

THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper is of the view that religion is in the fore front of Nigeria's inability to sustain her National Development since her independence in 1960. Since then the country has witnessed numerous religious riots or crises which have required in loss of lives and property worth billions of Naira. The paper is of the view that religion is in its rightful place to usher in unprecedented sustainable national development when multi-faith nature of the country is genuinely protected by the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Therefore, the paper believes that religion is the proper road to achieving sustainable national development through right spiritual living, religious tolerance, shunning of corruption, and living the life of goodness, beauty, unity, truth and freedom of expression.

Introduction

Religion, throughout the world, is a way of man's attempt to serve God, and it is a universal phenomenon. Hence, man feels that God created him in "his own likeness". This is the reason why men all over the world have found themselves living in an environment beyond their control. Some of these are born in a Christian environment, some others in the Islamic world while others live in a Buddhist, Hindu or Tao environment.

In Nigeria, there are three distinct religions, viz: Christianity, Islam, and traditional, hence, the country is a multi-faith culture. This unique environment disposed to be a source of oneness that would pave the way for sustainable national development, but it has become a source of disunity. Disunity in the sense that the country has witnessed so many religious crises, unrests or riots which have culminated in wanton destruction of lives and property worth billions of Naira since Nigeria's independence in 1960. Whereas religions propagate love, peace, synthesis, unity and freedom of; means of livelihood, etc, this has never been the case in Nigeria. This problem reached a critical stage at a time and prompted the Council for the World's Religion, with headquarters in the United States . of America, in conjunction with Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-ife, to convene a multi-faith conference in order to discuss the religious crisis in the country. The conference really took place between 4th and 8th December, 1989. The conference, according to Ezeme (2002), brought together leading scholars, religions and community leaders, members of the press and public from both Nigeria and abroad representing various religious interests and had remained the first of its kind. This kind gesture failed to ignite the spark of cooperation, unity and economic development of a nation such as Nigeria.

National Development

Andrew (2005), opined that National Development refers to the process of advancing forward from a state of foolishness or self-centredness towards an improved position that could benefit the generality of the people living in an environment including their economic well-being. The author further stated that individuals or nations are never static because they are always striving to develop by improving upon their present state of life conditions. Hornby (2001), added that when development becomes sustainable, it means that it would last for a long time to come.

Andrew further stressed that when there is societal or national development, it means that many people in an area have access or opportunity to benefit from the essential requirements of life which invariably improve standard of living such as: education, gainful employment, good health, food and nutrition, etc. In this regard, when a nation is underdeveloped, it means that the people living in the environment that are facing numerous problems such as the following:

1. Numerous religious crises/riots including destruction of property, loss of lives and ethnic group disputes and rivalries.

2. Shortage of pipe-borne water to the majority of the people.
 3. Inadequate electricity supply
 4. Wide scale corruption in place of legal income earnings.
 5. Unemployment of youths and adults
 6. Abject poverty, food shortages, including inadequate shelter for the masses.
 7. Inequality of wealth and low income earning.
 8. Poor access roads, infrastructure, and absence of honesty and trust among the people.
 9. Poor leadership, followership and absence of honesty and trust among the people.
 10. Wide scale corruption among the people.
- In this regard, Nigeria is guilty of most of the problems.

Religious Crises in Nigeria

Crises in any environment are the practical expressions of hatred, slander, curses, treason and rancour. They stand against unity, peace, synthesis and progress of individuals and nations. This is the reason why Ezeme (2002), stated that there are too many religious uprising in Nigeria since her independence.

Oritsejafor (2006), was of the opinion that the crises in Northern Nigeria of 23rd February, 2006, concerning the cartoon riot of Denmark in November, 2005, was a criminal act of the Moslem faithfuls over the Christians and that such actions shall be prosecuted. In this vein, the following are the major religious crises that have taken place in Nigeria.

1. The Organization of Islamic Conference crisis (January, 1986).
2. The Ilorin disturbances (March, 1986).
3. Usman Dan Fodio University, Sokoto Religious crisis (May 3, 1986).
4. University of Ibadan religions crisis (May 5 1986).
5. The Kaduna Religious crisis (May 5, 1987).
6. Ahmadu Bello University Religious crisis (June, 1988).
7. Bauchi, Riot (April 20-22, 1991)
8. Kano Riot (October 11, 1991).
9. Bauchi Riot (1992)
10. Zango-Kataf Uprising (May, 1992)
11. Kaduna Riot over Sharia (2001)
12. Jos Riot (September, 2001)
13. Northern Nigeria cartoon riot (23rd February, 2006).

