

PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract:

Religious pluralism implies a diverse variety and multiplicity of faiths found to exist simultaneously in a given society. This has always posed a problem to sustainable development in Nigeria. Any societies which tie political battle for supremacy, socio-economic dominance and cultural superiority complex to their religions breed developmental crises. This has being the case in Nigeria because, interactions between the three dominant religions in Nigeria, namely: Christianity, African Traditional Religion and Islam have been largely governed by divisiveness, hatred, bigotry and violence. The consequence is developmental deficits. The paper recommends among others that tolerance and accepting of individual religious differences is a key to peace and harmony. The politicians should not use religion as a language of power but rather emphasize its role of achieving social needs that affect the well-being of the people

Key words: Religion, Religious pluralism, development, Sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

Constitution specified Nigeria as a secular country. Constitution according to Appadorai (1975:247), a constitution, in general terms, is the body of rules which directly or indirectly affect the distributions or the exercise of the sovereign power in the state while secular is a movement towards the separation of religion and government. This can refer to reducing ties between a government and a religion, replacing laws based on scripture with civil laws, and eliminating discrimination on the basis of religion. In a secular state the constitution allows freedom of religion, thus make Nigeria become a religious pluralist state. Religious pluralism refers to a situation where a different religious persuasion within a given institutional frame exists. In effect, a religious pluralistic society is a multi religious society where the different religious groups have different doctrine of salvation and world views which eventually condition the style of life, value and ultimate goal of each group (Benoke 2000). Today there are three known dominant religion in Nigeria, namely: Christianity, African Traditional Religion and Islam. Without prejudice to the secularity of the nation, Nigeria is under both constructive and destructive influences of religions. The unhealthy interactions between the three religions breed developmental deficits.

By development we mean a “*more inclusive concept with its social, political and economic facets. It is the qualitative and quantitative positive transformation of the lives of a people that does not only enhance their material well-being but also ensures their social well-being, including the restoration of human dignity*” (Osagie 1985). In other words, development should be “a warm, gradual and considerate process in its attempt to

alleviate man's economic and technological standard or conditions without disregarding or disrespecting any aspect of man's existing social, cultural and political values” (Ifeyinwa 2004). Sustainable development on the other hand is a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (WCED, 1987). The primary objective of sustainable development is to reduce the absolute poverty of the world's poor through providing lasting and secure livelihoods that minimize resource depletion, environmental degradation, cultural disruption and social instability (WCED, 1987).

Sustainable development is a planned cultural, economic, social, environmental and political change for the better, which needs cooperation at all levels by all the stakeholders, geared towards the well-being of the masses, for the masses and by the masses. It is a societal good and every social actor must get involved and stay engaged in its pursuit. It is long termed, fosters inter and intergenerational equity and does not foul the air, poison the water, dis-equilibrate forest ecosystems or pollute and degrade lands (WCED, 1987).

However, the significant of sustainable development was applauded in August 2002 at the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD), where nations were urged to take steps to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and begin their implementation. (UNDESA, 2004). More so, various scholars have studied the challenges of sustainability and urban development in Africa. Some of them include Falade (2003) whose study focused on the challenges of a sustainable Nigeria, Abumere (2002) whose research centered on urban governance and the challenges of urban poverty, Odeyemi (2006) who did a study on gender and urbanization and Olanrewaju (2003) who focused on sustainability and urban poverty. In the same way, Manson (1985) observed that people's attitude about the role of religion varies. To him, “there are those who wish to put an official religious stamp on all political and social institutions, like the Muslims thus having a negative effect on sustainable development. Ekwunife (2005), also observed that “religion can be both an integrative and divisive factor in any society. When the divisive elements of religion are not handled and brought under control, they create tension and unrest in the society, which often result in religious riots and intolerance” and consequential effect on the development of the nation. Thus this work will examine the various ways religious pluralism has impeded on the sustainable development of Nigeria. Besides, various ways of curbing the crisis caused by religious pluralism were also reflected.

