

RELIGION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The paper focused on the status of Nigeria in religion and sustainable development in Africa. Religion promotes integrated development as it influences the development of a better world. Thus religion and development are discussed. Africa and religion are further discussed because there is no separation between religion and life, body and soul in African thinking. African religion in sustainable development and underdevelopment are highlighted. The role of religion in sustainable development in Nigeria is seen to be both positive and negative. Positively it is a stepping stone to sustainable development through provision of education and healthcare institutions and organizations. Negatively it has immensely contributed to Nigeria's underdevelopment through numerous religious riots in some regions of the country that have led to the loss of many lives and properties. Recommendations such as: Religious education should emphasize the importance of science in technological development, hard work and good governance for sustainable development, among others are proffered.

Introduction

There is reluctance to consider the influence of religion in contemporary discussions, of ways to attain sustainable human development in Africa, especially in Nigeria. This arises from the diverseness and intolerance among the various religious groups in the country, especially Islam and Christianity. This has occasionally resulted in violent conflicts and destruction of lives and property. This hampers, and in some cases destroys developmental projects and can precipitate the decline of nations. Thus development institutions and agencies often refer to religious wars and their attendant consequences as one of the reasons or a total neglect of religion and discourse or preferring civil religion devoid of creed, code and cult-committed humanism, as partners in development (Ogbonnaya, 2012). Ogbonnaya (2012) further states that "*in addition, when religion becomes involved in alleviating hunger by various forms of charity through faith-based organizations, contemporary*

developmental discourse finds itself in a dilemma as to what form their relationship with religion ought to be, in promoting religion, especially at the grass root level”.

Since religion promotes integral development that goes beyond economic globalization, this paper defends the view that religion plays a vital role in the sustainable development in Africa despite the conflicts, which are sometimes violent, arising from intolerance. Drawing from Africa’s religious world view, with special respect to Nigeria, this paper urges religious groups in Africa to inculcate in their adherents the importance of hard work and ingenuity in the quest for sustainable development.

Religion and Development

Religion can be involved in influencing the development of a better world. Its innumerable adherents have a common belief in the dignity of man under God. It is committed to the promotion of the human good so as to provide basic human needs, guarantee protection of human rights and promote integral development of the world. Thus neglecting religion, the source of normative meaning that grounds the architecture of infrastructural and super-structural development institutions of society, is misunderstanding world progress as a whole.

As long as secular discourse continues to exclude religion in its analysis of globalization, progress and development of mankind, its analysis will always give rise to defective results. Thus Stackhouse (2009) asserts that *“the neglect of religion as an ordering, uniting and dividing factor in a number of influential interpretations of globalization is a major cause of misunderstanding and a studied blindness regarding what is going on in the world”.*

At various times in the not too distant past, the recognition of indispensability of religion in the development discourse has given rise to changes of attitude leading to a series of dialogues between religion and various agencies concerned with the promotion of sustainable development. For instance, during the period of the food and energy crises of the 1970s the world’s religions met at the Interreligious Peace Colloquium on Food and Energy in 1975 and declared food and energy a basic human right. They issued a statement urging structural changes in world societies in order to alleviate hunger and malnutrition (Gremillion, 1978). Lessons of that conference bring to the fore the complexity of such simple acts of charity like feeding the hungry as well as the interdependency of the basic organs of society for the realization of integral development viz technological, economic, ideological and political will, religious and cultural for world peace.

On another occasion, with the gradual onset of economic globalization accompanying the call for a New International Economic Order,

selected leaders of the major world religions, particularly monotheistic ones. Christianity, Judaism and Islam in an interreligious Peace Colloquium in Lisbon, Portugal in 1977 reiterated the importance of religion in the emerging world order. They proposed a comprehensive grasp of the political, economic, religio-cultural, ethnic, faith communities and ideologies as necessary for peace in the new human order, especially as all these transitional actors in the world scene are significantly affected with fifth dimensions (Germillion and Ryan, 1978).

