

AN INSTRUMENT FOR PEACE BUILDING IN NIGERIA: CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Abstract

Most Nigerians take religion so seriously that a cross country survey conducted in 2003 described Nigerians as the most religious people in the world. While every religion proclaims peace and serves the cause of peace the world over, Christianity and Islam, especially in Nigeria, have been associated more with conflicts and crises which have devastated the nation and brought untold hardships on the people. It has been observed that conflict is a theme that has featured more in mankind's search for interest, peace and security. We affect conflict, and conflict affects us as individuals, families, communities, organizations, nations and states. Indeed, conflict does affect every group behavior. Religion has been used by unscrupulous politicians to fan the embers of rivalry, political antagonism and ethnic discrimination as it has continues to pose about the greatest threat to national understanding and peaceful existence which are pre-requisites for unity and development. This paper attempts to show how, through its teaching, research and community service activities Christian religious education in Nigeria can help to create a culture of peace and provide some solution to a problem that seems to have defied every solution,. The problem of this paper therefore centred on the role Christian religious education has played in the past, is playing in the present and will continue to play in the future to enhance peace and its sustenance. To deal with the topic effectively, the paper began with an overview of the ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria before looking at the syllabi and place of Religion education in Nigeria. A brief survey of the history of Christian religious education in the country was undertaken before the role Christian religious education has played in bringing its influence to bear on culture was examined. Before concluding, some practical and workable strategies for fostering peace through Christian religious education were suggested.

In attempting to discuss this topic beneficially, there is need to define some terms to avoid any possible misconception. A Christian is a follower of Jesus Christ that is a person who believes and practices the tenets of the Christian faith as presented in the Holy Scripture. Education, on the other hand, as defined by Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995) is the process by which the mind develops through learning at a school, college or university. Secondly, it is the knowledge or skill gained from being taught. Peters (1966) posits that "education is initiation into worthwhile activities". In discussing Christian religious education we therefore refer to a process of developing a person's mind, in which the Christian religious teaching are incorporated and are indeed central to all other aspects of knowledge or skills acquired in a particular setting (Ilori 2002). This type of education does not limit itself to Bible or religious knowledge; it embraces all branches of

knowledge, both secular and religious in teaching subjects like physics, chemistry, political sciences, botany and others.

One could give a narrow interpretation of peace as being freedom from, or cessation of war and civil disorder. But peace should be considered to be much more than that. According to Akpuru (2007) "Peace is a relative condition of security friendly climate that allows individuals and group relations to progressive order and stability". It also means non-violent resolution of conflicts and the establishment of universal values, such as respect for life, human rights, liberty, equity and justice. It means the ability of all components of the population of a country to lead a decent and healthy life in a safe and sustainable environment, with opportunities for economic, educational, social and cultural development (Aminigo, 2003). Peace in this paper therefore is not just the absence of conflict or war but beyond that, a beneficent adjustment of harmony between the individual and his creator on one side, and his fellow men on the other side.

Overview of Ethnic and Religious Groups in Nigeria

National curricula for religious education do not spring from a vacuum. They evolved over time as a reflection of the needs, perceptions and historical development for the societies concerned. Nigeria is a country with a population believed to be over 140 millions, spread among more than a hundred heterogeneous ethnic groups. Religion often coincides with the ethnic groups, but not always. Basically, most Hausa-Fulani in the north are Muslims, and most Igbos in the South-East are Christians. However, Yorubas in the South-West are both Muslims and Christian with Muslims slightly in the majority and there is a fair amount of inter-marriage. While exact census figures are hard to come by, the international religious Freedom report (2006), opined that the proportion of citizens who practice Islam or Christianity in the country which has an area of 356,700 square miles, and a population estimated at 140 to 150 million, is generally assumed to be roughly equal and that there are a substantial number who practice traditional indigenous religions along-side Christianity or Islam. The predominant form of Islam in the country is Sunni. The Christian Population includes Roman Catholics, Anglican, Baptist, Methodists, Presbyterian and a growing number of evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

Islam first entered West Africa through Trans-Sahara Trade in the 9th/10th century. It spread among the rulers and the urban population and then gradually into the rural areas. Scholars established Qur'anic schools and for many centuries up to the colonial period. Islamic schooling was the formal educational system in Northern Nigeria. The North was solidly Muslim apart from pockets of Africa Traditional religionists in the remote or mountainous areas with better transport and communication during the colonial period. Islam also spread faster in the south, particularly into Yoruba land down to Lagos and the sea.

