PERCEPTION ENGINEERING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Perception engineering in religious education in Nigeria has some keywords operationalised from the title. Although these words appear common in daily use, yet it will not be out of place to attempt defining them for the purpose of this topic.

Perception

Perception is the sensory experience of the world which involves both recognising environmental stimuli and actions in response to these stimuli. Through the perceptual process,we gather information about the properties and elements of the environment that are critical to our survival. Thus, perception does not only create our numerous experiences of the world around us; it also allows us the opportunity of acting within our environment (Kendra, 2020). Perception includes the five sense of **sight**, **sound**, **touch, smell,** and **taste**.

Suffice to mention that perception also involves the cognitive processes required to process information received through the five senses before taking an action (i.e. behavior). such as recognizing the face of a friend or detecting a familiar scent. While our sensory receptors are constantly collecting information from the environment, it is ultimately how we interpret that information that affects how we interact with the world.

Perception therefore, refers to the way sensory information is organized, interpreted, and consciously experienced. How someone views issues, situations etc based on what he has learnt through the senses (**sight**, **sound**, **touch, smell,** and **taste)**. Suffice to state here that there are non-sensory and or extra-sensory perceptions (Elena, 2021), but these are beyond the scope of this paper.

Engineering

In very straightforward term, engineering is the application of science and maths to problem solving. While scientists and inventors come up with innovations, engineers apply the discoveries to the real world situations. Engineering has also been defined as calculated manipulation or direction (as of behaviour). Engineers are involved in the design, evaluation, development, testing, modification, inspection and maintenance of a wide range of products, structures and systems. Thus engineering refers to deliberate and calculated manipulations of things for the achievement of desired results.

Religious Education

In secular usage, religious education is the teaching of a particular religion and its varied aspects —its beliefs, doctrines, rituals, customs, rites, and personal roles. In Western and secular culture, religious education implies a type of education which is largely separate from academia, and which regards religious belief as a fundamental tenet and operating modality, as well as a prerequisite condition of attendance. The secular concept is substantially different from societies that adhere to religious law, wherein "religious education" connotes the dominant academic study, and in typically religious terms, teaches doctrines which define social customs as "laws" and the violations thereof as "crimes", or else misdemeanours requiring punitive correction.

In the light of the operationalisation provided, we looked at 'perception engineering in religious education' i.e **how religious education is employed by its custodians (consciously or otherwise) to influence, modify or change human views and invariably their behaviours.** Custodian in this sense specifically refers to religious educators in the formal classroom setting **(i.e. Lecturers)** and those outside the formal classroom **(i.e. religious leaders).**

Research has established Africans among the most religious people on earth (Richard, 2010) and Nigeria as the world's second most religious country (Vanguard, December 11, 2016). This assertion, more often than not has attracted more aspersions than praise from different stakeholders across the globe. It is believed that many Nigerians would opt for prayers to solve problems that demand more realistic and practical steps. Of course, this is not to undermine the importance and effects of religion on its adherents, for example, a number of studies have linked religion to fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (Cornah, 2006; *Koenig, 2005*); better mental health (Rettner, 2015) and coping with stress (Ozcan; Hoelterhoff & Wylie 2021). Religion as it were gives people a sense of purpose and meaning in life, which help them to make meaning of negative things that happen to them," Koenig, 2005; Cornah, 2006; Pargament, 2013).

On the other hand, some forms of religious coping can be more problematic; life events can shake and shatter people psychologically, socially and physically. People may struggle spiritually with their understanding of God, with inner conflicts or with other people, all of which have been linked to higher levels of psychological distress, declines in physical health and greater risk of mortality (Pargament, 2013). In summary, religion can affect a person's coping styles or their locus of control perceptions. It can also provide access to a network of social support and increased social capital, both of which are widely acknowledged to promote and sustain emotional and psychological well-being. Some expressions of religiosity affect the lifestyle and may encourage individuals to limit illness-related behaviours, such as smoking, drinking excessive alcohol and overeating, or to increase health-related behaviours such as meditation, exercise and helping others.

Pargament, (2011) has also found that when people believe that God has abandoned them, or when they question God's love for them, they tend to experience greater emotional distress, and even face an increased risk of an earlier death. "These kinds of struggles have to do with the aspects of life that you hold sacred," Pargament said. "When you get shaken to that level, then … it's going to be very distressing."

The expectation is that as a religious people, things should work better, there should be moral standards and better operations from many different stakeholders. More often than not, there is no gainsaying the fact that Africans and Nigerians in particular have been seen as very religious people.

Therefore, people's perception of God's disposition towards them would have significant impact on their well-being. If they perceive that God is favourably disposed to them, there would be a high probability that they have a good psychological well-being and if they perceive otherwise, there would be a high probability that they have a negative psychological well-being. The pertinent question then is: how did they come about their perception of God (either good or bad? This depends on a number of factors, significant among which is the influence of the teacher or leader the people affiliate themselves with. E.g. those who saw Jesus's disciples after his ascension had no problem identifying them as people who had been with Jesus. They had been so influenced that everything about them reflected their master (Jesus), same goes for others religious figures as well. Even the present day realities attest to the fact that religious leaders and teachers have great influence in shaping the perception of their followers/students.

