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Historical and Religious Education as Foundations for Nigeria's Moral and Cultural Rebirth

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Abstract

The marginalization of religious studies and the historical removal of history from Nigeria's basic education curriculum raise concerns about moral formation, cultural preservation, and civic responsibility. This study examined the roles of religious and history education in supporting Nigeria's moral and cultural renewal. Guided by Durkheim's theory of moral education and cultural transmission theory, the study employed a qualitative review of relevant literature and policy documents. The review suggests that religious education supports ethical behavior, tolerance, and social responsibility, while history education strengthens national consciousness, patriotism, and cultural awareness. It also identifies barriers to effective teaching, including inadequate teacher training, weak curriculum implementation, and policy reforms that merge these subjects or diminish their curricular importance. The analysis highlights the complementary contributions of both disciplines to moral development, cultural identity, and national unity, providing a theoretical and policy rationale for teaching them as independent subjects. The study concludes that revitalizing religious and history education can support Nigeria's moral and cultural renewal. It recommends curriculum and policy reforms, improved teacher preparation, and increased educational support to strengthen the place and effective delivery of both disciplines within Nigeria's education system.

Keywords: Religious Education; History Education; Moral Development; Cultural Identity; Nigeria

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Introduction

The moral and cultural development of any nation depends largely on the nature of its educational system. Education does not merely provide intellectual knowledge; it also shapes the values, beliefs, and historical consciousness that guide social behavior (UNESCO, 2021). In many societies, religious and historical education have served as critical tools for nurturing moral discipline, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting national identity (Okonkwo, 2020). These subjects help individuals understand ethical principles, appreciate their cultural roots, and develop a sense of responsibility toward their community and nation.

In Nigeria, religious and historical education once played prominent roles in shaping the moral and cultural orientation of learners. Religious education provided moral instruction rooted in spiritual traditions, while history education helped students understand the nation's past, cultural diversity, and collective experiences (Ogunyemi, 2019). However, educational reforms and policy changes over the years have reduced the prominence of these subjects within the school curriculum. The removal of History from the curriculum for several years and its later reintroduction in 2019 by the Federal Ministry of Education reflect attempts to correct earlier policy gaps (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019). At the same time, debates about merging Religious Studies with Civic Education have continued to generate concern among scholars who argue that such reforms may weaken the moral and spiritual foundations of education (Adebayo, 2022).

The consequences of this shift are increasingly visible in the form of declining moral standards, weakening cultural identity, and growing social challenges among young people (Eze & Olaniyi, 2023). Scholars therefore emphasize that restoring the importance of religious and historical education is essential for strengthening ethical consciousness and national unity (Okafor, 2021). Against this background, this study explores how the revitalization of religious and historical education can contribute to Nigeria's moral transformation, cultural renewal, and national rebirth.

Moral and cultural rebirth refers to the process through which a society renews its ethical standards, cultural identity, and collective values in response to moral decline or social disorientation. It involves the restoration of ethical principles such as honesty, discipline, responsibility, and respect for communal traditions that guide social interaction and national development. Scholars argue that moral rebirth is often necessary when

societies experience crises of values, corruption, and cultural erosion (Okafor, 2021). Moral rebirth therefore requires an educational system that intentionally cultivates ethical awareness and cultural consciousness among citizens.

Statement of the Problem

The removal and subsequent marginalization of Historical and Religious Education in Nigerian schools have created a vacuum in the moral and cultural development of students. The decline in moral standards, loss of historical awareness, and the weakening of national values among youths are traceable, in part, to this educational neglect (Okafor, 2021). The proposed merging of Religious Studies with Civic Education risks oversimplifying moral and spiritual learning, reducing religion to mere social instruction rather than a means of ethical transformation. Moreover, many students grow up without a clear understanding of their national history, cultural roots, or moral responsibilities as citizens.

This gap in moral and historical education has contributed to rising social vices, intolerance, and cultural disorientation among Nigerian youths (Eze & Olaniyi, 2023). Therefore, there is an urgent need to re-emphasize the independent teaching and significance of Religious and Historical Education as indispensable foundations for rebuilding Nigeria's moral and cultural integrity.

