

**INTEGRATING RELIGIOUS STUDIES INTO LEGAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA:
RETHINKING CURRICULUM FOR A PLURAL LEGAL SOCIETY**

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of religious studies and its relevance to the study and practice of legal studies. It seeks to emphasise the introduction of religious studies into Nigerian legal education. However, enumerating the advantages, such a firm understanding provides to lawyers in understanding the diverse religious and cultural identity of those seeking their legal representation. The paper adopts historical and educational approaches to analyse the formation of legal studies in Nigerian institutions and the limited study of religious education within the legal institutional calendar. It identifies a significant research gap in the treatment of religion as a core component of legal education. The paper concludes that incorporating religious studies into legal training will not distract students from the study of law. Rather, it will enrich it by offering future lawyers a more holistic knowledge of justice, equity, and good conscience in legal practice.

Keywords: Religious, Nigeria, Legal, Institution, Culture, Students

Introduction

Article on both religious and legal studies in Nigerian institutions is treated as distinct academic disciplines in the understanding of scholars. Notwithstanding a deeper understanding of the foundations of law and legal practice can be achieved through engagement with religious courses that have a connection to legal study (Samuel Gilbert 2023).

The starting point is that the university system offering law programmes has not sufficiently introduced law students to a comprehensive understanding of the interrelationship between law and religious studies, nor has it adequately engaged with the practical application of religious knowledge (Pirozzi, 2026).

A historical review reveals that the development of law has been significantly influenced by religious scholars, especially those who laid the foundation for legal and moral theories grounded in Christian values during and after the medieval era (Caesar Munachimso Elikwu, Olusola Joshua Olujobi, and Ebenezer Tunde Yebisi, 2024).

.Looking at this from the Nigerian perspective, this research argues that the inclusion of religious studies in the legal curriculum is vital and recommends its official incorporation by the government of Nigeria and the University institution. The research further examines the contributions of medieval theologians in the light of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine of Hippo, Hugo Grotius, and other theologians and philosophers, demonstrating that the origin of law is deeply rooted in early religious traditions shaped by religious beliefs, customs, and practices. Central to this development is the principle of natural law, which posits that all humans have inherent rights enforceable at the instance of violation (Cross, 2026).

The Research also highlights certain symbols and practices particular to the Nigerian court of law, the legal systems in general that date back to religious and cultural origins, such as the act of bowing to a judge in court. The paper rounded off by recommending that adherents of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria should imbibe reciprocity in mutual understanding, emphasising that a competent lawyer must possess knowledge of African traditional religion, Christian practices, Sharia law, and other religious legal systems to effectively meet the continuous demand of clients.

The Notion of Religion and Legal Studies

Understanding religion and religious beliefs influences legislation made for specific groups of people. There is an ongoing debate among scholars regarding the introduction of religious studies for law students in Nigeria. The same applies to students of religious studies acquiring knowledge of secular laws. The challenge lies in how this can be practically implemented within the academic curriculum.

Religious studies and law have existed since the earliest accounts of human existence. For instance, the law of God in the Garden of Eden, and the Ten Commandments (José 2024). These cases of adultery in court are significant to the Ten Commandments. It goes to show the urgent necessity for the incorporation of religion into legal studies.

Religious studies are important for 21st-century lawyers, who often become leaders in diverse fields such as politics and law. This area of study requires integrity and honesty in practice. Religious studies is a broad concept; it is an academic approach to understanding the histories of particular religions or groups of religions and exploring their development over time.

Again, the studies of religion assess the impact that religion has on people, society, and government. The holy day of obligation for Christian is Sunday, resulting in the government recognising it as a public holiday. Muslim on the other hand, the day of holy observances is Friday, set aside to worship. Religious studies also examine matters of faith, and the understanding of such enables a law student to approach Islamic matters legally and religiously (Bishop 2022). Others, such as beliefs in the supernatural God, or the critical analysis of ideologies of a prophet and messiah, influence their followers.

