

ETHICO-RELIGIOUS EFFECTS OF DIVORCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

Divorce is a significant social issue with profound ethical and religious implications, particularly in the contemporary society. This study explores the religious effects of divorce focusing on how it influences ethical values, family structures, and communal relationships. In a society where marriage is deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, divorce is often perceived as a disruption of divine and ancestral order. Religious teaching emphasize marital fidelity, commitment, and the sacredness of the marital bond. Divorce is generally discouraged and sometimes met with social stigma, as it is believed to attract spiritual consequences, disrupt family lineage, and weaken the moral fabric of society. However, in contemporary times, changing social dynamics, economic pressures, and modernization have influenced the perception of divorce, leading to a growing tension between traditional religious beliefs and evolving societal norms. This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between ethics, religion, and divorce in the contemporary society. By analyzing religious responses, moral debates and the long-term effects on family and community cohesion, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on the role of religion in shaping marital stability. It also highlights the need for a balanced approach that respects religious values while addressing the realities of contemporary marriage and divorce.

Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that ethics and religion are intricately intertwined. In other words, there is probably no way by which the two can be segregated. The two are so much interwoven that they are doubtlessly inseparable. The attempt to

separate the two (i.e. ethics and religion) would be tantamount to stopping the sun and moon from rising when they are due to, or segregating the snail from its shell, while it is still dive. In fact, the two can be seen as synonyms, since what is obtainable in one can also be found in other. For instance, what is condemned in ethics is similarly kicked against in religion. Ethics frowns at stealing, lying, indolence, insolence, murder, unfaithfulness, undue animosity etc. just as religion abhor them all. Arguably, the two can be seen as nothing, but a confluence.

Evidently, the ethico-religious effects of divorce in the cotemporary days are quite enormous. Indeed the effects are sometimes pungent and somewhat devastating, not only to the divorcees, but also their parents, friends and the society as a whole.

Ethico-Religious Effects of Divorce in the Contemporary Society

It is imperative to carry out a succinct examination of the key words i.e. ethics, religion and divorce before going to the analysis of the effects of divorce. Thus, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* edited by Hornby defines ethics as moral principles that control or influence a person's behaviour... the branch of philosophy that deals with moral principles¹. Garner enthused that ethics is the branch of philosophy in which men attempt to evaluate and decide upon particular courses of moral action or general theories of conduct. The term "ethics" or *ethic* from the Greek *ethilos* ("moral") and *ethos* ("character") also refer to the values or rules of conduct held by a group of individual as for example in the phrases of "Christian ethics" or "unethical behaviour"². Buttressing the position of Garner above, *Shashi* postulates that ethics is the explicit philosophical reflection on moral beliefs and practices... Ethics is a conscious stepping back and reflecting on morality... The study of standards of conduct and moral judgement. The term ethics (or *ethilos*) is derived from the word *ethos* referring to the characteristic value of a particular group of people. *ETHICS* describes the way in which these values are expressed through habitual practice³. Similarly and in agreement with the above postulations, Ayantayo, quoting Smith, states unequivocally thus:

Basically, ethics is a systematic study of human actions and intentions in order to determine their goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness, correctness and incorrectness and with attention given to how course of action and intention being evaluated affects the person who performed the action and showed an intention in question, the person at which it is directed, and the society or the environment where the action is performed or the intention is muted⁴.

Having assessed ethics succinctly, it is now apposite to examine what religion is in brevity. It is probable that there is no universally acceptable definition of

religion⁵, more so that a given religion is defined by specific elements of which moral prescription defines its essence⁶. It is in the light of the above that we bring in the position of Bolaji Idowu, the doyen of African Traditional Religion. According to him, religion, which derives from the Latin root *religio* is used to designate “the transcendental reality of faith, the inner reality of faith, as well as the rituals and ceremonies. These basically are component parts of religion” which imply the awareness of an objective reality namely “Deity or “God” as well as the unmistakable reference to the way of worship which may aptly be described as divine service⁷. Buttressing the position of Idowu as enunciated above, Osume pontificates that religion is the means of communication between the traditional man and the divine beings of the spirit world whether the latter be ancestors, divinities or protective essences, with which man was a dynamic relationship. This definition conforms with Marlon Kilsons Tylorlan’s definition as “concern with spirituals” which Noel King also considers to be the basic religious beliefs of man⁸. Hornby defines religion as the belief in the existence of God or gods and the activities connected with the worship of them... One of the systems of faith that are based on the belief in the existence of a particular god or gods... a particular interest or influence that is very important in your life⁹. Whatever we think about the definition and function of religion, it is generally known now that religion has always been an inescapable, inevitable concomitant of human life as we know it today¹⁰.