The pattern of education in the south and the north has been different with consequences in economic and educational disparity. Christian missionaries were allowed by the British colonial power to set up mission, schools in the south from the early days, and government schools also were generally Christian-oriented. While the constitution does not require students to receive instruction in a religion other than their own, the Minister of Education requires public school students throughout the country to undergo either Islamic or Christian religions Instruction. State authorities claim that students are permitted not to attend classes taught in a religion other than their own and that students

may request a teacher of their own religion to provide alternative instruction. However, there have always been complaints of no teachers of ‘Christian religions Knowledge’ in many Northern schools while in the south, many Muslim believed that religious instructions in the schools was similarly biased towards Christians. In Enugu and Edo states, for example, there were reports that Muslim students did not have access to “Islamic religious Knowledge” in the public schools (Vellinga, 2004).

The fear of Muslim parents to allow their children to get a modern education and the opportunity to rise high in government or the modern administrative system at the risk of losing their faith, soon gave rise to the establishment of private Islamic schools for Muslims in the south west. Their medium of instruction which was usually Arabic, however, made it difficult for their products to join the mainstream of higher education unless they went to Arab countries for further studies. For these reasons the Christian missionaries and their students in the southwest went far ahead of their Muslim counterparts in western education.

In the north, the situation was different. The British here came face to face with the Northern emirates – the Legacy of the Sokoto caliphate established by the great religious reformer, Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio in the late 18th /early 19th centuries. After subduing the northern region by military conquest the British established good relations with the Emirs and their people and adopted indirect rule through the Emirs. Change in education came slowly with the gradual establishment of a few modern Government Schools and Teachers Colleges for boys and later for girls. In order to make these schools acceptable to the people, Islamic studies were taught with a fairly traditional syllabus. The teachers were almost always the product of the traditional Qur’anic schools and the syllabus emphasized memorization of the Qur’an and Hadith. (Islamic Jurisprudence), the articles of faith and basic moral education (Lemu, 2000).

For a long time Christian Missionaries in the north confined their educational and evangelical activities to the remote, rural and predominantly non-Muslim areas to avoid confrontation with the Emirs. Lemu (2000) attests that the British even set up the old sharia law school in Kano for the training of shariah court judges and Islamic teachers as early as 1933. Some of its graduates were subsequently given scholarship to study Arabic, Islamic studies and Islamic law at the University of London in the 1950s and 1960s.

By the time, missionary had been free for some years to evangelize all over the north, but their converts were mainly among the indigenous religionists on the Plateau and other remote areas. While the government trained and provided Islamic studies teachers, the missionaries sent in their own teachers so that the classes divided for Islamic and Christian religions Knowledge lessons. The school provided the books for both classes.

It is well known that Nigeria has had periodic religions riots, but it is worth mentioning too that these are not always promoted by religious differences as such, but more by ethnic historical and political rivalries or grievances in which religious difference is a secondary issue. Even in the midst of recent violence in Kaduna, some Muslim and Christian neighbors protected one another from rioters. It is against this background that we turn to the syllabus for the teaching of religion in Nigerian.

The Syllabi and place of Religious Education in Nigeria

Syllabi for Islamic and Christian religious Knowledge were drawn up by state and federal Ministries of education since 1950s. These syllabi prepared students for the subject in the West African school certificate examinations. The subjects were very popular. In the case of Islamic religious Knowledge there were no text books in English until about 1968-1970. The teachers, who

were mostly traditional mallams (scholars) who passed through Arabic teachers colleges, would use Arabic books, from which they would translate to the students.

With the production of books in English, Islamic religious Knowledge became much easier to teach. The government-run post secondary Advanced Teachers' colleges and colleges of education ran three years courses in Islamic studies (as well as Christian religious Knowledge) and the subject became widely available in the universities. Gradually the Arabic speaking mallams were replaced at secondary level by English speaking young teachers who were products of the mainstream educational system. Around 1984 Nigerians changed to the 6-3-3-4 system (6 years primary, 3 years Junior secondary, 3 years senior secondary and 4 years university) and at the same time all syllabi were reviewed by subject panels set up by the Nigerian educational research Council, affiliated to the Ministry of education.

The way of teaching Islam and Christianity in Nigeria is expected to be confessional that is students are taught how to practice their religion as well as being taught about their religion. Muslim students are therefore expected to memorized portions of the Qur'an and Hadith and their meanings, to know how to perform the duties of prayer, fasting, Zakat and Hajji, to evaluate the evidence for the authenticity of the Qur'an and so on, as well as learning essential historical information. Their Christian counterparts had to learn to read the Bible, the prayer book, the catechism and hymns books.