This enables legal studies to understand religious laws and their application, considering the supernatural. Similarly, religious sacred texts like the Holy Bible, the Quran, and the Vedas, which adherents study as guides, make up the laws in their own right.

Law students studying religion stand to benefit from the understanding of rituals, prayer patterns of groups, as well as different forms of meditation, and connection to a higher being. Religious studies emphasise festivals and ceremonies such as the origins of Christmas, Easter, the Sacraments, Eid al-Adha, Nikah, Aqidah, Samskaras, the Igwe festival, and practices passed down through the ages (Victor, 2018).

Religious Studies and Theology

While religious studies provide a general approach to the understanding of religion, theology studies religion from a particular religious perspective. Scholars have noted the distinctiveness of both fields, even though they are similar, because they use different methodologies, focus on different issues, and differ in their historical concepts (Stafford 2023). Examples include Christian theology, Islamic theology (also referred to as Kalam), Buddhist theology (often called Buddhist philosophy or Buddhist studies), and African traditional theology (usually called African religious studies or African Indigenous Religion studies).

Legal Studies

Legal studies is a broad concept that represents the study of law in universities (Blessing Olarewaju, 2024). It involves examining a legal system with the intention of understanding its functionality and identifying its shortcomings. Legal studies include the study of civil law and criminal law, in addition to other areas of law (Madu, 2024).

The History of Religion and Legal Study

Research has shown that law, philosophy, politics, and religion were once not separated; rather, they were all encompassed within the arts. Law and religious studies date back to ancient history, and both fields fall partly within the arts (Victor, 2018). They help students make informed choices about switching between them at the initial stages of educational admission.

Early scholars were both lawyers and religious intellectuals. An example is Saint Paul the Apostle. Although St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas may not have been formally trained lawyers, their intellectual writings were instrumental in interpreting the concept of law (Lisska 2024). During the medieval era, this influenced the development of laws reflecting natural law, which is understood as the law of nature emanating from God.

Contributions of Early Christian Writers to Legal Studies

The contributions of Christian writings and their involvement in law further highlight the significance of the relationship between law and religious studies. Constitutional amendments and drafting have historically relied on the fear of God in shaping laws for society. Research shows that religious monks played a crucial role in drafting laws during the early Christian period.

African Traditional Religion and Customary Law

Outside the Christian era, African laws emanated from traditional systems based on the understanding of deities and natural phenomena. Chief priests (wise men and seers), who were servants of local gods, were instrumental in forming laws that later developed into customary law incorporated into Nigerian legal systems.

Scholars acknowledge the connection between law and African cultural beliefs, describing customary law as unwritten, flexible, based on the intentions of the people, active and known to them at the time, and developed through usage over time rather than formal declaration (Atoyabi and Ekene 2025). This demonstrates that African religion is rooted in free will and is essential in shaping customary law, as it is not imposed.

Once a god's decree was communicated by the custodian (the servant of the gods) to the people, the king would declare it as law, making it final and binding. To breach such a law was to violate sacred order. Customary law has since been given judicial recognition by courts and parliamentarians (Atoyabi and Ekene 2025).

Sacred Text and Legal Studies in Nigeria

Sacred texts are used in courts, where individuals swear or affirm based on their religious beliefs. Scholar explained that Many laws were historically considered divine, encompassing both man-made and natural laws. For instance, the Jewish Torah, the Islamic Quran, the Christian canon law, and Hindu Dharma philosophy are all examples of religious systems that have influenced legal frameworks in Nigeria (Team 2024).

Doctor of the Church, Church Dogma, and Legal Studies

Many Christians who wrote on Dogmatic theology or law of the church are awarded the title "Doctor of the Church" by the pope, like the saints and influential figures, in recognition of their significant contributions to theology and religious laws (Phillip, 2017). The early Christian church law has been incorporated into Legal studies, also applicable in Nigeria legal system.