The paper has examined religion succinctly it will now assess divorce. According to Emery, divorce is the legal end of a marriage. When couples marry, they promised to share love, relationship, money, children and often religion. They also take on certain legal rights and responsibilities. A divorce ends the legal obligations of marriage, but many experts say that spouses who separate must also get “divorced,” in other ways. By this, they mean that the husband and wife need to separate emotionally, learn to deal with their friends and relatives on their own and eventually make enough money to support themselves alone¹¹.

With the examination of the key words i.e. ethics, religion and divorce in brevity, it is germane to kick-start the assessment of the effects of divorce in the contemporary society. Stigmatization probably appears to be the most pronounced effect of divorce. Stigma, which is a noun, from which stigmatization is derived is seen as:

A label used to devalue members of deviant social groups. A symbol (or a negative social label) of disgrace that affects a person’s social identity. As used by Erving Goffman (1922-1982) a differentness about an individual which is given a negative evaluation by others and thus distorts and discredits the public identity of the person. For example, physical disabilities, facial disfigurement, stuttering, a prison record, being obese, or not

being able to read, may become stigmatized attributes. The stigma may lead to the adoption of a self-identity that incorporates the negative social evaluation. Physical signs of some special moral position. While having Christian origins, Lombroso used the term to refer to physical signs of the state of atavism (a morally and biologically inferior person.) The stigmata of criminality for Lombroso were things like the shape of ears, length of fingers and the slope of the forehead...¹².

Divorcees are looked at in askance, most of the time. Many do not want to associate with divorcees, except their relatives who presumably have no option. Some parents would advise their children not to marry the sons/daughters of divorcees. This is because of the conviction that their children will behave likewise, whether male or female. This, again, is because divorce is not new to them. Both the husband and the wife that are divorced are seen or regarded as grossly irresponsible individuals that can not adequately manage their temperament, and this becomes nothing, but stigma. According to Ifedi, when a husband and wife divorce, they live with stigma all their span on earth, whatever happens to them in their existence. Society sees divorcees as marital failures, men and women who cannot organise families. Nobody listens to their many self-defending excuses. All that people know is that divorcees lack the ability and self-discipline to run a home. That dent goes along wherever divorcees set their feet¹³.

Besides, children of divorced parents are often prone to much social maladies. They are more often than not, susceptible to drugs, as they do not enjoy proper or adequate parentage. Garoo pontificates that drugs and alcohol become avenues for divorced children to vent their frustration and anxiety... Research has shown a higher incidence of substance abuse in teens whose parents are divorced¹⁴. According to Oloyede, it is obvious that the probability of an adolescent succumbing to the temptation of drug is high. Long-term substance abuse has damaging effects on the well-being of the child¹⁵. Often, children from broken homes are found in places that are hidden, where they can perpetuate smoking of hemp and drinking of alcohol. Their stock-in-trade is to get high always, probably as a result of frustration. Consequently, they grow up as irresponsible adults in the society engendering mayhem and obstructing the tranquility of the general populace. This can be in the form of noise population via loud speakers when they claim to be having carnival or shouting on top of their voices when they are drunk. These young men from broken homes have somewhat become hooligans. They are the ones freely used by desperate politicians as thugs to terrorise and intimidate political opponents. What is most irritating about this, is that they are usually supplied with what they like (i.e. drugs) and paid negligible sums or mere peanuts. And when the politicians eventually win the election, the thugs cannot

see them again. With this, the thugs are susceptible to diverse vulnerability like sickness, sudden and untimely death etc. Ifedi states that children of divorcees are destabilized and disorientated. The negative factors breed immoral and criminal *tendencies*¹⁶.