Furthermore, the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) set up in 1998 continues the dialogue of religion and development agencies such as the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2001). The result of such dialogue has been an emphasis on *integral development*, that is, development that is not merely economic but one that includes the political, social, cultural, economic, technological as well as the religio-spiritual aspects of human life. Thus such development must focus on the human person, involved in development and promoting his overall development: social, cultural, personal and religious (Ogboonnaya, 2012).

Institutions now appreciate the position of faith-based groups: that *“economic development programmes will not be sustainable, even within their own terms of reference, unless they incorporate the spiritual as well as the cultural, political and environmental dimensions of life”* (Tyndale, 2011). Wolfensohn (2011) foresaw the need for closer collaboration of the World Bank and other development institutions with religion and remarked: *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*. Thus religion should 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 almost everybody’s attitude to everything, including such matters as savings investment and a host of economic decisions. It influences we have seen as vital for successful development, in issues, such as schooling, gender quality, and approaches to health care.

This dialogue has led to the realization that the religious faith of people help shape their views on development. Religion provides the unifying power that grounds the socio-political, economic, technological, cultural and moral dynamics of a culture. This is particularly true of Africans for whom life is an intricate web of the sacred and the secular.

Africa and Religion

There is no separation between religion and life, body and soul in African thinking. This means that mankind is best seen as a life force harmoniously interacting with life forces in the universe such as God, deities, founding ancestors of clans and ethnic groups as well as the ancestors of living and dead of other families and tribes. According to Mbiti (1969), it is

religion more than anything else that colour an African's understanding of the universe and his empirical participation in the universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. The philosophical understanding of African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, moral actions and social relationship lies in the thinking that "to be is to be religious in a religious world". If Africans are "very religious" does religion in Africa promote or hinder sustainable development? If African religious values promote the human good by their emphasis on the community, does the modern religious value from the Christian, Islamic and traditional religions in Africa promote or retard sustainable, integral development?

African Development and Underdevelopment

Development in Africa can be interpreted in two ways: from the preview of underdevelopment which emphasis African's material poverty in comparison to developed world economies; and secondly from the viewpoint of Africa being part of the developing world. In case of the former, African underdevelopment reveals that the continent is almost synonymous with poverty, disease, malnutrition, political instability, violence, dependence by corruption and injustice. This is captured vividly in Ali Mazrui (1986) *in the Tripe Heritage*, asserts: "Things are not working in Africa. From Dakar to Dares Salaam, from Marakesh to Maputo, institutions are decaying, structures are rusting away. It is as if the ancestors had pronounced the curse of cultural sabotage". The report of the Economic Commission for Africa (2010) corroborates this and asserts; "Today Africa is the poorest region in the world. Half of the population lives on less than one dollar a day. Life expectancy is actually falling. People live on average, to the age of just 46. In India and Bandladesh, by contrast, that figure is now a staggering 17 years higher".

The challenges of Africa's underdevelopment are systemic, and things are going wrong in all directions. There are problems arising from poor governance and economic mismanagement, corruption and embezzlement of public funds. There are social upheavals arising from distorted border demarcations and the combination of incompatible people in one nation. This has in consequence led to nepotism and ethnocentrism. Another problem is the decay of infrastructure and or total absence of it. This makes it difficult for Africa to compete profitably in the global market; and has led to greater dependence on food importation. Thus there is unequal relationship in terms of trade, debt and aid from developed countries.

There are however, signs of improvement in development in the African continent. Many African countries now boast of democratically elected governments, but much still needs to be done to ensure free and fairelections. There is also greater regional integration with the creation of the

African union which has replaced the toddler Organization of African Unity. There is also peer review mechanism by which African heads of State can learn from one another through a programme called New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD).

Despite decades of overall continental stagnation, growth exceeded 5 percent in 24 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2003; and everywhere now there are signs that there is going to be a real momentum change (The Economic Commission for Africa-ECA, 2010). There is also improvement as reported in the *Financial Post of Canada* (2011:1-6): “*The region is shaking off economic chaos to become one of the most incredible success stories of the global economy*”. The McKinsey Global Institute report: on Africa’s development (2010) titled “*Lions on the move: the Progress and Potential of African Economies*”, similarly extolled the economic development of Africa and its potentials.