The results of these crises resulted in a wanton destruction of lives and properties. For example, Ubaka (2002) stated that churches in Northern States were demolished either through burning of the church buildings or through their being bulldozed as illegal structures. In addition, Emene (2002) said that the teaching of Christian religious knowledge was under check while Christians were denied the use of the media (radio and television) to propagate their preaching and teaching of the Christian faith.

Religion as a way to Serve God and Achieve Unity Among Human Beings

Saraydarian T. (2004), opined that religion is a way to serve God and also achieve unity among human beings in the world through the following:

- a. Developing and practicing compassion and harmlessness,
- b. Abandoning greed and competition,
- c. Spreading the teaching of the ageless wisdom,
- d. Dedicating our life to beauty and rejecting ugliness,
- e. Dispersing superstition and prejudice,
- f. Encouraging spiritual living.

Developing and Practicing Compassion and Harmlessness

Religion stands for compassion and harmlessness. This helps to live a life of mercy which promotes people's efforts to disperse hatred and separation. It encourages success in all departments of human labour. This is what all leaders or founders of various religions in the world practiced and encouraged in their various environments through their exemplary self examples.

2. Abandoning Greed and Competition

Saraydarian (2005) emphasized that greed and competition have robbed nations of their natural resources; hence there has been a lot of revolutions, wars and destruction. Religion has prepared the individuals to be content with whatever they have at a particular time. Religions, therefore, are trying to help people to see the dangers of greed and competition so as to disperse any evil which prevents humanity from achieving great heights of health, happiness and success.

3. Spreading the Teaching of the Ageless Wisdom

Down the ages, God has sent great saints to teach humanity higher principles, laws, to set greater standards of living and vision including knowledge and wisdom. All these combined are called "Ageless wisdom" and they contain the highest virtues and the highest food for humanity at different periods. In this respect, Saraydarian (2004), opined that the Ageless wisdom is not religion but includes it, because it is for everybody and likened, it to air, water and sunshine. Therefore, all its virtues are to enable every human being live holy life.

4. Dedicating our Lives to Beauty and Rejecting Ugliness

It is the vision of religion to stimulate the sense of beauty in every division of life. This is the reason why each beauty evokes higher cooperation with God Almighty so as to enrich the life of every human being; hence, there will be beauty in our manners, thoughts, and goals; beauty in our homes, schools, offices, environments; beauty in courts and prisons, etc.

All the different beauties will help to eradicate all forms of ugliness in the form of: corruption, ritual killings, life assassins, rigging of elections, cultism, examination malpractices, raping, trading on contraband and fake drugs or goods, etc.

5. Dispersing Superstition and Prejudice

Many people in Nigeria live in superstition and prejudice; and this means they have not expanded their consciousness but live in illusions and glamourous. Therefore, this creates a dark wall which prevents the light Of God from passing through.

In other words, Saraydarian (2005) stressed that superstition and prejudice are formations of ignorance, separations and toxicity, because they contaminate facts and reality and change them into ugliness. Religion, therefore, would certainly help to transform individuals to graduate from the world of superstition and prejudice to freedom and become "born again".

6. Encouraging Spiritual Living

According to Saraydarian (2004), a spiritual person is a very balanced person who is in harmony with both spiritual and human values.

Hence, to be spiritual means to grow towards the light of God, beauty and wisdom, hence such a person will hate corruption, crime, exploitation, forgery, self-interest and other forms of ugliness.

A spiritual person therefore, does his or her work well by dedicating his labour towards good productivity. This also leads to choosing the most essentials in life and live for them.

Conclusion

This paper has revealed that religion is one of the sources of crises in Nigeria including her inability to achieve sustainable national development. If the teachings of the various religions are imbibed, peaceful coexistence, unity and stability will be achieved. It has also highlighted the various ways which would encourage everybody to achieve peaceful and purposeful living.

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