Again, divorce can probably engender depression. Depression is defined by Hornby as a medical condition in which a person feels very sad and anxious to sleep..., state of feeling sad and without hope¹⁷. Buttressing the position of Hornby as postulated above, Shashi pungently states that depression is not a moral weakness, not mental sloth but true brain disease¹⁸. It has been observed that some cases of hypertension are probably the resultant effect of depression. According to Ogowo, depression is a serious problem and could cause a variety of problems such as mental health and engagement in criminal acts. It is also difficult for a person with low self-esteem to get meaningful employment¹⁹. No doubt, it can be very traumatic to part ways with a hitherto friendly partner. This do weigh down exceedingly those with such experience. Thus, they can be exposed to such ailment as stroke, apparently because of their unpalatable and harrowing experience. Often, they transfer aggression unduly, come up with very strange disposition(s).

Remarriage is another effect of divorce. Divorce do end up in picking another partner to probably preclude solitariness. Quite often, there are complaints from either the man or woman that have just remarried each other. This is ostensibly because the duo i.e. the new husband and wife are relatively new to each other, and do not know each other quite intimately. Regrets often set in as it is usually a case of *from frying pan to fire*. Occasionally, the disposition of the former husband or wife that had been jettisoned is much more tolerable than the new person i.e. husband or wife.

Notice that children of divorcees are usually uncomfortable in the new home(s) that they have found themselves. They usually see the entire environment as quite strange. Amato pontificates that following a divorce, parents and children often experience emotional problems that can last for years, even for the rest of their lives²⁰. Consequently, anxiety, depression, fear of abandonment, distrust, insecurity, lack of intimacy, confusion over sexuality, avoidance of conflict, faithlessness, loneliness, bitterness and rebellion manifest in children who have lived through their parents' divorce²¹. Oloyede goes on to postulates that remarriage can be painful if the child does not love the step-father or the step-mother, as well as if the step-father or the step-mother does not give attention or develop much time to their new family²². The trio of Johnston, Roseby and Kuehnle assert that the child may feel like the mother has a new family now, and she does not need her child around anymore²³.

Again, physical affection which is probably the hallmark of marriage will be truncated by divorce. Of a truth, human beings need intimacy, and such may necessarily include hugging and kissing, occasional holding of hands, tapping etc. These gestures may be viewed as trivial or negligible, however, they go a long way in enhancing the affection of the husband and his wife. Doubtlessly, divorce would put paid to all these and the lacuna would always be there. This is because the psychological joy derivable from these would be abruptly terminated by the unwanted agent, known as divorce. There would be nobody to kiss or hug, nobody to tap, nobody to hold his or her hands, etc. Both of them i.e. husband and wife would become despondent as they are enormously depressed and become pariah in their diverse places of domicile, where neighbours look at them in askance. It is worse in a situation whereby the lady goes back to her father's house. Some members of the extended family would despise her and try to avoid her, as much as possible. The Yoruba usually call a divorced lady who returned to her father's house *Dale mosu* (i.e. hitherto married, but returned to her father's house). This is detested and, in fact, regarded as an anathema.

The *Dale mosu* do constitute menace in her father's house. Since she has tasted marriage life, where she was free to do whatever she wanted in her former husband's house, she would occasionally be at logger-heads with her parents, especially her mother. Occasionally, she would disagree with her mother whether rightly or wrongly, wittingly or unwittingly. There is always conflicts in the house, especially when the child or children of the *Dale mosu* are cautioned for any error occasioned by youthful exuberance. In essence, there would be rancour and acrimony. The argument of the divorcee is that her parents do not love the children, otherwise, they would learn how to tolerate the shortcomings of the children who are just growing up and have not learnt how to differentiate between right and wrong. That is why the parents of the divorced lady would encourage her to go and look for accommodation, even if it would involve assisting her financially, so as to be able to foot the bill of rent relatively comfortably. When this happens, the divorcee becomes *Iya ndagbe baba nyo wa* i.e. the woman is living alone, and the man (concubine) is coming clandestinely. Virtually all categories of men would be seen trying to woo her, ostensibly because she is living alone, as a divorcee. Neighbours, rather than having empathy would cultivate the habit of traducing and or making mockery of her in her absence, while they smile with her, deceptively, as soon as she is sighted.