Unfortunately, despite increase in Africa’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in recent years this does not translate to improvement for most of the people. For instance, while Nigeria’s GDP increased, paradoxically her poverty level has increased throwing more people below the poverty line of less than \$1 a day (Ogboonnaya, 2012). According to the report on poverty head count figures for 2010 and forecast estimate for 2011 released by the National Bureau for Statistics (NBS), “the incidence of poverty worsened between 2004 and 2010. Adebayo (2012) states that during that period, the Nigerian economy was growing strongly at an average growth rate in excess of 6.6%, making the country the 5th fastest growing economies in the world in 2010 at 7.87% real growth rate”. This paradox in the growth on the face of poverty and inequality is as a result of the inequality and injustice in Nigeria’s socio-politico-economic distribution, with 1% of the population (politicians and bureaucrats) allocating most of the resources to themselves while the rest of the populace wallow in abject poverty. The role of religion in the sustainable development of Africa, particularly Nigeria, will be assessed based on the performance of Christianity, traditional religion and Islam in addressing these socio-politico-economic issues bedeviling Africa.

Religion and Development in Nigeria

The role of religion for sustainable development in Nigeria has been both positive and negative. Positively, religion stands as a reliable institution providing stepping stones to sustainable development. According to Sanne (2003), “*although they were little prepared for, the churches found themselves as the only viable structure remaining after the break down of state institutions; and as such had to shoulder a disproportionate burden of the problems of their societies.*” In another statement the author further states: “*from the days of the missionaries to the present, the church in Africa has*

focused its development strategy in two areas: education and healthcare". The details below show that they have done remarkably well:

- The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA) contribute in many ways to sustainable development of Nigeria (Olarinmoye, 2011). In the face of weakness of the Nigerian state and the inefficiency of its constitutions to provide the human good to its citizens, these two faith-based organizations (FBOs) supplement and complement government's effort toward improving the standard of living of Nigerians. These FBOs in Nigeria are involved in pro-poor charitable works, alleviate poverty, promote progress, and serve as agents of progress. According to Olarinmoye (2011), FBOs in Nigeria provide health and educational services through their health and educational institutions. They own economic institutions such as bookshops, hotels, insurance and mass media, among others.
- The Christian Rural and Urban Development of Nigeria (CRUDAN) partners with the government and other FBOs to promote rural and urban development especially in areas of agriculture, water and sanitation, micro-finance and livelihoods development and training.
- The Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) with consultative status in the United Nations, among other things, aims at the intellectual and economic empowerment of Muslim women, the rehabilitation of children and orphan, centres, the encouragement of young girls to embrace education and proper and adequate healthcare, etc. It does this in partnership with the Nigerian Programme of Nomadic Education Programmes.
- Although not institutionalized like Christianity and Islam, African traditional religion contributes to the sustainable development of Nigeria psychologically. According to the Ogbonnaya (2012) it provides a sense of security and assurance of assistance from the spirit of the ancestors which Africans believe serve as a protective shield against such evil forces as witches and wizards which can disrupt individual and communal development. Therefore, when faced with the riddles of life, and in moments of suffering and difficulty, a good number of Nigerians fall back on their traditional religious cultural beliefs.

Religion and Underdevelopment in Nigeria

In spite of their laudable involvement in promoting progress and sustainable development, religions in Nigeria have in some ways been inhibiting sustainable development. Christianity and Islam are often antagonists, leading to ethnic and religious conflicts which result in loss of lives and destruction of properties. For instance, between 1980-2011 more than eleven thousand Nigerians died and properties worth millions of dollars were destroyed in riots

between Muslims and Christians. A few of the facts of countless tragedies to exemplify religious violence in Nigeria are presented below:

In 1980, the Maitasine crisis claimed thousands of lives (the government conservatively estimated the death toll at just over four thousand) and caused millions of naira and property damaged. On the last day of October 1982, eight churches were burnt in Kano city. Another riot in Kaduna that same year claimed more than four hundred lives. In 1984, violence sparked by Muslims in Yola and Jimeta killed approximately seven hundred people (including policemen) and left nearly six thousand people homeless. In the first week of February 1986 at Ilorin-Kwara State, the Palm Sunday procession turned disastrous as Christians clashed with Muslims, leading to the destruction of three churches... (Falola, 1998).

