditions and organisations are seeking followers and attempting to be understood by the non-adherent sphere of the populace, the actions of the followers inform the populace's view of what each religious tradition and organisation believes. This speaks to the methodologies of how the theology of Christian youth ministry should touch the everyday life of religious believers and followers. Among the four methodologies proposed to invite the praxis of action-guided Christian ministries are operant theology, espoused theology, normative theology, and formal theology. According to Cameron et al (2010:16) "operant theology" is the theology that is seen in the practical lives of people before it is formally reflected on. This implies that the action carried out by religious followers define the essence of their religion. Max Weber (1958:181), who was a renowned sociologist in the early twentieth century, argues that a religious organisation can lose its religious and ethical meaning if the followers of that religion exhibit what he calls "mundane passion". According to Weber (1958:181) it means that the mundaneness of passion is exhibited when the religious-spiritual values of religious followers do not

transcend the theoretical ideology. In contemporary parlance a religion is viewed to be mundane if the followers who claim allegiance to such a religion do not practically walk (and work) the talk.

In response to Weber, Ammerman (2007:4) argues that, for religious traditions not to be viewed as mundane in the twenty-first century, religion will have to be an everyday practice in people's lives, just like "science, capitalism, politics are pervasive and powerful in the everyday lives of ever-expanding layers of the world's population. Christian youth ministry will be viewed as significant or insignificant to the youth depending on how the practice of its everydayness is felt and experienced by the youth. If youth ministry is merely theoretical, then the chances are that it will become a religious tradition that is not meaningful to the everyday needs of the Nigerian youth.

In their reasoning on why religious traditions and organisations in the Christian faith (like Christian youth ministry) should not be merely theoretical and dogmatic, Gregg and Scholefield (2015:14) note that, "for centuries, theological discourse and dogma dominated approaches, and of course this is still important, but in recent times, lived religion gets more credence to people than reported or represented religion". The lived religion of religious institutions and organisations should be practically lived in everyday life and be meaningful to people.

Christian youth ministry in Nigeria and Africa is not a mere theoretical youth organisation, but a Christian organisation that infiltrates the everyday lives of the youth. Weber (2015:1) argued that youth ministry in Africa has been for decades of positive influence in the life of young people through different Para-church organizations. Additionally, youth ministry, as we have experienced it and in which we have been involved in Nigeria for over a decade, initiates practical measures of influencing the youth through approach like caretaking, and discipleship as an integral fibre of its praxis (Chiroma 2015:73). That is, youth ministry care likes offering students scholarship to further their studies and connects them with older people in society to source jobs for the youth, especially because unemployment is a major problem among Nigerian youth (Osakwe 2013:4).

Youth ministry in Abuja¹, Nigeria is a paradigm of caregiving as an approach in action-guided youth ministry. The caregiving of the Christian lived religion is a practice that endears youth ministry to the general populace of Nigerian youth. Care in ministry is fundamental as a field of practice that invites a variety of actors (Roeland and Ganzevoort 2014:94). In Nigeria, youth ministry are active actors in administering care as a practice in ministry to young people. Elucidating the argument by Roeland and Ganzevoort, Ononogbu and Chiroma (2018:49) add that youth ministry in Nigeria must move beyond programs to embrace care-giving that will empower young people to live out their faith in all facets of their lives.

Theoretical and theological framework

The theoretical framework for this article is as argued by Gregg and Scholefield (2015:14). Arguing for a framework in understanding lived religion, they note that:

For centuries, theological discourse and dogma dominated approaches, and of course this is still important, but in recent times, lived religion of religion get more credence to people than reported or represented religion.

The point is that religion of religious institutions and organisations should not be merely theoretical but practically lived-in everyday life, and thus provide existential meaning to people. To explicate a framework for lived religion, Gregg and Scholefield (2015:1) penned an experience of their first year undergraduate Religious Studies student notes that, “it is most important to have an understanding of religion through the eyes of its followers- it helps us learn why they follow a particular tradition, and they live their lives”

The theological framework for this article is as promoted by Richard R. Osmer. Osmer (2008: iv) offers a practical approach in engaging religion. This pragmatic task focuses on the development of action-guiding models and rules of art (open-ended guidelines about how to carry out some form of Christian praxis) (Osmer 2005; 2008). The pragmatic task involves determining action-

¹ Abuja is the Federal Capital City (FCT) of Nigeria.

guided strategies that will influence situations in ways that are desirable and entering into reflective conversation with “talk back” emerging when the strategies are enacted. This implies that in the pragmatic task, the religious practitioner needs to be skilful in appropriating strategies that are effective to the everydayness of the community. Beyond preaching, teaching and administrative skills, the practitioner also needs to take into cognisance the congregational system and relational context.

