



The Role of Religion in Promoting Fundamental Human Rights in Nigeria: Christian Perspective

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Abstract

The role of religion in the human rights arena is sometimes perceived as challenging, since some religious actors and some secular human rights actors may not see eye-to-eye in some areas. In this important topic, Religion and human rights: understanding the role of Christianity in the promotion of fundamental human rights in Nigeria. This study gave a historical account of the contributions of Christianity human right formation and struggle. it examines the relationship between Christianity and human rights, with emphasis on whether there is some integral connection between Christian thought and the idea of natural human rights. The paper clarified some important concept like religion, human right and go further to looked at the Origin of Religion (with Special Reference to Christian Religion) and it's Role in Bringing Peace and Order in Society. The paper explores the argument that Christian thought have a significant link with the idea of natural human rights, and that a deep understanding of the idea of natural rights is inimical to Christianity. The history of modern human rights discourse shows its indebtedness to religious thought. The paper conclude that Human rights advocates should also consider how religious thought helps to support the universalizing impulse that has existed in human rights discourse from the beginning. The research recommends among others that There is need for government to strengthen independence of the judiciary, press freedom, democratic rules/principles, human rights education and public vigilance to curtail human rights abuses and promote good governance in Nigeria

Key Words: Human Right, Religion, Christianity, Law, Freedom

Introduction

The culture of human rights is currently believed to be a new reality that humanity cannot afford to live without. It is generally perceived as a requirement that is likely to improve human relations and bring about continuous peace and harmony between individuals and among groups of people. The history of the human rights movement began with the ancient religions and societies but however Today, The role of religion in the human rights arena is sometimes perceived as challenging, since some religious actors and some secular human rights actors may not see eye-to-eye in some areas. It is no news that Nigeria, which is arguably the giant of Africa, is notorious for human rights violations. From its dark years of military authoritarianism (effectively between 1983 – 1999) which witnessed the unfortunate killing of several human rights activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa (executed by hanging on 10 November 1995), and since the return to democratic rule (1999 – to date), the country’s human rights narrative has not changed. Government authorities and law enforcement agents (the police and officials of the State Security Service) frequently engage in various human rights violations, notably unlawful killings, torture and other forms of ill-treatment of crime suspects. Enforced disappearance, forced evictions, interference with the rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of association, and violence against women and children are also widespread across the country. The persistent problem of

violation of human rights that manifests in the form of infringement of personal freedom, constriction of civic space, police and security abuse of citizens’ rights, constriction of political participation and deepening deprivations in the economic and social sphere remained and, in some cases, worsened (PLAC, 2023)

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Religion: Religion is coined from three Latin words-Ligere (meaning to bind), religare (meaning to unite, to link together), and religio (which means relationship). The Latin concept of religion stresses an important thing that is relationship which is a link between two persons -human and divine. It is here also that Falaye's definition becomes vital. He says, “Religion implies a relationship not between man and man but also between man and some higher powers. Religion can be seen as a system of thought, feelings and action that is shared by group and that gives the members of that group an object of devotion, code of a behavior by which an individual may judge the personal kind, social consequence of his action frame of reference by which an individual may relate himself to his group and his universe (Omoregbe, 2009). Religions are influential social forces in many societies. Like human rights, they have a universal concept of a just and good life. All religions claim that the ethical aspirations and moral duties they share contribute to the well-being and welfare of

individual human beings, groups and communities. This applies particularly to the golden rule, which plays an important role in all religions, namely that one should treat everybody as one would wish to be treated. The principle of universal reciprocity underlying this golden rule be the very basis of all human rights law. However, one could ask whether and to what extent this principle is observed within and between different religions, as well as in the secular world, both within and between nation-states.

Human Rights: The phrase “human rights” is among the most popular phrases frequently used in the modern International as well as National laws. Human rights are moral principles, or norms, for certain standards of human behaviour and are regularly protected as substantive rights in substantive law, municipal and international law. They are commonly understood as inalienable, fundamental rights "to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being" and which are "inherent in all human beings" regardless of their age, ethnic origin, location, language, religion, ethnicity, or any other status. They are applicable everywhere and at every time in the sense of being universal, and they are egalitarian in the sense of being the same for everyone. They are regarded as requiring empathy and the rule of law and imposing an obligation on persons to respect the human rights of others; it is generally considered that they should not be taken away except as a result of due process based on specific circumstances. (Wikipedia, 2024).