In the Nigerian context, the call for moral and cultural rebirth has become increasingly urgent due to rising cases of corruption, social violence, examination malpractice, and declining respect for cultural traditions among young people. These social challenges have been linked to the weakening of value-based education within the school system (Bello & Danjuma, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories: Durkheim's Moral Education Theory and Cultural Transmission Theory. Both theories underscore the role of education, particularly religious and historical instruction, shaping moral values, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting societal stability.

1) Durkheim's Moral Education Theory

Émile Durkheim (1973) proposed that the central aim of education is to cultivate moral discipline and social solidarity within individuals. According to Durkheim, moral

education instills shared values, respect for authority, and a sense of duty that sustains the moral fabric of society. He emphasized that moral formation is not merely about obedience to rules but about developing a conscience aligned with the collective good.

In relation to Nigeria, Religious Education performs this moral function by teaching ethical behavior, empathy, and reverence for life—values that are essential for addressing corruption, moral decay, and social disintegration. When schools de-emphasize Religious Studies, students lose a vital avenue for internalizing moral principles that support social harmony and responsible citizenship.

2) Cultural Transmission Theory

Cultural Transmission Theory, as advanced by Parsons (1951) and later expanded by Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman (1981), posits that education serves as the primary mechanism for transferring cultural norms, traditions, and historical consciousness from one generation to another. This process ensures the continuity of a society's identity and cohesion. Through the study of History, learners understand their origins, heroes, struggles, and shared values, which strengthen patriotism and national identity (Ogunyemi, 2019).

In Nigeria's multicultural context, History Education helps to bridge ethnic divides and promotes unity by highlighting common heritage and experiences. Its absence from the curriculum for several years contributed to the erosion of cultural values and the weakening of collective memory among young Nigerians.

Theoretical Connection

Durkheim's Moral Education Theory and Pearson's Cultural Transmission Theory intersect on the premise that education is not only for intellectual development but also for moral and cultural continuity**.** While Durkheim emphasizes the formation of moral character necessary for social order, Pearson stresses the preservation of cultural identity vital for national unity. Together, they provide a holistic foundation for understanding why Religious and Historical Education are indispensable for Nigeria's moral and cultural rebirth.

By combining religion moral instruction and history's cultural awareness, these theories affirmed that a nation can regenerate its values, strengthen civic responsibility, and foster sustainable development rooted in ethical and cultural consciousness.

Literature Review

Concept of Religious and Historical Education

Religious and Historical Education are two interrelated disciplines central to the moral, cultural, and civic development of learners. Religious Education focuses on moral formation, ethical awareness, and spiritual development, providing learners with guiding principles for daily living and social interaction (Okonkwo, 2020). It promotes respect for human dignity, honesty, discipline, and tolerance—virtues that underpin peaceful coexistence in pluralistic societies like Nigeria (Adebayo, 2022).

Similarly, History Education enables learners to understand their collective past, appreciate national heroes, and draw lessons from past events (Ogunyemi, 2019). Through history, individuals develop critical thinking skills, civic consciousness, and patriotism. Both subjects therefore serve as educational tools for shaping the moral and cultural consciousness of the youth, thereby sustaining societal stability.

Recent studies further emphasize the moral significance of religious education in contemporary societies. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization notes that education systems that incorporate ethical and religious values help learners develop empathy, moral reasoning, and responsible citizenship (UNESCO, 2021). Similarly, Adeyemi and Musa (2020) found that students who receive structured religious instruction demonstrate higher levels of discipline and tolerance for diversity. Ibrahim and Lawal (2022) also observe that religious education promotes interfaith understanding and peaceful coexistence in multi-religious societies such as Nigeria.

Historical Background of Religious and Historical Education in Nigeria

Before the advent of colonialism, indigenous education in Nigeria emphasized moral and cultural values transmitted through oral traditions, proverbs, and community life (Fafunwa, 2018). Missionary education later introduced formal Religious Studies, which became a foundation for moral instruction and literacy. However, during the late 20th century, History was gradually marginalized and eventually removed from Nigeria's basic education curriculum, while Religious Studies faced various reforms and dilutions (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2019).