In this article, lived religion is understood as an action-guided, performed, and experienced religion that is lived out by individuals who practice the religion. That is, the practitioners, communities, and religious organization speak volumes through their actions as to how the religion will be viewed and understood.

Youth-centric ministry in Africa

Africa has more people aged younger than 20 than anywhere else in the world, and the continent’s population is set to double to two billion by 2050. With about 200 million people aged between 15 and 24, Africa can be said to have the youngest population in the world. Nigeria, as an African country, is estimated to have a population of 400 million persons by 2050, of which the larger populace will be youth. This reality is set to provide both challenges and opportunities for the church and youth ministries in Africa (The Economist: 2020, IASYM, 2015: 2012). For Felix Kariba², the African population in 2055 will be 1.4b. Of this population, 60% will be young people under the age of 25 (2020). In the Nigerian context, the total population of the country stands at a staggering 170 million. According to Salami (2011:28), youth between the ages of 18 and 35 years make up more than half of the Nigerian populace.

These staggering statistics give rise to the question: to what extent will religion as lived out through youth ministry appeal to African youth if the lens through which to view religion is praxis? By praxis here it means a combination of action and reflection that moves one to action. To this, Osmer (2008: iv) argues for

² Felix Kariba is an African Urban Development resource person with City Compliance. He is resourced in research around population growth and urban (and rural) development in Africa countries.

the pragmatic task that is action guided. This article argues for the lived religion of caregiving, as epitomised in Jesus' practical earthly ministry for salvific purposes.

Jackson (2016:37) cautions that this projected populace is most likely to appreciate religion through the care-giving practice of religious youth ministry followers (disciples), rather than through indoctrination with religious dogma. Thus, discipleship is crucial in the sustainability of youth ministry that administers care to young people (Nel 2017:2). Andrew root (2020:28) shares the experience of caregiving in youth ministry in his article, "Youth ministry isn't about fun", when he narrated the care for a young person who was hospitalized, and how that informs his argument that youth ministry isn't for fun alone. Youth ministry transcends fun and offers care to young people. This is why youth ministry in Africa must take seriously the need to impact or influence the everyday lives of the youth. The reason for this is that the youth, at this estimated population demography, are actors in the Church, in society and in their social world of influence.

What constitutes the reality of religion in the lives of young people in Abuja, Nigeria is not the profession of statements or allegiance to rules and regulations; rather, what constitutes religion to people is the practice of care followed by the followers of or subscribers to that religion (Ammerman 2007:v). According to Bandura (1975:5), young people learn best through modelling, hence young people best embrace religious practice when they see them put into action by trusted adults. This means that religion is understood by young people on the basis of the everyday lives of the followers, and not just the institutionalisation of the denomination (churches or worship centres) or religious beliefs, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Taoism, to mention but a few.

Religion in Africa

An African understanding of religion is multi-dimensional because African scholars share different opinions on the constituents of religion but agree that religion is an integral part of the lives of Africans. According to Beyers (2010:1), Opoku (1993:79), and Turaki (1999:124), Africans understand religion as both transcendent and earthly. Religion as transcendence denotes that religion

gives allegiance to a supreme [G/g]od, who is understood by the followers to be the source of life and whose wish, desire and regulations inform the traditions and rituals performed by those religious followers. Religion as earthly practice and way of life brings to bear that it is human beings who glean from the source of life (transcendence) to practise religion; it is human beings who practise and experience religion. Thus, the traditions and rituals revealed by the transcendent being are meaningful only if the followers practise them. Religion therefore is an everyday experience in the lives of traditional Africans.