Religious Pluralism and Sustainable Development

Nigeria is passing through developmental crisis. Religious pluralism has remained the greatest challenge to sustainable development and unity of the nation. African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam, which are widely practiced in the country, dominate the daily lives of their practitioners and it has generated intolerance and deadly violence that threaten the corporate existence and development of Nigeria as a nation. The high premium placed on religion “is portrayed by the diverse manner through which it is practiced in many societies” (Anyacho, 2005). As a religiously pluralistic society, the

place of religion in addressing national issue appears evident. According to (Imaekhai, 2010), "it is part of the fabric of people's lives and strongly tied to their cultural identities". Thus, Mbiti (1996) rightly observed that "Africans are notoriously religious". According to John S. Mbiti; it is religion, more than anything else, which colours their understanding of the universe and their empirical participation in that universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. Africans eat religiously, dance religiously, trade religiously and organize their societies religiously; but this is done in a holistic manner, without any dichotomy of the material and the spiritual. Since Africans are "incurably religious", (John S. Mbiti, 1969).

James D. Wolfensohn, foresaw the need for closer collaboration of the World Bank and other development institutions with religion according to him: Religion is an omnipresent and seamless part of daily life, taking an infinite variety of forms that are part of the distinctive quality of each community. Religion could not be seen as something apart and personal. It is, rather, a dimension of life that suffuses whatever people do. Religion has an effect on many people's attitudes to everything, including such matters as savings, investment and a host of economic decisions. It influences area we had come to see as vital for successful development, like schooling, gender quality, and approaches to health care. In short, religion could be an important driver of change, even as it could be a break to progress (James D. Wolfensohn, 2007). As a result, there is a realization that the religious faith of people help shape their view of development.

National development in a pluralistic country like Nigeria "has been a problematic issue since the attainment of independence in 1960"(Ker, 2003). The nexus between the Muslims and Christians have been one of mistrust and suspicion. This has led to incessant religious crises due to different perceptions of the ideal society and the conflicting strategies of power and posturing which have made the ideological gap impossible (Masou, 1985). Whenever religious crisis in Nigeria is mentioned, what really comes to the mind of some people would be the destructive activities of religious extremist groups and the violent clashes mostly between them. Between the 1980's to the present, there have been more than 50 religious crises recorded in 30 years in the Northern part of Nigeria only which have left political, social, economic and psychological losses and pains on the affected people and area (Abimboye, 2009). Another challenging crisis is from the Boko-haram religious sect, according to Adesoji (2010) opines that the outbreak of Boko Haram uprising in the country in July 2009 "reinforced the attempts by Islamic conservative elements of imposing a variant of Islamic religious ideology on a secular state". This sect sees western education as sin and vow for the full implementation of the Sharia law in the northern states: Zamfara state, Bornu, Yobe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Sokoto, Niger, Bauchi, and Gombe. Such activities no doubt do not only have devastating effects on peaceful co-existence but impinge on the development of the nation.

Another significance fact is religious intolerance and fanaticism among the adherents of the religion. Onimhawa \$ Ottuh (2007) affirmed that in Nigeria "the most prevalent problem confronting relationship between the religions is the absolute claim to religious faith especially between Christians and Muslims". According to Ezeh (1999)oral or

written statements made by the religions lead to conflicts. Religious events in the northern states show this tendency. The Muslims in Nigeria have been demanding for the application of the Sharia law forgetting that Nigeria is a secular state. Any attempt to support this is a violation of 1999 constitution which states that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice or observance”. To accept this means the state support Islam which violates its secular status. Where it exists, its application affects both Muslims and Christians. Minority groups or Christians are sometimes forced to change to Islam or they are tried in Sharia courts (Eze, 1999). It is an hindrances to development, Intolerance among denominations; Muslim against Muslim brothers whom they call infidels. The same frame of mind is shown by other protestant churches against orthodox Catholic Church and so on. Religious intolerance has become a very big problem to nation building in contemporary times.