Similarly, religious conflicts, riots and violence arising from clashes between Muslims and Christians regularly occur in Nigeria. Rioting outbreak in 2004 and 2008 between Muslims and Christians claimed about 1000 lives, while various attacks by Boko Haram insurgents since 2009 has claimed more than 5,000 lives and destroyed valuable properties worth millions of dollars. Its terrorists activities in Nigeria are crippling the economy of Nigeria, especially Northern Nigeria, creating insecurity in the country, driving way foreign and local investors, thus resulting in much government spending on security instead of infrastructures.

It should be noted, however, that economic status is another reason for the upsurge of religious intolerance in Nigeria. According to Odozor (2011) *“A cruel irony in oil fields, a sizeable proportion of the population sinks more deeply into poverty. The concomitant decline of investment in the education and economic well-being of people, especially the young, makes the latter easy prey for religious fanatics or lunatics who promise them something greater than themselves, whether in this world or in the next.”* For instance, the present terrorist activities of Boko Haram arise from endemic poverty arising from bad governance and dissatisfaction with the structure of the Nigerian State.

Religion also implies sustainable development through tacit collaboration in corruption and mismanagement of the economy because religious leaders have failed to challenge the structures that give rise to bad governance, corruption and social malaise. They have not spoken with one voice against the cycles of injustice, greed and self-aggrandizement of the political class that confiscates the state resources for personal use, thus dehumanizing Nigerians. On the contrary, various religious groups have sought to benefit from the corruption and nepotism in the Nigerian system when a member of their religion is in power as the president, governor or local government chairman, etc. By so doing, religions in Nigeria put themselves in a position to be used at will by the political class. Thus, religion instead of

being an agent of development has at times been an instrument of decline, destruction, violence and revenge.

Recommendations

- Since it is not enough for religions to contribute to the sustainable development of Nigeria merely by providing social services as they have been doing, religious leaders in the country should figure out a way to honestly embrace peace and promote mutual coexistence by understanding one another's religious beliefs.
- In view of their contributions to sustainable development, religions should be integrated to the development plans of the country through education in order to contribute to the industrial development. This is necessary because religions have direct access to the people who are involved in national development through FBOs.
- Civic education should be included in the curriculum of religious education because this could inculcate in Nigerians a nationalist spirit and patriotism to make them love their country, be involved in the political process and demands justice by holding their officers and elected leaders accountable.
- Religious education should emphasize the importance of science in technological advancement, hard work and the importance of good governance for sustainable development of the population.
- While they are involved in national development through their FBOs, religious leaders must fight corruption and injustice. Their influence in public policy must be to promote the common good and sustainable development of Nigeria.

Conclusion

Although there are many factors inhibiting the contribution of religion to development in Nigeria, it is still an important agent for sustainable development. This is because there are a good number of Nigerians identifying themselves with religions and belong to the various FBOs that abound in the country. A survey of people's religious beliefs carried out in ten countries in 2004 by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC NEWS) shows that Nigeria is the most religious nation in the world, topping the list by ninety percent of the population opting for their religious beliefs as a moral guide to life. This religiousness can be utilized for the development of the country. Normally, instead of impeding sustainable development, religion ought to promote it, because faith addresses the ultimate concerns of humans because it permeates all aspects of human life. Thus religion provides an anchor in giving meaning to various forms of human experiences, life and actions. If religion is used to promote interreligious dialogue and education it will reduce

religious conflicts, hence contributing to sustainable development through the nurturing of human conscience for honesty and transparency.

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