HUMAN RIGHT: ORIGIN AND SOURCE

Introduction: The origins of human rights may be found both in Greek philosophy and the various world religions. In the Age of Enlightenment (18th century) the concept of human rights emerged as an explicit category. Before the emergence of the religion as more organized and centralized belief, primitive beliefs such as animism, totemism, and fetishism as mentioned above were primary beliefs that primitive society connected with. These primitive beliefs gradually gave a way to the emergence of the currently universally recognized religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc.

Formation and promotion of human Right: Christianity role

Religion, represented by churches, religious communities and other actors, is also a significant factor in the protection and promotion of human rights, both in the world. The central understanding of the human being within the Judeo-Christian tradition starts with the idea that God was the creator of all things. He created man in his own image: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ... So, God created man in his own image, in the image and likeness of God he created him; male and female he created them.’ (Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1, 9:6).

The image of God in man also means that murder is a most heinous crime. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; / for in the image of God / has

God made man” (Genesis 9:6). The severity of the punishment underscores the severity of the offense. The Mosaic Law is full of examples of how God expects everyone to be treated humanely. The Ten Commandments contain prohibitions against murder, theft, coveting, adultery, and bearing false testimony. These five laws promote the ethical treatment of our fellow man. Other examples in the Law include commands to treat immigrants well (Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 19:33-34), to provide for the poor (Leviticus 19:10; Deuteronomy 15:7-8), to grant interest-free loans to the poor (Exodus 22:25), and to release all indentured servants every fifty years (Leviticus 25:39-41).

The Bible teaches that God does not discriminate or show favoritism (Acts 10:34). Every person is a unique creation of His, and He loves each one (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9). “Rich and poor have this in common: /The LORD is the Maker of them all” (Proverbs 22:2). In turn, the Bible teaches that Christians should not discriminate based on race, gender, cultural background, or social standing (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11; James 2:1-4). We are to be kind to all (Luke 6:35-36). The Bible gives strict warnings against taking advantage of the poor and downtrodden. “He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God” (Proverbs 14:31).

Instead, God’s people are to help whoever is in need (Proverbs 14:21; Matthew 5:42; Luke 10:30-37). Throughout history, most Christians have understood their responsibility to aid their fellow human beings. Most hospitals and orphanages in our world were founded by concerned Christians. Many of the great humanitarian reforms of history, including abolition, were spearheaded by Christian men and women seeking justice.

Human rights as God-defined justice

This category is stronger. Instead of trying to interpret the message of nature, we can see God's justice in His word. Rights as defined by justice, for the most part, are comprised of ways in which people should not be victimized. Here are a few listed in the Bible:

- To not be murdered (Exodus 20:13)
- To not be robbed (Exodus 20:15)
- To not be insulted (Matthew 5:22)
- To not be kidnapped/enslaved (Exodus 21:16)
- To not be cheated on in one's marriage (Exodus 20:14)
- To not be lied about (Exodus 20:16)
- To not be disrespected by children (Exodus 20:12)
- To not be cheated in business (Proverbs 16:11)
- To not be victimized by society such that one's life is threatened (Deuteronomy 14:29; 24:17)
- To not be raped (Deuteronomy 22:25-27)
- To not be denied access to a place to worship God (John 2:11-12)
- To not be defenseless (Exodus 22:2-3)

- To not be denied reconciliation after apologizing for an offense (Matthew 18:22)
- To not be barred from entering a land that is safe (Leviticus 19:34)
- To learn about God (Deuteronomy 6:7)

Christian organizations and individuals continue to play a significant role in contemporary human rights advocacy, providing aid to refugees, combating human trafficking, advocating for religious freedom, and addressing systemic injustices worldwide.

MODERN HUMAN RIGHTS LAW

The emergence of fundamental modern human rights is a culmination of centuries of philosophical, political, and religious thought, profoundly shaped by the evolving understanding of individual dignity and liberty. While a truly universal and codified framework for human rights is a relatively recent development, formalized in the 20th century, its roots lie in earlier traditions, with Christianity playing a particularly significant and often foundational role in the Western context.

Early Precursors and the Christian Foundation

While ancient civilizations had legal codes and philosophical concepts that touched upon justice and individual welfare (e.g., Code of Hammurabi, Cyrus Cylinder, Stoic philosophy), the idea of inherent, universal rights for all humans, irrespective of status, gained significant traction with the rise of Christian thought.