Continuation on Perception

Looking at the purposes of religion, and the benefits derivable from religious practices one would not but agree to the fact that (consciously or otherwise) religion plays a significant role in the lives of Africans and Nigerians.

Prior to now, religion was significant in moulding positive behaviours in its adherents irrespective of their religious affiliation. The society have certain expectations from anyone who claimed to be religious to the point of being a teacher of it (either within the four walls of a classroom or within religious circles). As at then, teachers of religion were perceived as 'special beings' who had special grace based on their level of commitment to the service of God and their relationship with the supernatural, thus, they commanded much respect from the people and the entire society.

People therefore regarded them and listened to them without questioning. They were seen as God's oracle. As a matter of fact some parents would willingly hand over their wards to religious teachers so that they can be trained to follow in their steps and most probably become religious leaders themselves. Some of the effects then, was that the value orientation was high, human lives had value, moral standards were higher and well sustained, handwork was encouraged and less attention was paid to getting rich quickly by all means and at all cost. Good name was better than silver and gold as at then… fast forwarded; in the present dispensation, the reverse is the case; silver and gold is considered better than good name now. As a matter of fact, some of the young people have turned the saying around to say the silver and gold will be used to by good name. Value has been thrown into the trash can. Everything has turned upside down calling for very urgent intervention.

Clarion Call to all Religion Engineers

A clarion call is made to all teachers of religion within and outside school environment. Have we taken time to actually ruminate on how we got to where we are now? If we may remind ourselves, many years back, when drummers approached a Mosque or a Church, they would stop drumming until they had moved pass the

Church or Mosque premises before they started to beat their drums again. This was done then as a sign of reference for God. Though God is invisible, yet He must be referenced and honoured, and same must be extended towards His house (i.e. the church of mosque). When you were at the bus-stop waiting for vehicle and a Pastor or Imam came around (and they were not difficult to identify based of their mode of dressing), you would allow them to board the vehicle first etc.

How did we loose all of these virtues, one may ask? How did we get to this point where hardwork is eschewed and get rich quick syndrom is the order of the day?; no regard for elders anymore; many young people care less about God and unfortunately many elderly people are aiding and abetting. Could this be a reflection of the dereliction of our duty as teachers of religious education?. Have we not lowered our own standards? Are we keeping the flag flying?

Many of us today had the virtues we hold handed down to us. As a matter of fact, many of us did not have the opportunity of choosing our religion, we adopted the religion of the family we were born into, we imbibed the family religion and its culture, we did not even think of alternatives, if anyone did then, you could not voice it out. Of course this is not to say that there should not be freedom but, looking at the extent to which the exercise of freedom and human rights have destroyed our value systems and value orientation, it has left so much to be desired.

Looking at the purposes of religion, and the benefits derivable from religious practices one would not but see that the role of religious engineers cannot be overemphasised. An understanding of perception will suffice here. Which is a function of religious engineers.

Perception involves both bottom-up and top-down processing. **Bottom-up processing** refers to the fact that perceptions are built from sensory input. On the other hand, how we interpret those sensations is influenced by available knowledge, experiences and our thoughts. This is called 'top-down processing'. an example is provided below.

Look at the shape in **Figure 1** below. Looking at it alone, your brain engages in bottom-up processing. There are two thick vertical lines and three thin horizontal lines. There is no context to give it a specific meaning, so there is no top-down processing involved.

Fig. 1

Now, look at the same shape in two different contexts. Surrounded by sequential letters, your brain expects the shape to be a letter and to complete the sequence. In that context, you perceive the lines to form the shape of the letter "B."

Figure 2. With top-down processing, you use context to give meaning to this image. Surrounded by numbers, the same shape now looks like the number "13."

Figure 3. With top-down processing, you use context to give meaning to this image. When given a context, your perception is driven by your cognitive expectations. Now you are processing the shape in a top-down fashion.

One way to think of this concept is that sensation is a physical process, whereas perception is psychological. For example, upon walking into a kitchen and smelling the scent of baking cinnamon rolls, the sensation is the scent receptors detecting the odour of cinnamon, but the perception may be "Mmm, this smells like the bread Grandma used to bake when the family gathered for holidays."

Although our perceptions are built from sensations, not all sensations result in perception. In fact, we often don't perceive stimuli that remain relatively constant over prolonged periods of time. This is known as **sensory adaptation**. Imagine entering a classroom with an old analog clock. Upon first entering the room, you can hear the ticking of the clock; as you begin to engage in conversation with classmates or listen to your professor greet the class, you are no longer aware of the ticking. The clock is still ticking, and that information is still affecting sensory receptors of the auditory system. The fact that you no longer perceive the sound demonstrates sensory adaptation and shows that while closely associated, sensation and perception are different.