Another salient understanding of religion in Beyers' (2010:7) proposition is that "religion is an effort by humans to search for meaning, to understand reality and place themselves in a relationship with reality". This suggests that, for an African, religion should be practical and real, tangible, and practicable leading to abundant life. This makes lived religion a potentially viable aspect of any religion in Africa. Beyer (2010:7) elucidates further that, "from an African perspective, religion emphasises the human effort to systematise, in society, the continuation of a religious experience relevant to a specific context". In Africa, religion is fundamentally experiential rather than theoretical or explained dogmatically. In this sense, the people of Africa patronise any religion whose followers act out their values and beliefs. If Christian youth ministry is going to be relevant to religious and non-religious people in Africa, it must proactively live out, on a daily basis, its beliefs, and convictions. However, an emphasis on beliefs and convictions can be argumentative and sometimes dangerous to society because of religious extremist groups like Boko Haram and ISIS, which live according to their religious beliefs and convictions.

The following paragraphs discuss three ways of religious formulation, as propounded by Gregg and Scholefield (2015:7).

Formulating lived religion

Gregg and Scholefield (2015:7) articulate three ways of formulating religion. Religion can be reported, it can be represented, and it can be lived.

Reported religion

Over decades and centuries, reported religion has formed and shaped the understanding of religious traditions and arguments. Gregg and Scholefield (2015:7) argue that reported religion has been the basis and standard of religious traditions for a long time throughout history. I could not agree more with Gregg and Scholefield (2015:7) that reported religion has been the basis for understanding religion, except that reported religion could not have been the standard for understanding every religion. The reason for this is that the sources of reported religion are religious textbooks, Holy Scriptures, commentaries on religion, and articles in magazines. These sources can be a basis for understanding a religion because they document the dogma, and traditions of the religion. Sources of religious standards are the supreme and superlative documents that the religion upholds. For the Christian religion it is the Bible, for the Muslim religion it is the Quran, for Judaism it is the Torah.

Reported religion is oral and passed down from one generation sometimes. It is the traditions that are merely inscribed in the written word. These written words are not harmful or painful since a religious follower is not living them out or practising them. They are just written codes of religious chauvinism or dogma. These written codes can be interpreted and explained by the followers to suit individual or corporate interests as represented by religion, thus necessitating moving beyond the written codes into practice. To this end, Gregg and Scholefield (2015:8) caution, and we infer, that, although there is a need for religious followers to go beyond the understanding of religion as provided in textbooks, and in the case of Christianity, the Holy Bible, this does not imply the negation of religious textbooks, because religious textbooks contain the historical, contextual dogmatism of that religion.

Represented religion

Represented religion is the way and manner in which religious followers present their religious tradition. This presentation is done through talking, book publications, evangelistic outreaches, preaching and sermonising, sharing religious tracts and newsletters, and oratory speeches. It connotes that represented religion is how the followers of a particular religion present the articles of faith of their religious institutions.

Religious followers present their religion as part of their own identity through documented and oral media. Gregg and Scholefield (2015:9) argue that represented religion shows how individual religious followers project their sense of identity. This entails that religious followers find their identity in their documented religious traditions and rituals. They derive identity from their representation of their religion.

Speaking of representing the identity of religious affiliation and institutions through different means, Nigerian youth are inclined to represent their religious identity in various ways. Adetiba (2014:32) argues that Nigerian youth have what he calls a *spirit of religion*. He explains spirit of religion as being extremely overwhelmed with religious representation. This means that Nigerian youth show their religious identity (especially denominational affiliation) through labels and stickers on doors, offices, and cars, through their haircuts, the way they dress and their vocabulary, to mention a few. This could be the reason why Africans are represented as religious people, although the same cannot be said about their religious actions and everyday practices.

Lived religion

Lived religion is the aspect of any religion that is action guided, real and part of daily practice. Gregg and Scholefield (2015:7) argue that lived religion is beyond the reported and represented aspects of any religion because it entails practically helping and aiding people who need tangible influence. Harvey (2013:192) adds that lived religion comprises the actions undertaken by the religious followers of any religion. Therefore, lived religions are the practice of living out traditions that are reported and represented in religious narratives.