Imago Dei (Image of God): This core Christian doctrine, rooted in Genesis 1:27, posits that every human being is created in God's image. This theological assertion grants intrinsic dignity and worth to every individual, forming a powerful basis for equality and challenging existing social hierarchies. As Kurt Mahlburg notes, this concept is central to the Christian understanding of human dignity, influencing societal norms and legal frameworks over centuries (Mahlburg, 2019). The belief in a divine spark in each person means that no one's value can be diminished to that of mere property (Emerging Scholars Blog, 2024).

Love, Compassion, and Justice: The teachings of Jesus Christ emphasize altruism, empathy for the marginalized, and a call for justice. New Testament scriptures (e.g., James 2:1-9) explicitly condemn discrimination and advocate for equitable treatment. Early Church Fathers, like Basil of Caesarea and John Chrysostom, articulated duties towards the poor and needy, laying early foundations for social justice (Mahlburg, 2019).

Natural Law Tradition: Building on earlier philosophical traditions, Christian scholars like Thomas Aquinas significantly developed the concept of natural law. This theory posits a universal moral order, discoverable through reason, reflecting God's divine law. It suggests that certain rights are inherent to human nature and therefore inalienable, existing independently of human-made laws or governmental decrees (Catholic Insight, 2024;

Teachdemocracy.org). Aquinas argued that laws conflicting with natural law were not morally binding, providing a basis for challenging unjust rule (Teachdemocracy.org).

Shaping Modern Rights Through Christian Influence

The principles derived from Christian theology manifested in various historical developments that paved the way for modern human rights.

Magna Carta (1215): While not a comprehensive human rights document, the Magna Carta is a crucial early step. It established principles of due process and limitations on royal power. Notably, its drafting and negotiation were significantly influenced by Christian churchmen, particularly Archbishop Stephen Langton, who championed the idea of law being above the king, aligning with Christian theological views of God's ultimate authority (The Christian Institute, n.d.).

The Reformation (16th Century): The Reformation, with its emphasis on individual conscience and direct access to God's word, contributed to the idea of individual liberty. Martin Luther's challenge to the Catholic Church's authority over the "inner lives of its people" laid groundwork for religious freedom and the idea that all individuals are equal before God ("priesthood of all believers") (Mahlburg, 2019). This emphasis on individual accountability and conscience fostered a climate where personal freedoms could be more strongly asserted.

Early Modern Thinkers and Natural Rights: While the Enlightenment is often credited with the explicit articulation of natural rights, many Enlightenment thinkers, including John Locke, operated within a broadly Christian intellectual framework. Locke's theories of natural rights—life, liberty, and property—though often presented in secular terms, were deeply rooted in a natural law tradition that had been developed and sustained by Christian thought for centuries (ResearchGate, n.d. - "Christianity and Human Rights"). He argued that these rights were endowed by a "Creator," a concept consistent with Christian theology.

Abolition of Slavery (18th-19th Centuries): The movement to abolish slavery, a fundamental human rights struggle, was heavily driven by Christian conviction. Figures like William Wilberforce in Britain and various Quaker, Methodist, and Evangelical communities in the United States, viewed slavery as a profound violation of the *imago Dei* and the inherent equality of all people (Cambridge Papers, n.d.; BBC Bitesize, n.d.). Their theological arguments were central to the moral condemnation of slavery and its eventual demise in many parts of the world.

Social Reform Movements: Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Christian leaders and organizations were at the forefront of various social reform movements aimed at improving working conditions, promoting education, and advocating for the rights of the poor and vulnerable. Lord Shaftesbury in Britain, for example, a devout Christian,

championed the rights of children and factory workers, leading to significant reforms in labor laws (By Faith, n.d.).

Civil Rights Movement (20th Century): In the United States, the Civil Rights Movement, led by figures like Martin Luther King Jr., was deeply rooted in Christian teachings. King's philosophy of non-violent resistance and his appeals for racial equality drew heavily from Christian principles of love, justice, and the inherent dignity of every human being, regardless of race (NPS.gov, n.d.; Center for Action and Contemplation, 2020). The Black Church served as a vital institutional and spiritual backbone for the movement.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Beyond

The horrors of World War II and the Holocaust galvanized the international community to create a universal framework for human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, is the foundational document of modern international human rights law. While the UDHR is a secular document, many of its core principles, such as the inherent dignity and equality of all human beings, resonate strongly with and are arguably influenced by the long history of Christian ethical and theological thought. Some scholars, like Said Rajaie-Khorassani of Iran, even described the UDHR as a "secular understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition" (By Faith, n.d.).