You are an engineer

Believe it or not, as a matter of fact, the earlier we realise it the better for all of us. All teachers are engineers by default and likewise all religious leaders. An understanding of the basic functions of an engineer explains the reason for my assertion. Engineers are involved in the **design**, **evaluation**, **development**, **testing, modification**, **inspection** and **maintaining** of a wide range of products, structures and systems. Are

these not exactly what we do as teachers? We have human beings as our products, we help mould and design their lives directly (through classroom teaching) and indirectly through (modelling and mentoring), we evaluate their behaviours to make them better citizens, help to develop them in the right way etc. Therefore, we are nothing but 'life engineers'.

How religion influence behaviour
Our experiences, environment and even genetics form our beliefs and attitudes. In turn, these beliefs influence our behaviour, and determine our actions. Beliefs that are widely accepted become part of our culture and, in many ways, shape the society we live in.
Religion is probably the strongest belief system that has existed for thousands of years. In many ways, it is a code of conduct, a rule book that allows believers to function in a non-primitive or cultured manner. The earliest forms of religion were established to facilitate social bonding. In fact, it is also believed that religious practices are adaptive and have emerged to sustain survival and reproductive advantages through gene selection or gene-culture co-evolution dynamics.

It is no surprise then, that this system is crucial to thinking patterns and plays a vital role in formation of self-identity and a collective identity of a community, which then shapes attitudes, cultural norms and influences individual and group behaviour. Children are particularly perceptive to religious beliefs and the concepts of Gods and other supernatural agents, which leads to a teleological bias of accepting explanations of phenomenon, based on the purpose they serve rather than their postulated causes, which persist into adulthood (Kelemen, 2004). These attitudes are contingent upon factors such as beliefs about God's existence, immortality and omnipresence; attributions about psychological characteristics such as fairness, compassion and harshness; and attributions about God's causal involvement and motives in one's life events.

Most, if not all religions, have some thematic principles that make them similar to one another, namely concepts of god and love, honesty, altruism, miracle workings and peacekeeping. However, every religion has elements and ideologies that set them apart from the other. These ideological differences may not be overt and easy to discern, but they are present and account for a lot of disharmony and discord at times. This is mainly due to irrational and distorted deductions of religious scriptures by some followers which go against the fundamental principles. Moreover, coexistence of diverse religions in a single community or nation is a comparatively recent trend. Sacrifices and wars in the name of religion are not unheard of, with some of the significant examples being The Crusades, Sati System, Buddhist Burma, Jihadists and the Witch Hunt, which ended thousands of lives. What is even more mind-boggling is the dichotomous function that religion seems to serve, where it imbibes compassion and kindness towards all, but also instigates religious hatred, violence and religious martyrdoms, especially in radical believers.

Most religions enforce moral behaviour through positive and negative reinforcement by infusing 'god-fearing' elements in scriptures, such as the concept of karma and reincarnation in Hinduism, heaven-hell and salvation in Christianity, paradise and hell in Islam, peaceful afterlife and reincarnation in indigenous Chinese folk religions, and release from the cycle of reincarnations and reaching enlightenment in Buddhism.

This was further reiterated through Shariff and Norenzayan's (2011) study where they found that individuals are more likely to behave in a moral or honest manner when they believe in fearsome and punishing supernatural agents. In their subsequent studies, they concluded that the concept of hell exists to make people act in a moral and ethical manner, whereas the concept of heaven (or its equivalent in other religions) exists to make people feel good, and has a direct and positive relation with happiness. However, another possible explanation for this suggests that it may have nothing to do with religious beliefs. Rather, the religious scriptures or rituals act as a moral reminder, through priming, and impel us to act in a moral and honest manner.

It is important to note here that although, religious beliefs may play a causal role in some of the actions, it is not the only factor that influences behaviour. Rather, it's an important factor in a pool of other factors like genetics, environment, parenting, drives, and needs that determine our behaviour.

Research supports that there is a correlation between religious beliefs and behaviour, but does this necessarily mean that there is a causality? It doesn't really matter whether one believes that people form these belief systems in order to adapt and function, or if existing beliefs influence religious attitudes. What is important is how we use (or misuse) such a powerful instrument, and to what extent we let it influence our behaviour.

However, modern psychology recognizes that religion can play an important role in an individual's life and experiences and can even improve health and well-being. In fact, studies have shown that religion can help people develop healthy habits, regulate their behaviours, and understand their emotions—all factors that can affect your health (Aldwin, Park, Jeong, and Nath, 2014).

Conclusion
The earlier we realise that all teachers and leaders of religion are engineers by default, the better. Engineers design, develop, test, modify, inspect, evaluate and maintenance of a wide range of products, structures and systems. (Do we do anything less as teachers?)

Human beings are our products, we help mould and design their lives directly and indirectly through (direct teaching, modelling and mentoring), we evaluate their behaviours and help to develop them in the right way etc. Therefore, we are nothing but 'life engineers'. We should all work towards educating our students at all levels to have the right perception about life and work towards its realisation.

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