THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION TO PEACE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examined the role of religious education to peace and sustainable development in Nigeria. Every human society craves for sustainable peace, security and development and this is true also of Nigeria. The role of religious education in attaining sustainable peace and development in Nigeria education is a means through which the individuals are formed and reformed through qualitative training and retraining of the human capital, who are agents of development in the society. Religious education will certainly form a backbone to moral education. To enhance a moral society, there is the need for religious education in Nigeria. This paper looks at the role of religious education in achieving peace and security in Nigeria. It also examines the need for peace and security in Nigeria. The paper identifies factors affecting sustainable peace, security and development, and posits that education is a determinant factor for the development of any nation or society. Likewise, the paper highlights the role of religious education to peace, security and sustainable development in Nigeria. In terms of methodology, this research employed the qualitative research design. The study gathered data from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included oral interviews with resource persons and the secondary sources involved the use of books, journals, scholarly papers and the internet. The paper revealed that, the teaching of religious education will instil values and high morals on the citizenry to bring about expected sustainable development. Finally, the paper concluded that Nigerian can be mobilized and inspired through religious education as a driving force to peace and development in the country. As such, the Federal Government of Nigeria owes it a duty to re-introduce the teaching and learning of religious education as a compulsory subject in Nigerian schools for all students.

Introduction

Every nation of the world clamours for peace. The issue of peace remains one of the major focuses of every community in the world. Religious Education has played a significant role in peace, security and sustainable development in Nigeria. Over the years, Nigeria had been tagged "security

risk nation" to which many international communities warned their nationals not to live or even travel to Nigeria (Suleiman& Ojo, 2012). Taking a cursory look at the happenings in and around Nigeria, one may be tempted to agree with these international communities that their fears were justified. This is because Nigeria has been experiencing a number of crises, social-vices and lack of cordial relationship among her citizens since independence. There have been constant hostilities among the inhabitants of one village, town, city and the other; one state and another or inhabitants of the same town or the same state based on tribal, religions or ideological differences. Also violent conflict has developed a pervasive phenomenon in most Nigerian communities. The various political party crises that finally led to the 1967-1970 Civil War have had devastating effects on the unity and peaceful co-existence of Nigerians. Today, in most states of the federation, "one hears stories of violent conflicts involving individuals or groups." (Egwu, 2001: 68)

Other negative impacts of violent conflicts on sustainable development in Nigeria include the destruction of lives, properties and critical infrastructure. It is in the light of the above situation that peace building initiatives and religious education have to be integrated into Nigerian educational curriculum towards enhancing the process of sustainable development in Nigeria. The challenge before Nigeria is to develop the needed institutional capacity that will sustain development, transform and reconcile the individuals and groups through social enlightenment, dialogue and peace through Religious Education.

Religious Outlook of Nigeria

The basic trait of African societies and Nigeria in particular is high religious consciousness. "This reality is expressed in a complexity of rituals and symbols which together pervade the entire field of human existence" (Madu, 2018: 97). Referring to this religious consciousness of Africans, (Mbiti, 1980: 262) stated thus:

> 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. That is the philosophical understanding behind African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships.

In other words religion has a lot of influence on Nigerians and Africans as a whole. In recognition of this, Nigerian government has always recognized the importance of religion in her educational policies. The first government policy that recognized the importance of religious training and moral instruction was the 1925 Memorandum on Education in British Colonial Territories (Fafunwa, 1974). According to Fafunwa number three of the

twelve memoranda states that "Religious training and moral instruction should be regarded as fundamental to the development of a sound education and should be accorded complete equality with secular subjects" (Fafunwa, 1974: 124).

No religion preaches violence and conflict or militancy. On the contrary, every religion advocates and preaches peace and peaceful co-existence of all citizens. In Christianity Jesus Christ is known and referred to as the prince of peace. He taught, commanded and demonstrated the significance of peace and "his name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9: 6-7). Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another (Mark 9: 50).

Furthermore, the Bible says: "Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up building" (Romans 14:19). Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, he demonstrated his desire to love and maintain peace with all men. Despite stiff opposition from the Pharisees and religious leaders, he never said any rude or insulting word to them. Even when he was arrested and Peter had to draw his sword to cut off the ear of the slave of the High Priest, Jesus cautioned Peter and replaced the ear. He was led to be crucified like a lamb that is dumb, for he said no word, to show the level to which he pursued peace.

Islam also calls for the quest for peace, tolerance and kindness which is a state of physical, mental, spiritual and social harmony. Other virtues of Islam are that Muslims were urged to imbibe the spirit of kindness and forgiveness (Quran 3:124), and further enjoined to live in harmony and peace with fellow human beings, repel evil with that which is better and show perseverance with patience (Quran 3: 200). These values and virtues were practically demonstrated by the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW). He used non-violent methods to resist those who persecuted him. He never resorted to violence or force unless as defensive mechanism. Peacemaking, negotiation and dialogue are considered more effective than aggression and violent confrontations. For instance, the virtue of tolerance and forgiveness as demonstrated by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) can be seen vividly when there was famine in Mecca and he helped them despite the fact that they had driven him out of his home. Similarly, after the conquest of Mecca, the people of Mecca expected Prophet Muhammad (SAW) to either execute to them in retaliation, take them as slaves or at least confiscate their properties and belongings. They were extremely worried and wondered what declaration he was going to make at this historic occasion. However, he began his address by saying to the pagans of Mecca: "Today there will be no blame on you for anything and no one will harm you in anyway"(Otonko 2005: 81). This is indicative of the Prophet's position on non-violence and peaceful dipositions.

