
THE ROLE OF CHRISTIAN RELIGION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF A NATION: NIGERIA SITUATION

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ABSTRACT

Christian Religion has a significant role to play in sustainable development process of a nation like Nigeria. Events in the near past have centralised the theme of sustainable development at the stage of local, national and international discourses. The struggle to overcome oppressive regimes and to build peaceful communities for sustainable development has continued to grow from strength to strength. This paper attempts to review the present state of the nation, to view Nigerian situation in the context of its problems of sustainable development as derive from poor leadership. It attempts to draw attention to lingering problems and social conditions Nigerians find themselves. The paper goes on to examine the inequalities created by wrongly designed state policies, the religious factors and contributions towards a sustainable development in Nigeria. The paper concludes with suggestions as a gadfly to sustainable national development.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is one among the developing countries in the globe and cannot be dominated or ruled by a single religious belief. The question of sustainable development dominates Scholarly conferences, seminars symposia, debates, and even street-walkers' chat, etc. The well-meaning Nigerians in particular, are expecting to see change and continuity in the already developed sector of their dear nation. They are tired of unrealistic promises and un-translated words of their leaders. Republics after independent have elapsed. The policy of building up and pulling down dominates the national system, resulting into encouragement of ghost workers, abandoned projects, and illegal appointments and dismissals of civil servants across the country.

State of the Nation

The issue of sustainable development in Nigeria is apt for a case study for some reasons. Nigeria is endowed with great physical and human resource. In Africa, Nigeria has almost unrivalled record of leadership changes. Each leader comes with a new policy. According to G. O. Abe (1991): Nigeria, though not a religious state in politics, is religiously oriented. Political leaders over the years have been religiously influenced significantly. The Analysts of Nigerian situation so often find it difficult to explain why the country has made a very slow progress in her development programme since independence. Even before the establishment of the colonial rule, the geographical area now known as Nigeria was indebted by diverse ethno-nationalities with different languages, social, political and religious institutions. These diverse ethno-nationalities thought of themselves as distinct peoples. A search for Nigerian nationhood was based on a practical attempt made by the colonial masters in 1914 to weld these diverse ethno-nationalities into a governable whole. Unfortunately, there were no unifying symbols that could induce the desire integration, and the task was left to the post-independent leaders. The modern civilization

Nigeria currently participating in is by and large preoccupied with the technique and equipment of the material aspect of culture to the neglect of the ultimate values which make the race truly human. In a nation where there is only one dominant religious force, religion serves twin functions of social control and moral revolution in the development process. However, in Nigerian context, there are various forms of Christianity exist side by side with Islam and Traditional religion, each propagates its own world-view, values and ethical norms which make it difficult to be sure which brand of religion is to inform which stage of our sustainable national development. On religious factor in Nigerian national development, Archie Bahm opines: The presence of the different brands of religion, render the world's religions impotent in dealing effectively with the crisis of sustainable development confronting the nation. Bahm never washes down the fact that one of the effects of religion in sustainable development is unity. But the multiplicity of religions is contributing to the centrifugal forces pulling the universe apart. The religious worship of the Church, Mosque and shrine, is not just reflect the present reality, but is also judging and condemning what is wrong, and thereby initiate the radical departure of the status quo which the present stage of our national development calls for. By so doing, religion is truly carrying out its twin functions of both stabilizing and transforming the progress of our national sustainable development.

Leadership

The poor leadership constitutes national problems for national development and maintenance process. These problems are clearly seen in the looting of the country's resources and mindless bribery and corruption. Proper understanding of Nigerian history helps to acknowledge the past and present mistakes so as to prevent any future repetition. In 1914, they merged the two administrative regions into one country. In 1958, Nigeria was declared Republic. The colonial interest was preceded by Travellers, Traders and Missionaries. Though they were attracted by the enormous wealth that the country possessed, but they made optimistic predictions for Nigeria. The country also witnessed military interventions that disrupted national growth and development. The military made their first incursion into Nigerian politics in form of a coup d'état which set a series of other similar interventions. The Colonial Masters declared Nigeria as an independent country on 1 Oct. 1960, and Nigeria was left with colonial political legacy. In what was predictable development, the cracks began to appear much earlier than expected. Post-colonial elite hoped that their political wisdom would gradually lay the foundation for a stable economy which would serve as the bedrock for a viable development and political system. At the heart of the crises has been the religion playing the role of developing Nigerians for better future. Kuka (2003), is at the view that: The failure of the state in Nigeria is at the heart of the crisis that the nation continues to face. The moral meltdown has helped to create a climate of anomie. The vast destruction inflicted by the military on the nation cannot be properly estimated, because little or no attempt has been made to quantify it. Such an attempt would need to address the issues of abandoned projects across the country, poorly maintained infract-structure, bureaucratic theft, shoddy job performance, the compromising of senior government officials by big-time contractors etc.