The narrative of human rights in Nigeria is regrettably intertwined with a long history of abuse."

Nigeria has a long and complex history of human rights abuses, spanning from the pre-colonial era through British colonialism, periods of military rule, and into the current democratic dispensation. While the nature and perpetrators of these abuses have evolved, a consistent thread of violations against fundamental human rights has unfortunately persisted.

Pre-colonial and Colonial Eras:

While often romanticized, some pre-colonial African societies, including those in Nigeria, did exhibit forms of human rights abuses, such as slavery, human sacrifice, and cruel punishments for dissent (Jauhari, 2011). The arrival of British colonial powers, while ostensibly bringing an end to some of these practices, introduced its own set of egregious violations. The British, in their quest for economic exploitation and consolidation of power, employed "gun-boat diplomacy," coercion, and violence to suppress local resistance, dethrone traditional rulers, and establish their authority (CORE, n.d.; Jauhari, 2011). This era saw forced labor, suppression of local economies, and the imposition of a system designed to serve British interests, often with disregard for the rights and well-being of the Nigerian populace.

Military Rule (1966-1999):

The most severe and systematic human rights abuses in Nigeria's post-independence history occurred during its prolonged periods of military rule. Following the first coup in 1966, a cycle of military takeovers and counter-coups ensued, lasting for over three decades with only brief interruptions of civilian governance (Truth Commissions, n.d.). Regimes like those of General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) and General Sani Abacha (1993-1998) were particularly notorious for their systematic disregard for human rights and the rule of law (Ajayi & Oyetunji, 2024).

During these periods, the military governments suspended the constitution, enacted draconian decrees, and routinely suppressed dissent. Common abuses included:

Extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances: Security forces were frequently accused of arbitrary killings of political opponents, agitators, and perceived dissidents (Amnesty International, 2025; Wikipedia, n.d.). Notable cases include the brutal murder of journalist Dele Giwa by a parcel bomb in 1986 under the Babangida regime (Ajayi & Oyetunji, 2024).

Arbitrary arrests and detention: Critics of the government, human rights activists, journalists, and political opponents were routinely arrested and detained without fair trial (Wikipedia, n.d.). Prominent intellectuals like Wole Soyinka and Gani Fawehinmi were among those incarcerated (Ajayi & Oyetunji, 2024).

Torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment: Reports of torture in detention centers were widespread, often used to extract confessions or punish perceived enemies of the state (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Suppression of freedom of expression and assembly: Newspapers were shut down, and journalists faced intimidation and imprisonment. Public gatherings and protests critical of the government were violently dispersed (Wikipedia, n.d.). The annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, widely regarded as Nigeria's freest and fairest, is a stark example of the military's disdain for democratic rights (Ajayi & Oyetunji, 2024).

Nigeria: Fundamental Human Rights under the 1999 Constitution (As Amended)

Every Nigerian has rights, duties, liabilities and privileges entrenched under various existing laws. However, certain rights are constitutionally guaranteed under Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, these rights are referred to as Inalienable rights. This article seeks to educate the readers on the various fundamental human rights under Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution.

In the 1999 Nigeria constitution, some of the rights generally recognized as fundamental are:

Right to life;

Right to marry;

Right to procreate;

Right to raise children free from unnecessary governmental interference;
Right to freedom of association; of expression;
Right to equality of treatment before the law (fair legal procedures);
Right to freedom of thought;
Right to religious belief;
Right to choose when and where to acquire formal education;
Right to pursue happiness;
Right to vote;
Right to Freedom of contract;
Right to privacy;
Right to interstate travel

Any restrictions on these rights based on race or religion are unacceptable. If they are denied to everyone, it is an issue of substantive due process. If they are denied to some individuals but not others, it is an issue of equal protection. Examples of rights and freedoms which are often thought of as human rights include civil and political rights, such as the right to life and liberty, freedom of expression, and equality before the law; and social, cultural and economic rights, including the right to participate in culture, the right to food, the right to work, and the right to education.