In the early 1980s, the governments carried out major subject's syllabi were revised and more weight was given to moral education based on religious values. Lemu (2000), notes that there was at this, however, an attempt by secularists to eliminate "Religious knowledge" both Christian and Islamic in favour of 'Moral education". Both Christian and Muslim bodies resisted this effort on the grounds that Christians and Muslim parents wanted their children to be brought up "in the religion of their parents". Since this time, there have been no major changes. Each syllabus contains minor elements of information about other religions and about African traditional religion (Abama, 2001).

Historical Origin of Christian Religious Education

Christian religious education in Nigeria began with the advent of missionaries and mission agencies in mid 1800s. It was introduced in the form of Evangelism and as part of western missionary enterprise (Fafunwa, 1995). Prior to the coming of the missionaries, communities had their own traditional system of education and in some parts of the country Islamic religions had already been entrenched. In trying to visualize the cohabitation of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria, their coexistence would naturally be competitive for obvious reasons.

Kagarko (2009) specified that "the Christian missionaries had in mind some reasons of coming to West Africa for quite some time; the interior of Africa was the unknown and mysterious continent". Each of these religions came to a new environment in the garments of the sending culture, each had the human element which is the vehicle of the divine as well as the diabolical and as Borode (2003) noted, "entry into a different religious worldviews without love, respect and humility, and abandoning ones critical faculty often generates conflicts".

Several factors were behind the introduction of education in Nigeria by the various groups and organizations. The Missionaries for instance, saw the educating of the indigenous population as a means of facilitating their conversion to Christianity. The colonial administrators saw in educating the local populace a means of producing a literate being who would run errands for him as a domestic hand messenger or orderly and at best a clerk. Both approaches to education were based on giving to

the African what was considered to be best for him, and not necessarily an educational system which was in accordance with his cultural heritage and sociological environment and one that was aimed at projecting and promoting the African personality (Makulu, 1997). While the motivation for education was evangelism for the missionaries, for the tribesmen, it was a way of entering into the mysteries of western technological civilization. To this end, education helped to facilitate the spread of European civilization in Africa. Tribal institution, contrary to this view, were discouraged or suppressed as there was a tendency to measure every part of the African life by the European standards.

The issues of curriculum content and policy were extremely in the hands of individuals mission agencies until government became interested in education when they issued grants of 30 pounds in 1872, distributed among Anglican, Wesleyan and catholic Missions in Lagos. In 1874 the grant increased to 100 pounds to each agency and by 1876 it had increased to 200 pound for each mission agency, because “he who pays the piper dictates the tune”, the declaration of religious neutralism in matters of education. There was also a divergence of opinion on the content and purpose of education. While the government was trying to intellectualism, the missions wanted spirituality. The division which began to grow wide eventually led to the formation of the Phelps-stokes commission which was a major watershed in Africa’s educational policy. The commission made a plea for religious and moral education as the basis for lasting education. It stressed character training and other major inputs.

In 1952, there was a Cambridge conference on African education and in 1961, the Addis Ababa conference on the development of education in African held. There, far reaching measures on African education were arrived at. In 1962, there was another conference for higher education in Africa, during which participants expressed the desire to exclude religious education from secondary school curriculum. There has been a lot of criticism of missionary educational activity in Nigeria but whatever the failing Ivorgba (2006) still identified quite a good number of major contributors made by these missionaries to the growth and development of our societies and communities among these contributors include:

- a. Preservation through writing of major Nigeria languages – Ibo, Yoruba, Hausa, Efik, Nupe and so on, thus creating Linguistic homogeneity. For instance, we have what is called “the union Igbo: into which the Bible was translated and synthesized in three major indistinguishable dialects. This became a bond unifying the third largest West Africa tribe (Ayandele, 2011)
- b. They also facilitate the social and moral development of the Nigerian people.
- c. They made the administration to create law and order in place of inter-tribal wars and anarchy. They ensured the suppression of abominable crimes repugnant to Christian morality, like Mary Slessor did in the abolition of killing of twins in the Eastern part of Nigeria.
- d. They also facilitated mobility by ensuring safety of travel without the risk of being enslaved in Yoruba land or Igbo land or elsewhere in Nigeria.
- e. They also contributed to social and moral regeneration through churches and schools as well as preventing the demoralization of society
- f. The objective of education for the missionaries was also to discourage children from participating in their parents’ pagan practices. Character training was emphasized along with spiritual; development. They were mainly interested in primary education for converts. They felt that further education would only make them opt for secular work to improve themselves socially and morally. However, Christianity could not be deeply rooted because the intellectual development required to

match the principles of the new faith was not available. Traditional morality was however destroyed without an appropriate replacement.