Research reveals that the Roman Catholic Church mostly bestowed this title. The contribution associated with the title of Doctor of the Church does not relate only to theology; it also covers

law, politics, and philosophy (Phillip, 2017). Research demonstrates that Catholic dogma has influenced legal studies. For instance, Saint Augustine of Hippo, an African priest, and Saint Thomas Aquinas were not only theologians and philosophers but also contributors to legal thought. Matters of dogma, such as the law on disobedience (original sin), are significant when compared with the court's application of the presumption of innocence, which is adopted today.

Similarly, Saint Augustine's theology argued that the guilt of original sin robbed all mankind, making them guilty with or without their consent. The court of law reverted this instead, presuming that individuals are innocent until proven guilty by the lawful court of the land (Hunter, 2024).

Another scholar, Saint Thomas Aquinas, posits that eternal law is the law of God, which can be understood through reasoning, meditation, and intellectual reflection. Scholars noted that this law is unwritten. Eternal law is universal and beyond complete human comprehension. The teachings influenced legal thinkers in the medieval era to the present day (Green 2015).

Theology, Religious Studies and Legal Studies,

In order to acquire a concrete understanding of theology and religious studies, a student is to have a holistic knowledge of the interrelationship between these fields. It will foster a broader perspective that includes historical, theological, and philosophical views.

Although the tone of their interpretations may resemble that of religious preachers, the postulations of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas have become embedded in contemporary legal systems worldwide (Luscombe 2024). Studies have shown that the great minds of the past were both theologians and lawyers.

More so, legal education should incorporate elements of religious studies to provide deeper insight into the historical development of legal principles. Religious studies can help lawyers understand the rationale behind a client's behaviour and explore appropriate approaches to handling matters of such complexity that religion presents. Studies show that a client's religious background presents insight into the conflicts and, *ipso facto*, assists lawyers in determining a matter that requires adjudication, reconciliation, or mediation.

Research notes that the Nigerian government introduced legal education to train aspiring lawyers, including the establishment of the Nigerian Law School in 1962, which serves as a means of developing essential qualities for the field of legal studies.

The Nigerian Bar Association has been resourceful since its inception (Idoko 2023). The Lagos campus became the first following the establishment of the Nigerian Law School. Nigeria now has campuses in Abuja, Kano, Enugu, Yenagoa, Yola (Adamawa), and Port Harcourt (Rivers). Legal studies approach the field through critical thinking, examining diverse aspects of law and the legal system of a country using argumentative and analytical methods to address identified problems (Abigail et al. 2022).

Sharia Law and Customary Law as an Upshot of Religious Studies

An understanding of traditional societal structures is essential. For example, traditional rulers across Nigeria are accorded a reputable position of a Chancellor. Studies show, however, that despite the role not being loaded with university activities, it is merely symbolic, but both state and federal universities acknowledged the contribution to the institutions. Some Scholars do not see the importance of according such a prestigious position to a traditional authority and, to all intents and purposes, add no relevance to the educational sector (Adeyemo 2025).

Categories of Legal Studies in Nigeria

Research classifies legal studies into three primary stages: the university level, the law school level, and practical legal training, which includes court and law firm experience during formative years at law school (Idoko 2023). These stages do not sufficiently incorporate religious studies to adequately prepare lawyers for professional practice.

The course *An Introduction to the Nigerian Legal System*, typically studied at the 100–200 levels in some Nigerian universities, introduces Sharia law and customary law at a superficial level. At the 400 level, some southern universities revisit customary law as an elective. Consequently, these courses do not comprehensively address Sharia law, customary law, or religious studies. Scholars have noted this limitation since the reintroduction of Sharia law in 1999 and the lack of uniformity with other legal systems in Nigeria (Igwenagu 2026). The problem of Sharia law has been linked to the multiplicity of diverse religious groups (Adekunle Olajide 2023).