Democratic Era (1999-Present):

Despite Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, human rights abuses have unfortunately persisted, albeit with a different character. While the 1999 Constitution aims to guarantee fundamental human rights, enforcement remains a significant challenge, often undermined by systemic corruption, impunity, and institutional weaknesses within the judiciary and security forces (Amnesty International, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Current and ongoing human rights concerns include:

Abuses by Security Forces: The Nigerian Police Force and military continue to face frequent allegations of arbitrary arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings, and excessive force, particularly in the context of security operations or against civilians (Amnesty International, 2025; Wikipedia, n.d.). The #EndSARS protests in 2020, which erupted against police brutality, highlight the pervasive nature of these issues.

Insurgency-Related Abuses: Groups like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have perpetrated heinous acts, including mass killings, abductions (such as the Chibok girls), sexual violence, and forced displacement, leading to immense suffering and humanitarian crises, particularly in the Northeast (Amnesty International, 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Inter-communal Violence: Clashes between farmers and herders, particularly in the Middle Belt region, have resulted in widespread killings, displacement, and destruction of livelihoods (Amnesty International, 2025).

Restrictions on Freedoms: Despite constitutional guarantees, freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association are still sometimes curtailed. Journalists and critics of the authorities face harassment, arbitrary detention, and charges (Amnesty International, 2025).

Corruption: Widespread corruption at all levels of government, including within the judiciary and security services, hinders justice for victims and perpetuates impunity (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Socio-economic Rights: Challenges remain in ensuring access to basic social services, adequate housing, and protection from forced evictions, particularly for vulnerable populations (Wikipedia, n.d.).

Conclusion

This paper has critically explored the intersection between religion—specifically Christianity—and the promotion of fundamental human rights in Nigeria. It has been established that Christian doctrines, rooted in the belief in the sanctity and equality of all human beings as created in the image of God, inherently support the ideals of human dignity, justice, and freedom.

Nigeria's history of human rights abuses is deeply rooted in its colonial past and exacerbated by prolonged periods of military authoritarianism. While the transition to democracy in 1999 brought hope for improved human rights, significant challenges persist, often stemming from systemic issues of governance, impunity, and ongoing conflict. The Christian faith, through its teachings, institutions, and moral leadership, has historically played a constructive role in advocating for the oppressed, challenging injustice, and promoting social welfare in Nigerian society.

Despite these positive contributions, the practical impact of Christianity on human rights promotion in Nigeria faces considerable challenges. These include internal contradictions within Christian institutions, denominational rivalries, limited engagement with secular legal frameworks, and at times, silence in the face of systemic violations. Moreover, the pluralistic and multi-religious context of Nigeria demands that Christian advocacy for human rights be pursued in ways that promote national unity, interreligious dialogue, and respect for diversity. While Christianity alone cannot resolve the human rights challenges facing Nigeria, it remains a vital moral and social force. For its role to be more impactful, Christian communities and leaders must deepen their engagement with human rights discourse, partner with civil society, and actively hold political structures accountable. A theologically informed and socially responsible Christianity can contribute meaningfully to the realization of a just and humane society where the rights and freedoms of all are

respected and protected. Addressing these historical legacies and contemporary issues remains crucial for the full realization of human rights for all Nigerians.

Recommendations

1. As the new administration of President Bola Ahmed kick starts its programmes, it is recommending some concrete measures to ensure that human rights are better respected, protected, promoted and fulfilled in Nigeria.
2. There is need government to strengthen independence of the judiciary, press freedom, democratic rules/principles, human rights education and public vigilance to curtail human rights abuses and promote good governance in Nigeria.
3. Intensive measures must be taken to encourage and institute human rights education both in formal and informal by translating human right content of Nigerian constitution into the major Nigerian language (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) and to minor languages Jenjo, Michika, Yungur, Bchama, Jukun, Mumuye, Chamba, Waja, idoma, tiv, Beron, Bajju etc
4. School curricula should be saturated with human right related issues right from pre-primary, primary, secondary and higher institution. And Values like peace, hard work, patriotism, justice, sanctity of human life, etc.
5. Finally, Government must embark on consistent programme of training of members of the security agencies on the imperative duty to respect human rights. Where breaches occur as a result of deliberate disregard for human rights, the culprits must be promptly and decisive disciplined to serve as deterrent to others.

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