This removal created a moral and cultural vacuum in schools, as young learners lost contact with their historical identity and moral foundation. The reintroduction of History

in 2019 was therefore seen as a restorative step toward reviving national identity and moral education (Eze & Olaniyi, 2023). Despite this, the proposal to merge Religious Studies with Civic Education has continued to generate concern among educators and scholars who argue that it undermines the moral and spiritual depth that Religion education provides (Adebayo, 2022).

Recent empirical studies reinforce the importance of history education in strengthening our national identity. Eze and Olaniyi (2023) found that students exposed to Nigerian history demonstrate stronger feelings of patriotism and national belonging. Similarly, Yusuf and Ahmed (2020) argue that history education promotes social cohesion by helping learners understand the diverse cultural backgrounds that make up the Nigerian nation. Research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020) also indicates that students who develop historical thinking skills are better able to critically evaluate political and social issues and participate responsibly in democratic processes.

Moral and Cultural Significance of the Two Disciplines

Several scholars have emphasized that education must go beyond intellectual development to include moral and cultural formation (Durkheim, 1973; Okafor, 2021). Religious Education develops ethical reasoning and moral responsibility, while History connects learners to their cultural heritage and collective destiny (Ogunyemi, 2019). Together, they nurture both moral rectitude and cultural continuity.

Durkheim (1973) argued that education is the means through which societies reproduce their collective conscience and ensure moral order. In the same vein, Cultural Transmission Theory posits that cultural knowledge, traditions, and social norms are passed from one generation to another primarily through education (Parsons, 1951; Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981). This process helps maintain societal stability and identity. The neglect of these subjects in Nigeria has therefore contributed to the erosion of moral values, the rise of social vices, and the weakening of national unity (Okafor, 2021).

Education is widely recognized as a key instrument for preserving cultural heritage and transmitting societal values. The African Union emphasizes that African education systems must integrate cultural knowledge and historical awareness in order to safeguard indigenous identities (African Union, 2020). Supporting this view, Okeke and Nwafor (2021) found that students exposed to both religious and historical education demonstrate

stronger attachment to cultural traditions and communal values. Adamu (2022) also notes that the decline of cultural education in Nigerian schools has contributed to the weakening of indigenous knowledge systems and moral traditions among young people.

Challenges Affecting Religious and Historical Education in Nigeria

Despite their importance, several challenges hinder the effective teaching of Religious and Historical Education in Nigeria. These include inadequate teacher training, poor curriculum implementation, insufficient instructional materials, and government policies that downplay the subjects' relevance (Eze & Olaniyi, 2023). Furthermore, the dominance of Western curricula and the pursuit of science- and technology-driven education have marginalized humanities-based subjects (Adebayo, 2022). The marginalization of moral and cultural subjects in Nigeria's educational system has also been linked to broader social challenges. According to the Transparency International (TI, 2023), corruption remains a major obstacle to development in Nigeria, highlighting the need for stronger ethical education. Olatunji (2022) argues that the overemphasis on science and technology in educational reforms has inadvertently weakened humanities-based subjects that promote ethical reflection and value formation. Empirical research by Bello and Danjuma (2024) further shows that students exposed to moral and historical education demonstrate stronger attitudes toward honesty, responsibility, and civic duty.

Religious pluralism and fear of indoctrination also create tension in the implementation of Religious Education, while History suffers from students' perception of it as irrelevant to modern career aspirations (Okonkwo, 2020). These challenges collectively weaken the potential of these subjects to promote moral integrity and cultural awareness among Nigerian youths.

Empirical Studies and Scholarly Perspectives

Empirical research consistently supports the argument that Religious and Historical Education significantly shape students' moral judgment and civic responsibility. For instance, Okafor (2021) found that moral education in secondary schools correlates with reduced incidences of indiscipline and moral misconduct. Similarly, Ogunyemi (2019) reported that students exposed to historical education demonstrate higher levels of national pride and tolerance for cultural diversity.