The Influence of Christian Education on Culture

The influence of Christian education on culture has been mainly to demystify issues and eliminates prevailing ignorance that persisted as a result of superstitious beliefs among the people. Ideas, beliefs and customs shared by people were shaken and faulted by the white man's reasoning and scientific facts with often seemingly magical and miraculous demonstrations. For instance twins were been killed in certain places in Nigeria because they were seen as bad omen and brought disaster on a community. The intervention of Christian Missionaries showed these beliefs to be false overtime. In various areas of human life, scientific knowledge about diseases, illnesses, hygiene and medicine were brought to bear on daily living. These yielded results that forced prevailing ideas and thinking to change.

The influence of Christian education on culture can be seen in the light of the confrontation between the Christian religion and the African Traditional religion. The Christian religion won in the face-off. The concept of the "fatherhood" of God common to most religions in the form of a supreme being, or a creator or a Lord of the universe, the idea of retribution in an after-life and issues of morality, clearly articulated in the Christian faith and found in traditional societies in various shades has given the Christian religion on edge.

Religion itself, in any form, is made up of relationship with God which is vertical and relationship with fellowmen which is horizontal. It is an encounter between the divine and human. Divine is transcendent, spiritual, all-powerful all perfect. The human is material, limited, corruptible and prove to error. In its divine dimension, religion consists of divine revelation, communication of divine will to man. From this perspective, religion is sublime, ideal, perfects and infallible (Metuh, 1992). In its human limitations it is thus imperfect, fallible and can be abused. When such abuse occurs, the result is fanaticism, bigotry and ultimately, a disruption of peace. This leads us to the issue of evolving strategies for fostering peace through Christian religious education.

Strategies for Fostering Peace Through Christian Religious Education

The Christian religion teaches that man is made in the image and likeness of God. Its curriculum needs to go beyond this to clearly state all men, irrespective of race, tribe, creed or colour are made in God's likeness and are entitled to dignity and rights. Its education curriculum should begin to focus on the elimination of ignorance about other faiths from basic primary level. It is amazing the level of ignorance that exists between Christian denominations; talk less of the Muslim or other religions. This ignorance breeds fear and the antidote to ignorance is knowledge. Knowledge can be acquired through education.

A higher dimension of eliminating ignorance is to establish an exchange programme between mission schools, where Christian kids are selected and sent to Islamic schools and vice versa. When these kids complete their education, they would certainly become ambassadors and peer group educators. Non-governmental organizations have a major role and responsibility to play in this respect. They have initiated peer group educators for HIV/AIDS awareness and other life threatening issues. They can also assist with peer group educators for religious harmony and peace.

Also there is a compelling need for the early teaching of respect for other religions and instructions on how to approach other religions and their adherents with love, respect and with a sense of humility, rather than the scornful disdain and superiority mentality which do not in any way

enhance or facilitate peace.

The esoteric nature of the language of some of the Holy Books also creates an aura and mystery about them. Languages like Arabic, Latin and Hebrew sound mysterious and exotic to the African mind. These languages can be demystified by being taught openly. The learning of these languages will to a large extent eliminate ignorance about others.

Education is a crucial part of socialization. Care needs to be taken to run psychological profiles on those involved in educating others to ensure that they are balanced and unbiased in their presentations and closely monitored to prevent the indoctrination of innocent youthful minds along destructive lines. In this respect, the Christian religion education curriculum has been changing: however more needs to be done. Mission schools now employ teachers who, to the best of their knowledge, are balanced and stable and such schools are attracting good patronage as a result of their performances.

However, these schools are quite expensive. Non Governmental organizations can also partner with such schools and subsidize or give scholarship to the previously mentioned peer educators from other faiths to attend such schools.

Conclusion

In summary therefore, if we are to achieve peace in a multi religious society like Nigeria, education becomes a very useful instrument in this direction. Religion influences culture and the Christian religion in particular has had and still has a very strong influences on culture in Nigeria. There is a need to reshape the curriculum of Christian education with emphasis on eliminating and developing minds that can think clearly, unfettered by the shackles of religious bigotry and fanaticism. This can be achieved as one of our Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), if we embrace justice, human rights and equity in our dealings with all men, irrespective of tribe, language, faith, colour or religious affiliations.

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