Conceptualising Religious Education

Religious Education is chiefly concerned with building the sense of the sacred in humans, teaching them of where they come from, why they are here on earth and where they are going (Ezanya, 1988). Religious education according to Akubue (1992:8) is "education designed to produce well ordered personalities or men and women of strong character for the nation". Iwenofu (2009) argued that the goal of religious and moral education is for national developments. She observed that the teaching of religious education influences peoples' lives in every time and every place. To her religious education prepare men to live a perfect life. She also explains that religious education creates in man the sense of sacred and his purpose on earth and where he will end his life. Religious education helps the individual to understand him as well as their tradition and appreciates the faith and traditions of others (Iwenofu, 2009). It builds in men spirit of contentment and faith to a discerning encounter with the surrounding culture and seeks for its transformation. Religious education is the ground work of all subjects. Adedeji (2009) adds that Religious Education is informative, gives understanding of the meaning of religion which helps people to know their culture, and their origin. Such knowledge creates the balance for a peaceful society.

Religious Education and Nation Building in Nigeria

Religious Education is a veritable tool for nation building. This mind-set will help us to appreciate the impact of religious education in enhancing sustainable development in the Nigerian society. This is because in Nigeria, religion and religious education explain our corporate social living and practice in all spheres of the national life. The influence of religion and religious education on the cultural, economic, socio-political and spiritual activities in Nigerian society is both pervasive and powerful. This is why the fact cannot be denied that religious beliefs and practices are fundamental to nation building, since these beliefs and practices establish a kind of link or connectedness between the divine and the human. Obiekea(2015) averred that this connectedness or link can be sustained if rules and regulations, norms and values, and covenant agreements have to be put in place, so as to ensure rewards and punishment of man and his society.Religious Education helps to train religious functionaries who discharge religious duties to their members. In this way they help compliment effort in nation building.

In pursuing religious education for national development, religious bodies establish and run schools where people are trained to take up developmental projects in the society. These schools apart from the secular education they offer also incorporate religious values and discipline which helps individuals later in the society for peaceful co-existence and national development. Religious education teaches people to be patriotic and committed to building the nation. For instance, "the Christian Religion teaches

civic responsibility which is summarized as servings one's country, commitment to one's society and contributing to the development of one's society" (Obiekea, 2015: 20).

Religious education is a means of evangelization through the media of schools, hospitals, church activities and the building of macro-business outposts, all geared toward the development of the Nigerian nation. Alanamu (2004) observed that those who have moved the nation in the past and some in the present were products of mission schools where religious education were upheld. Moral education has always been the goal of religious schools and this explains why some states in Nigeria have begun the process of handing over schools back to the mission churches who owned them ab-initio, in order to restore morality to our morally decadent society, which is the focus of religious education.

Though religion has caused much harm to the social coexistence of the Nigerian people through undue rivalry and unjustifiable religious killings and fanatical dispositions, engineered by seeming political interests, it has none the less tried to uphold and display some spiritual charisma in Nigeria. By upholding religious education which forms people into good citizens of the Nigerian nation and nation builders, religion has become an agent of mobilization in complex social engagements in Nigeria. In the view of (Uche, 2011: 51), "religious priesthood which is a social product of religious education functions as a nation builder by restoring peace and order between the visible and the invisible, between the spiritual and the mundane, settling quarrels, presiding over festivals and coronations".

Religious Education and Sustainable Development

There is an intricate link between a proper religious education and sustainable development. Adedeji (2009: 64) corroborates this by stating that:

> Sustainable development is the effort at improving the socioeconomic and ecological status and at exploiting and processing the environment or natural resources for the purpose of improving the quality of human life in such a way that the needs of the future generations are not jeopardized.

He further says sustainable development is the organizing principle for meeting human development goals while at the same time sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the economy and society depend (Adedeji 2009). The Brundtland Commission's report defined Sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations General Assembly, 1987: 43). Olupona (1992: 19) notes that Sustainable development is "a continual enhancement of the quality of human life both for now and the

future". This concept of sustainable development according to Olupona (1992: 17) aims to "maintain economic advancement and progress while protecting the long-term value of the environment". The achievement of the above by any country strongly hinges on peace.

Sulaiman and Ojo (2012) said religious education is a very potent tool for nation building. This is observably clear from the study of European history. From the period of the scholastics to the beginning of the 18th century, education and politics and other socio-cultural institutions of human endeavour were in the hands of the church. The church encouraged and promoted learning, built schools and learning centres where religious and secular education was taught. The classical and Greek philosophies of Plato, Aristotle and other oriental writers were promoted and preserved by the church. The writings of churchmen like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, Albert the Great and a host of others are still relevant today.