Isirameh (2010) is of the view that poverty or deprivation provides empowerment for religious violence. “A condition where there are widespread social, economic, religious insecurity, corruption, injustice, youth unemployment and absence of good governance among states in the north could serve as catalyst for religious violence (Gbenga, Inusa & Livinus, 2015). The issue of poverty has become a recurrent decimal in Nigeria, most especially in the Northern states to the extent that many now associate Islam with poverty. Islam is a religion of peace, but the tenet of the religion allows their adherents to marry many wives only if they can cater for them. But our men are greedy, they miss interpret the message; they started marrying wives producing children they can not cater for. This has been responsible for many uncared child on Northern states streets. This children don't have access to education, thus the can not contribute to the development of the country. These unemployed youths especially the “almayiris” are used as war machines to carry out violence in the northern part of the country.

The influence of foreign culture is another impediment to development in Nigeria. Many Arab culture were imported here, many of which can not do us any good. The practice of putting women under pudah, the strict adherence to what the Quran says is killing our culture. Today in Nigeria, scholars are now acknowledging that there should be more constructive approach to understanding the significance of culture in our societies and how culture influences forms of behaviours that can support development but importation of religious culture that is different to our is an hindrances. Though an indebt understanding of the significance of culture would have help the policy makers to recognize and respond to the opportunities that culture presents but many of these policy makers are under the influence of religion. Culture is gradually gaining presence in development discourse in the world, most especially as policy makers are now acknowledging that social and cultural norms influence peoples' attitudes and choices; that there is a strong correlation between a peoples' culture and the perspective to life. Therefore, a balance perspective is necessary for understanding the role of culture in development efforts. This balance perspective requires the integration of culture with other factors such as class, occupation, gender, location and politics (Sen 2004). It is the intermingling of all these factors that produces heterogeneity, fluidity and change.

UNESCO in its world conference on cultural policies held in Mexico City in 1982 gave the following definition of culture directly linking it to development. It stated thus:

Culture may now be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights, traditions and beliefs (UNESCO 1982).

Any reasonable development efforts must have roots in the people's culture for it to be successful. The existing cultural patterns in a particular society will determine whether and to what extent such a society welcomes or rebuffs change. There are sets of unseen social goods that flow from a vibrant culture, most especially if it is protected and supported in a progressive manner and should a development effort runs contrary to such social goods as it is in Nigeria, that society will be opposed to development effort.

Due to religious pluralism, there is wrong diagnosis and treatment. It is common for an average Nigerian to assume certain diseases as stroke; heart disease, epilepsy, and madness and so on are spiritually machinated. To this end, instead of seeking orthodox medical diagnosis and treatment, alternative solutions become the viable resort. Christian "prayer houses" and the traditional healing homes have turned to hospital and psychiatric homes. In turn, people who supposed to be well and healthy are wrongly diagnosed and treated thereby contributing less or nothing as the case may be to national development.

Scientific innovation is not encouraged. Scientific innovation in Nigeria is at its low ebb when compared with the western world. Religious pluralism, no doubt has contributed negatively to such innovations. For instance, assuming there is a brake failure that resulted in a fatal car accident. Hardly will anyone try to find the root cause of the accident, to advance a better/efficient brake system. Obviously, scientific innovations are vital ingredients for societal development. Lack or poor scientific innovations have really affected Nigeria's development. It will not be an over statement to say that Nigeria is the strong hold of religious pluralism. This condition has continued to tarnish the country's international image as no foreign investors or corporations would want to do business in an unreceptive environment. Every investor would like to do business where there is security of lives and property. But in the case of Nigeria, the story is different. This affects national development in the country.

The mixing of religion with politics as experienced in Nigeria has not really helped the cause of governance. At the national level, many of Nigerian political officials are selected or elected on the basis of religion. A good number of the electorates vote not on the competence of those vying for political offices but on religious sentiments. Part of the reasons why some persons voted for the former and incumbent President of Nigeria Goodluck Johnathan and Muhammadu Buhari is religion (Banjo, 2016). This sets a wrong precedence in the sense that individuals who are not qualified for a job may at some point be elected. And when it occurs, the leadership style of whoever is the leader would lead to under-development. Religion which should have been a unifying factor has been manipulated to cause division and hatred. Political leaders have continued to exploit the county's religious and regional diversity to consolidate political base of support. The result is that Nigeria today is a deeply divided society in terms of religion.