In another, related development, all three forms of religion are interrelated; lived religion is not in exclusivity as religious action. The lived religion of religious followers is reported in the dogma of that particular religion. The reported dogma in a religious book or document is represented in the lives of the religious followers. This happens as the religious followers live out, in actions (practice), the things written in the dogma of that religious tradition and beliefs. This theological turn from dogma to practice is echoed by Root (2013:22) when he argues for the theological turn relationship with young people through incarnation into their reality of concern. This suggests the

essence of lived religion that appreciates but extends beyond dogma and documents.

However, religion as the product of documents or textbooks; must help it adherents to active experience that is lived out in all spheres of life (Gregg & Scholefield 2015:12). This implies that, in lived religion, religious followership is not practised in reported and represented forms within the church building or temple. Therefore lived religions are practised in acts in everyday life among people (Harvey, 2013:188). Societies are informed of a religion's traditions and dogma by what they see the followers do in practice. Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) youth fellowship handbook records that the aims of the youth fellowship "is to present every man/woman perfect in Christ"³. As good and appealing as these ECWA and Baptist denominational objectives sound, if they do not translate into action, it will remain a reported religion that is insignificant to the youth of Nigeria.

Therefore, the relevance of youth ministry to African society and beyond is in what youth ministry does among people in that society. This relevance connects the youth ministry to the hidden, implicit, or lived life of the young people (Roeland and Ganzevoort 2014:100) Lived religion, however, poses the paradoxical challenge of outward actions that may not be consistent with inward thoughts. In Nigeria's language, this is called the tendency of carrying out *eye service*. It signals that outward actions may not be a true and genuine reflection of the state of the heart.

To curb, or at least reduce, the tendency of living out actions that may be inconsistent with the state of the heart, this paper suggests that lived religion employs what Thomas Edward Frank (2006:130) calls "theological methodologies", such as "reflective practice" in its ideology to aid living out actions that are in consonance with religious convictions and beliefs. In Frank's (2006:131) argument, reflective practices entail a methodology that encourages religious followers to stay passionate in doing or living out their religious traditions in action.

³ ECWA Youth Fellowship Handbook, *ECWA Youth Fellowship Beliefs and Practices: Aims and Objectives*, 2010, 6.

Reflective practice is not peculiar to theological methodology. Gibbs (1988:2), in *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*, argues for reflective practice as a methodology for improving reflective writing. Johns and Freshwater (2005:3) in their book *Transforming nursing through reflective practice*, and David (2004:44), in *A practical approach to promote reflective practice within nursing*, argue that reflective practice is a methodology in the nursing profession that promotes and transforms the care-giving acts of nursing. In John and Freshwater's words (2005:10), "reflection fosters a more sensitive and mindful approach to practice." Reflective practice enhances action-guided care-giving practice, as it aids the motivation behind the caregiving to the patient.

This paper lends voice to the arguments of Frank (2006), John and Freshman (2005), and David (2014) on reflective practice as a methodology that enhances the mindful practice of action-guided caregiving in lived religion, because reflective practice is an adaptable theological methodology that necessitates studying one's action and practice in order to improve the practice and keep the motivation of a lived religion in view.

Conclusion

Youth ministry needs to be lived out in actions that reflect the Christian religious tradition of caregiving in Africa (Nigerian context). The reason for this is that Christianity, just like other world religions, can be studied and defined by the lived-out actions of its religious followers. This means that people in youth ministry must go beyond what is reported and represented in textbooks on the religious tradition to living out the tradition of caregiving and entering into dialogue with the society in which they live.

Harvey (2013:177) reasons, "acted-out Christianity may be little different from other world religions, in the end. We can only see this when we recognize that Christianity, as other world religions, can also be studied and defined by the lived-out actions of people".

This paper has argued that the need of the hour in Nigeria, Africa is a religious tradition like care giving that is not abstract and removed from people's daily needs, struggles and challenges. Youth ministry in Nigeria offers solution to the

everydayness of people's lives by offering care giving as one cogent praxis that constitutes the objectives of youth ministry. Therefore, youth ministry that is not meeting the needs of the youth, and not practically helping and caring for them to solve, or at least assist in, their basic problems of care giving in regard to unemployment, poverty, and educational pursuits, stands the risk of being irrelevant to the youth. Youth ministry, just like other religious organisations and institutions, must go beyond only being reported or represented, to living and being active in people's daily lives.

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