Lingering Problem

Our national lingering problem has been that of the sustainability and continuity policy. Since the independence, signs of rapid development were noted as energy was directed toward the transformation of the extant structures into a society based on modern institutions, modern technology and new social consciousness. Significant improvements have been recorded in the areas of health services, transportation, education, communication, trade and industry, social services, Security, etc. However, these signs were offset by social imbalance and political disharmony which led to yawning gap between more privileged members or groups and the less fortunate in the Nigerian society. The Regional and Minorities syndrome and, persistent crisis generated by religion itself, are amongst the nation's lingering problems. These crises seemed to be part of responses to poor government policy, particularly, in relation to sustainable development.

Religion

Scholars continue to discuss the problem of religion in a manner that belittles the role and place of religion in sustainable development. What is it about religion that makes it so vital to the development of human culture and the national development? This is a question of definition of religion. Bolaji Idowu (1973), states how difficult it is to provide a satisfactory definition of religion, citing Leuba's effort to define religion which yielded forty-eight definitions and, H. Fielding Hall's attempt which produced twenty definitions. For this exercise to be meaningful, working definition of religion is essential. According to Finiran (1983), 'Simply put, religion is the concern for the ultimate values which are ends-in-themselves and pertain to life as a whole.' Religion is a symbol of unity. It can be described as an embodiment of human sciences. It deals with the development of human person.

Sustainable Development

Development per se, is an enhancement of qualitative and quantitative transformation of skills. Rodney (1990) describes it as an increased skill and capacity for greater freedom and creative self-discipline, responsibility and temporal possessions. Tade (1992), points out that: Sustainable development seeks to meet the need and aspiration of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future. It is a process in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investment, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are in harmony and enhance both current and the future potentials to meet human needs and aspiration. The term development is understood and explained differently by scholars of different academic disciplines. Religious view of development is that of authentic human development. According to Roger (1964): Development is a type of social change in which new ideas are introduced into a social system in order to produce higher per-capita incomes and levels of living through more modern production methods and improved social organizations. UNESCO (1990) sees development as an idea of freedom, a process that enhances effective freedom of people to pursue whatever they have to pursue.

Possible Factors for Sustainable Development

The following factors are considered significant in sustainable development: Christian Religious/Moral factor, Spiritual factor, Social factor, Political factor, Educational factor, and Christian youth empowerment, etc.

Religious/Moral Factor

According to R. C. Agarwal (2009), Religion has played a vital role in developing the national sentiment and in consolidating a nation. Prayer sustains every work of human hand. One can do nothing without prayer, Jesus warns: Stay awake, and pray not to be put to the test. The Spirit is willing enough, but human nature is weak (Mt.26v41). On annual festivals and occasional sacrifices, African Traditional Religious Priest prays for peace and tranquillity of the Nation. On Fridays and Sundays, prayers are offered by Muslims and Christians respectively for same purpose. Religious values are very vital in shaping human morality and ethics. The root of the neglect of the ultimate values in sustainable development process of a nation lies in the attitude which sees religion as negative force or source of strife and division. For people with such attitude, religion is pushed aside in the course of sustainable development. According to Christopher Dawson (1983): If the rational and spiritual determine their creative activities, and if the primary manifestation of these elements is to be found in the sphere of religion, it is clear that the religious factor has had a far more important share in the development of human cultures. Dawson's study shows that real development takes place when there is harmony and coordination between the progressive intellectualization of the material universe through science and technology and the progressive spiritualization of human beings through religion. Dawson believes that without religion science becomes a neutral force at the service of militarism and economic exploitation. Without science, a society or a nation becomes fixed in a non-progressive order.

Spiritual Factor

In any sustainable development of any nation, the unitary factor is the Spiritual factor rather than geographical, racial or political factors. The spiritual factor is rooted in religious beliefs, it superimposes on the underlying diversity of many different peoples, languages and cultures that have been drawn together by a common faith into a new community with common moral values and intellectual culture. As Dawson says, Europe was Christendom and the Catholic Church was the bond and organ of European unity.