Religious pluralism has affected the Judiciary as an institution: this relate to the functioning of the legal and judicial systems in Nigeria. In a country where legal/judicial environments is in consonant with the indices that can instigate development the following attribute of judicial/ legal content will be obvious. There will be independence of the judiciary, proper enforcement of laws, incorrupt law enforcement agents, lack of corruption in the judicial system, and fast process of trial and good welfare for the judges. But the judiciary is divided along the religious line in Nigeria. The functionality of the courts in the South matches that of the court system of the United States, yet the North continues to rely upon Shari'ah law to interpret legislative code. In this way, religious law also impacts the manner in which society behaves. This is because the legal system holds significant social influence and has the power to shape how citizens behave through setting rules. The legal polarization in Nigeria has consequential social and religious effects but it has an impact on the way the system has been organized. The legal system acts as a reflection of the Nigerian society as a whole, with the North a region influenced by Islamic law, and the South being a westernized region, development can not be attain in this way. Only a unify judical institution that can instigate sustainable development in Nigeria.

Educational as an institution is another important area that religious pluralism has affected almost beyond repairs. The establishment of religious institutions has been the order of the day in Nigeria. Today all the religious denominations have established their own higher institutions in Nigeria. All the Muslim sets are doing the same. Many of this institution can not afford to incorporate technology and engineering department / faculty in their institutions. How would they instigate development? Many of these institutions are producing more religious fanatics that are contributing to the circle of violence in the country. Education is supposed to impart knowledge, to broaden the individual mind. It is also intended, to make him/her a better behaved member of the society. Lack of formal education, poor education, inadequate education, ignorance, wrong educational upbringing, lack of moral up bringing in schools, inadequate preparations for examinations and emphasis on paper qualifications (Ogundele 2004) may not sustained development in any country. Education is expected to be a strategy for sustainable development, international policy documents like the Dakar framework on 'Education in Africa' urge member states to ensure that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes (Labonte, R, et. el, 2004). The Ubuntu Declaration on 'Education, Science and Technology for Sustainable Development' identifies a global need to integrate a sustainable development focus into the curriculum at every level of education (IAU, 2002). The declaration emphasizes curriculum development; North-South networking; strategic educational planning and policy-making; and capacity building in scientific research and learning. All these are pointers to show the significant of education in the sustainability of development in Nigeria. There is also the need for learning for work, citizenship and sustainability for all sexes and genuine commitments to assure equity for all ethnic groups. This will reduce the problems of early childbirth, overpopulation, intellectual capital flight and lack of participation.

Conclusion

Every religion promotes moral values such as peace, tolerance, honesty, justice, humility, brotherhood and love. Instead of manipulating religion for selfish interest, people should imbibe such positive principles and teachings of religion, as these can serve as a beginning to achieving peace and social harmony in the society. Peace and social harmony provide enabling environment for national development. Politicians in Nigeria should learn to stop the use religion as a “language of power.” Its role should be on fulfilling social needs that directly affect the well-being of the community.

The law on secularism must be implemented to the later. The government should take measures to ensure that it is obeyed by every citizen. The issue of some states operating a different law from the federal government should not obtain at all. Every state is under the federal government and the governor must abide by his oath of office of upholding the constitution of Nigeria. As a matter of fact any governor that goes contrary to this has to be removed without delay and a sole administrator will take over his duties.

It will not be an over-statement to state that religious pluralism has generated insecurity and instability in Nigeria. Religious conflicts have been recorded by the two immigrant religions (Islam and Christianity) in the country and this has led to waste of human and natural resources. To enhance national development in Nigeria today, peaceful practice of religion with respect for other people's religion is a pre-requisite. Muslims and Christians should as a matter of urgency emphasize their area of similarity and de-emphasize divergent features of their religion. They must seek a basis of unity that brings them together without destroying their differences as far as religious integration is concerned. It therefore becomes pertinent to recommend that for peaceful co-existence and sustainable national development to be achieved there must be respect among members of the different faiths.

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