Part of the effects of divorce in the contemporary society is the absolute breakdown of love between the two families of the divorced couple. Those who had hitherto been relating like brothers and sisters would suddenly become arch-enemies of one another. Each family has the strong conviction that it is the child of the other family that is at fault. Ifedi states that "the breakdown of family

harmony and unity is the worst tragedy of divorce. The psychological trauma is irreversible²⁴.

In spite of the hitherto enumerated seemingly debilitating effects of divorce, the intellectual arrant-garde would advocate or crave for divorce in a situation whereby co-habitation has become cumbersome. This would obviously save life and occasionally bring lasting solution(s) to some seemingly intractable problems. For instance, a woman was barren for twelve years in her husband's house. Consequent upon this, the husband sought for a divorce and got it. About two month later, the woman coincidentally, came across an old man-friend of hers, where she relocated. They both exchanged greetings, and friendship momentarily resumed again. Subsequently, there was sexual intercourse (just once) between the two of them. And the woman became pregnant. If the woman had remained with her husband, she probably would have remained barren throughout the duration of her life. The saving grace for her was doubtlessly divorce.

Furthermore, according to a report, a bank worker, Olaoluwa Adejo, has been arrested by the Lagos state Police Command for the death of his 28-year-old wife, Maureen at their home on Peluola Street... The 32-year-old Lagos indigene was alleged to have tortured his wife of five years with a belt, as well as cutting her with a machete. Their five-year-old son, Richard, in whose presence the incident reportedly happened told *Punch Metro* that his father also forced a local insecticide *Otapiapia*, down the throat of his mother²⁵. In the same vein, the Lagos state Police Command has arrested a 25-year-old lady who... stabbed her lover to death over a yet-to-be ascertained circumstance in Badagry area of the State. The deceased, PrinceWill Chukwu died... at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), a day after he was referred by officials of Badagry General Hospital... The lady said she had just returned from Church on the day of the incident when her husband started another round of violence which was usual, since their informal union in 2003²⁶.

There is yet another disturbing scenario. According to the report:

A Lagos High Court in Ikeja has sentenced to death Akolade Arowolo for the murder of his banker wife, Titilayo who he repeatedly stabbed to death with a knife at their residence in Isolo, Lagos... Justice Lateefat Okunnu in her judgment... held that even though there was no eye-witness to the incident, the circumstantial evidence adduced by the prosecution proved the murder charge against the convict beyond all reasonable doubts. "I pronounce the defendant guilty as charged and accordingly sentenced to death", the court held. The 32-year-old man decked in white short sleeve shirt and black trousers broke down in the dock and shouted "Jesus, I did not do this", shortly after the Judge

made her pronouncement. “Jesus, what will happen to Olamide (the daughter the deceased had for him)?” he asked rhetorically²⁷.

In all these seemingly excruciating scenarios, if divorce had occurred, it would have succeeded doubtlessly in saving the lives of the victims and they would have been useful for themselves, children, parents and the society at large. But alas! Their lives have been callously terminated prematurely.

Conclusion

It is obvious that divorce cannot be eliminated outrightly from marriage, occasionally. Two people from diverse political, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds cannot reason alike. There is bound to be occasions when they cannot, but disagree, which often leads to altercation and consequently imbroglio. This, at times, leads to divorce invariably, which is often at variance with the expectations of the couples and their families, friends and even acquaintances. Divorcees occasionally have cause to curse the day they came across their former partners. This is because they probably did not bargain for their harrowing experiences when their marriages were consummated. Divorce, as a phenomenon, is worth dreading. Thus, couples should strive to avoid it in their marital life irrespective of what it would cost them. In fact, Ifedi postulates that the best option is to avoid divorce like a plague dimensions. It is a catastrophe of monumental dimensions.²⁸

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