It is difficult to teach students and for students to learn all religions in the university, and Sharia law and customary law represent only one aspect of the legal system; it is accepted in the north due to the influence of Islam in northern Nigeria and customary law in the south due to diverse cultures.

Research observed that law students are not adequately prepared for situations involving legal and religious conflicts; there is a gap in studies. Southern Nigeria should undertake a more detailed study of Sharia law. It accounts for postgraduate students struggling to find supervisors for research focused on Sharia law (Pirozzi, 2026).

Scholars argue that Nigerian universities have not introduced courses within the legal studies curriculum that thoroughly explore religious studies, particularly in relation to Islam and African traditional religion. Such inclusion would necessitate a more comprehensive introduction to Sharia law and customary law for law students.

Research shows that many universities treat Sharia law and customary law as elective courses. Southern universities often consider Sharia law inapplicable to their region and therefore do not study it extensively. Conversely, northern institutions, where Sharia law is operational, may place less emphasis on southern customary law beyond general knowledge.

A lawyer in Nigeria is qualified to practise across all 36 states (Pirozzi, 2026); however, religious factors may pose challenges. These challenges stem from the need to understand the diverse religious and cultural beliefs of clients, similar to difficulties encountered during the colonial introduction of religion across different regions of Nigeria (Blessing Olarewaju, 2024).

For example, a lawyer from southern Nigeria may decline to manage an adultery case in the North due to differences in legal and religious frameworks. Although Sharia law is taught at the undergraduate level, challenges remain in understanding the religious context of the Islamic northern region and its practices.

Nigeria as a Religious Country

A study of Nigeria shows between 525-530 languages (Davies Ngere Ify 2024), having Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba as major ethnic groups (Segun Dukeh 2026).

A lawyer requires a solid understanding of the people's religion, history, traditions, beliefs, and cultural expressions to practice effectively (Blessing Olarewaju, 2024)

.Nigerian System of Governance

Religious studies expose law students to the federal character principle, which is often influenced by religious divisions: the North is Muslim, the South Christian, while traditional religious practices are commonly associated with title holders and chiefs.

Without such knowledge, lawyers may struggle to fully understand societal structures, as legal studies at the undergraduate level do not sufficiently integrate religious knowledge. Religious studies, therefore, enhance legal education (Victor, 2018).

Governance in Nigeria follows federal character, a pattern left by the colonial government in 1914. The unification increases the religious practices to include Christianity, Islamism, and African traditions. Knowledge of religion, therefore, helps Nigerian legal students to understand the diverse local law operation, with adopted English law from England.

Influence of Religion on the Legal System

The proponents of religion and founders of religious movements should be studied from the perspective of the philosophies underlying those religions.

Bowing to the Judge

The bending of the head reflects long practices dating to the early development of law in medial era with is also religious in nature. This is obvious in respect for the cross, the tabernacle, and church authority, like the pope.

Swearing and Affirmation

Another practice adopted by law is the swearing of an oath. The affirmation of a witness in court, swearing a declaration of facts before a commissioner for oaths, and a solicitor. Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Affirmation can be made instead of an oath. This may be religious (oath) or secular (affirmation) (Sears 2025). The declaration, “I swear by (or promise) by Almighty God...,” demonstrates the importance of religious studies in understanding the deeper meaning of legal practices in court.

Natural Law and Moral Laws

Gaius defined natural law as law applicable across nations (Luscombe 2024). Natural and moral laws are considered laws of God or religious laws emanating from religion. Hence, the legal system advocates for “natural justice, equity, and good conscience.” Any law that does not uphold these principles may be regarded as overly rigid and deficient. This demonstrates the extent to which religion interrelates with law. The Stoic influence on Christianity also shapes legal thought; the combination of philosophy and religion continues to influence legal systems (Editorial 2024).