On the moral front, church functionaries served as both moral guides to kings and legal consultants. Bad and despotic kings were deposed and excommunicated by the church to give a sigh of relief to the masses. The church also championed technology (as it was known then), monks wrote and copied the biblical manuscripts and other ancient writings with hands and preserved them. The church equally promoted the act of painting, drawing and sculptor-ship and other artistic ingenuities that modern technology has not rivalled.

In Nigeria today, religious education promotes and sustains development through the media of religious values and ethos. It is a truism that religious values have permeated the social fabrics of the cultural life of the Nigerian people. In this way, it contributes to the dynamic belief systems which preserve the awe-inspiring aspects of Nigerian cultural heritage. The teachings of taboo by religious education and its use help integrate the Nigerian integrative value system. In a complicated pluralistic society like Nigeria, human actions, conducts and behaviour could affect the wider society negatively. The negative influence it may wield on the society could hamper the growth of and endanger sustainable development. This is why religious education can step in to cohesively teach and encourage people to be morally responsible (Madu, 2018).

Religious education promotes social norms that keep the society together and review social commitment to the socially desirable behaviour, which in the long run creates sustainable behaviour in Nigeria. It also compliments sustainable development by conscientizing Nigerians to act according to their filial obligation.

In Nigeria corruption is on high gear, especially among those at the corridors of power and this poses a big challenge to both religion and religious education. If religious education must be relevant to the Nigerian nation, religious leaders must brace up to the expectations of their responsibility of

providing moral guidelines and spiritual checks and balances. "Religious education must articulate vividly, functional ways of addressing the immoral dispositions of Nigerians and in this way, it would be able to address the moral decadence in the Nigerian society" (Madu, 2018: 26).

Religious education conceived and understood as a powerful instrument of social change and liberation, can still transform the most criminal of all men in various societies through the teachings of religious beliefs, values, morality and ethics. Nigerian men and women could become better citizens through religious education.

Since religion is an instrument of social control, religious education in Nigeria should encourage this through the activities and pastoral duties of priests and religious functionaries. Priests are instruments of social control through their pastoral care programmes, praying for members, counselling, pastoral visitation and other pastoral activities.

Religious education is also an instrument of social order. Through the teaching and promotion of religious traditions, restrictions are made; prohibitions and peace drives are encouraged. In this way, law and order are maintained and these are essential ingredients for sustainable development. No country can develop under tension, disorder and chaos. By preaching peace and obedience to the law of the land, religious education promotes order which snow-balls into a favourable atmosphere for business to thrive. In this way, religious education helps to bring about sustainable development in Nigeria.

The provision of social welfare like schools, hospitals, orphanages, and care for widows and the poor, as well as old people's homes are all evidences of the usefulness of religious education in Nigeria. Finally, religious education teaches and fosters forgiveness, promotes truth, confidence and commitment among people. These moral values do not only promote peaceful coexistence but are instrumental to nation building and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Religious education is a powerful force in Nigeria with identifiable social functions. The roles of religious education to peace, security and sustainable development in Nigeria cannot be over emphasized. However, much as we are all eager to see a virile society where peace, security and sustainable development reigns, this aspiration can only be realized if we all make conscious efforts to see it happen. As previously mentioned, when religion is rightly handled it could be the solution to the incessant violence, confrontation and conflicts in Nigeria. What is needed is an understanding of when and how to gingerly handle religion as a new bride to serve a positive purpose in the Nigerian society.

Recommendations

In the light of the foregoing discourse, the following are recommended for way forward:

1. Ethical values of the three dominant religions should be well harnessed and disseminated in the society through religious education.Religious education should be encouraged since it is a panacea to the problem of sustainable development in Nigeria. This is because it brings growth to the society through the media of schools, hospitals, health care services and other humanitarian services.

2. The teachers of religious education at all levels of Nigerian educational system should be consistent in promoting morality and ethical values while imparting religious knowledge on students.The students should be encouraged to demonstrate such moral values in their day to day dealings or affairs with other fellow men.

3. Nigerians should be re-oriented to see each other as brethren no matter their religious differences.Proper positive religious education and orientation is to be given, so that ignorance can be wiped out. Nigerians need to go back to God in prayers of repentance because concerns for God are already waning. Everyone should be concerned about the fact that Nigerian's plethora of problems can only be handled by God because it is only Him that can grant absolute security.

4. Religious leaders should review the content of their religious education to reflect the present needs of the Nigeria nation. Since no religion preaches and encourages evil or immorality, religious education in Nigeria should condemn vehemently the immoral dispositions of Nigerians that are evident today.

5. Respect and loyalty that members have for their religion should be transferred to that of the nation. This helps them to fit into the wider society.Dialogue between different religious groups can be arranged. This will create a common forum for exchange of idea and understanding, consensus building and cooperation through citizenry.

6. Religious leaders need to increase their zeal for God's work, preaching of repentance as the Holy Books teach. People need to know why they should stop doing evil and the punishment that will follow for anyone who continues.

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