These findings suggest that revitalizing these subjects is essential for building a cohesive and morally upright society. Scholars such as Eze and Olaniyi (2023) further

emphasize that integrating moral and historical learning into school curricula contributes to value reorientation, national unity, and the rebirth of ethical citizenship in Nigeria. Empirical evidence also supports the positive influence of religious and historical education on students' moral and civic development. Adeyemi and Musa (2020) reported that students who actively participate in religious education programs exhibit higher levels of moral reasoning and social responsibility. Similarly, Okeke and Nwafor (2021) found that historical education enhances students' understanding of national identity and cultural diversity.

Summary of the Study

This study examined the importance of religious and historical education as foundational elements for moral and cultural renewal in Nigeria. The paper began by highlighting the role of education in shaping the moral and intellectual development of individuals and societies. It observed that both religious and historical education historically played significant roles in promoting moral discipline, cultural identity, and national consciousness among Nigerians.

The study discussed how religious education provides ethical principles that guide behavior, promote tolerance, and encourage responsible citizenship. Similarly, history education enables learners to understand their national heritage, appreciate past experiences, and develop a sense of identity and patriotism. Together, these disciplines contribute to the formation of morally upright and culturally conscious citizens.

Using Durkheim's Moral Education Theory and Cultural Transmission Theory as its theoretical foundation, the study explained how education functions as a means of transmitting moral values and cultural heritage across generations. The literature reviewed in the study demonstrated that the decline or marginalization of religious and historical education has contributed to moral decadence, cultural disorientation, and weakened civic responsibility among Nigerian youths.

The study also examined the challenges affecting the teaching of these subjects in Nigeria, including poor policy implementation, lack of instructional materials, inadequate teacher preparation, and educational reforms that prioritize science and technology while neglecting humanities-based disciplines. Despite these challenges, empirical studies reviewed in the literature consistently show that religious and historical education significantly contribute to moral development, cultural preservation, and national unity.

Conclusion

This study concludes that religious and historical education are indispensable pillars for Nigeria's moral and cultural rebirth. Both disciplines play complementary roles in shaping ethical behavior, preserving cultural heritage, and strengthening national identity. Religious education provides the moral framework that guides individual conduct and promotes social harmony, while history education connects citizens with their collective past and fosters a sense of national belonging.

The neglect and marginalization of these subjects within Nigeria's educational system have contributed to the erosion of moral values and the weakening of cultural consciousness among young people. As a result, many students grow up with limited knowledge of their historical roots and insufficient exposure to moral and ethical instruction. This situation has broader implications for national development, as a society cannot achieve sustainable progress without a strong moral foundation and a shared sense of identity.

The reintroduction of history into the school curriculum represents a positive step toward restoring historical consciousness in Nigeria. However, further efforts are required to ensure that both religious and historical education receive adequate attention within the educational system. Strengthening these disciplines will contribute significantly to addressing Nigeria's moral crisis, promoting cultural pride, and fostering national unity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen religious and historical education as instruments for Nigeria's moral and cultural rebirth:

Promotion of Balanced Educational Policy: Educational policymakers should promote a balanced curriculum that gives adequate attention to both scientific disciplines and humanities subjects. While science and technology are essential for economic advancement, religious and historical education are equally important for developing morally responsible and culturally conscious citizens.

Integration of Value-Based Education in School Curricula: Curriculum developers and educational authorities should intentionally integrate value-based learning into the national education system. Schools should emphasize character formation, ethical

conduct, and civic responsibility alongside academic achievement. Religious and historical education should be used as platforms for teaching values such as honesty, tolerance, respect, and patriotism.

Adoption of Innovative Teaching Methods: Teachers and educational institutions should adopt innovative and interactive teaching strategies to make religious and historical education more engaging and relevant to students. Activities such as field trips to historical sites, cultural exhibitions, debates, and storytelling can help learners appreciate the practical importance of these subjects in contemporary society.

Strengthening Collaboration among Stakeholders: Government agencies, religious organizations, educators, and community leaders should collaborate to support the effective teaching of religious and historical education in Nigerian schools. Such partnerships can help to promote value-based education, strengthen cultural awareness, and foster the moral development of young people.

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