Furthermore, fundamental rights advocated globally are products of natural law, supported by medieval scholars such as Hugo Grotius, Thomas Aquinas, Cicero, and John Locke (Lisska 2012). This body of law is believed to represent the inalienable rights of humans, implying that individuals are born free and should not be unjustly constrained.

Addressing a Judge as “My Lord”

This expression reflects a tradition influenced by the notion of a divine judge who will deliver judgment on the last day. The concept of a just, merciful, and compassionate God is significant

when a lawyer pleads for mercy. The notions of guilt and innocence also have roots in religious thought. Scholars trace this practice to France and later to Christian traditions in Brazil (Jamal 2023). Seeking justice in court may be compared to approaching a throne of mercy for judgment.

Good Conscience and Fairness

A good conscience is religious in nature, guiding individuals to make truthful and fair statements. Christianity, for example, demands truthfulness and discourages condemning one's neighbour.

The absence of knowledge in religious studies may contribute to deficiencies in conscience and fairness. The requirement of oath-taking before being called to the Bar reflects a traditional practice of affirming truth and upholding public trust.

Passing Christian Religious Studies in Secondary School

Christian Religious Knowledge is often a requirement in Nigerian universities for the study of law, particularly for students entering at the 100 level, with some exceptions for direct entry candidates. A student without Christian Religious Studies or Islamic Religious Studies (CRS/IRS) in the Secondary School Certificate Examination (SSCE) may be disqualified from studying law (Robinson 2024).

Research indicates that this requirement is rooted in the historical influence of religion in shaping exemplary legal professionals. The study of religion builds a good conscience, preparing the good moral conscience of legal practitioners, enabling them to uphold justice under demanding situations. They also promote equity, good conscience, and fairness. However, some scholars argue that CRS/IRS is not compulsory but rather an optional subject in the JAMB examination for law (Divine 2023).

Judge Lord Denning of England in perspective

Unsurprisingly, Lord Denning of England was a shining example in delivering judgments, grounded in religious Christian scripture learnt from a Christian upbringing (Khoo 2026). It commands admiration to date.

Recommendation and Conclusion

The research has traced the origin and meaning of court practice. It also traced the history of religion and legal studies in Nigeria. The paper noted the effort of religious philosophers and theologians in their approach to law. It identified the gap to be the inadequate introduction of religious study, resulting in a lacuna, poor appreciation of law, law practice, clientele base, and court procedural in sharia and customary courts in Nigeria.

The example of Lord Denning illustrates the impact of strong religious education on legal reasoning in the twenty-first century. Similarly, the contributions of Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to categories of law remain significant. The study recommends that their work be read in detail.

The study therefore recommends that legal studies that do not deeply connect with the Nigerian legal system should be removed to make way for religious studies. The study does not see the need to read irrelevant law of other jurisdictions, as many foreign legal systems do not accept Nigerian lawyers as qualified to practice.

The research recommends that legal institutions review school curriculum to enhance a deep connection between law and religious studies. Religion should be a requirement for law admission, compulsory for JAMB and direct entry students. The research further recommended that law students be built up with love and fear of God, which will support lawyers in legal practice to be moral and ethical life.

The paper also recommends that Nigerian institutions and the government must assist in bridging religious divisions. The inclusion of religious studies is not a distraction; rather, it improves knowledge.

The research recommends that the response of the Nigerian government is commendable, but not enough. There should be the establishment of law schools across the country; several issues remain pending. Nigeria's institutions are admonished to revamp religious studies deeply. Without such integration, legal study may not have a rich understanding of law principles, many of which are deeply incorporated in religious philosophy.

Conclusively, an in-depth knowledge built from the early undergraduate level will enable lawyers to engage effectively with clients from diverse cultures and religions, broaden their professional reach, promote open-mindedness, and reduce segregations. As a result, Christian Religious Studies should be made compulsory, alongside Islamic Religious Studies, as a *conditio sine qua non* for entry into the legal profession.

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