Social Factor

The social condition, under which most Nigerians find themselves, shows deep inequalities designed by poor policy and have created tensions among Nigerians, this has to be addressed. Socially, religion permeates every aspect of human life from cradle to grave.

Political Factor

This has to do with the failure of the state to create a true sense of belonging among the various segments of society. Nigerians continue to see themselves along religious, regional and ethnic lines. According to Kuka: A clear programme of good governance that works hard to achieve greater national integration will help to channel energies away from the centrifugal forces of ethnicity and regionalism to the centripetal forces of unity.

Educational Factor

Educational factor is one of the crucial factors in sustainable development process. The educational process is inadequate for our politicians to understand the nature of their duties and responsibilities to the nation.

Christian Youth Empowerment

The youth are what they are today because yesterday's problem was not properly addressed. They need to be empowered religiously, politically, and economically. In term of sustainable development Christian Youth play a vital role. They are the continuity of human race and the life wire of existence. No nation meaningfully exists without its youth. Through their religious activities, the youth learn how to organise themselves for a common goal. The statistic of 2007 places the population of youth at 60% of the country population; this means that the youth number 87 million. Religion inculcates in these youths sense of obedience, respect, transparency, justice and peace. The empowerment of the youths makes them to become pioneers of sustainable development.

Religious Contribution

Religion makes a huge contribution towards sustainable development of a nation. Through its preaching and teaching, religion fights the vices that antagonise development: Self, Tribal and regional sentiment, Corruption, exploitation, dishonesty, Imprudence, bribery, deceit, sycophancy, terrorism etc. and advocates non-violence and love. Religion develops human beings themselves who in turn develop and maintain national structures. Through Assemblies, Seminars, Workshops, Meetings, Communiqué, Circulars, etc. religious leaders have been in a position to show how religion has always been a part of the forces for development. Where the government remains transient on developmental setbacks, the religious bodies remain intransient. According to Catholic Bishops of Nigeria (CBN/2003): "It is specifically the role of the Church Leaders to offer pastoral, Counsel and, Spiritual guidance." According Pope J. Paul 11, Sustainable Development must be aimed at the fulfilment of man's vocation, which ultimately leads to God. The CBN deplored environmental degradation, serious impoverishment of Nigerians, regional, deep ethnic, tribal, religious tensions and ruthless handling of situations of social unrest by the civil authorities. Religion manifests itself in all areas of national life such as political, social, economic, health, legal, cultural, educational, etc. The early Missionaries were able to bring the people together through charitable and Health Services, and Education. These charitable and health services, and Education moved hand in hand with the spreading of religious faith even up to date. The standard of educational dropped when the Government took over the Missionary Schools, maintenance policy also dropped. Across the country most places are occupied by dilapidated or poorly maintained structures.

Religion and Sustainable Development

The vision of the third Republic tagged, Millennium Development Goals(MDGs). That by the year 2015 every nation of the globe is developed to fight that which dehumanises human conditions. To develop is one thing and to sustain is another thing entirely. Development without sustainability is no development, be it national, international or Global. The most tasking challenge of any nation today, is the challenge of sustainability. How can we maintain or sustain the already developed or established segments of our society? Religion makes sacred, the norms and values of a nation and functions as an efficacious means of social control. It elicits confidence, assurance, prudence, trust and

loyalty. Religious sanctions remedy many evils and restrain people. Religion performs critical function by providing values and ideals in sustaining development process. Religion has a dialectical relationship with sustainable development process, acting as an element of social control and stability. The history of Israel, gives an excellent example of this dialectical function of religion in the process of sustainable national development. Religious experience of the people, serves as a source of cohesion, stability and social control. Behind any subsequent development of any nation, is this vital force (religion). Each time religious factor became weak through disobedience on the part of the nation, the result is always destabilization, disharmony, oppression, exploitation and all kinds of vices and eventually leads to the decay or collapse of the system.

Factors Militating Sustainable Development

There are militia groupings across the nation, most members of these groupings are the idle youth being used by the wealthy people to cause confusion. Social ills exhibited by Godless youth, have been identified as major factors militating sustainable development in Nigeria, these social ills include: Armed robbery, brutal crimes, immorality, bribery and corruption, drug abuse and trafficking, etc.

Religious Disadvantages in Sustainable Development

Though religion plays a vital role in sustainable development of a nation, it also has its disadvantages. For instance, Obasanjo's administration set up National Council for Interreligious Dialogue (NCID), this body continues to hold meetings, but has never made any impact or significant in terms of any national crisis. Religious leaders in Nigeria do not go beyond the exigencies of groupings and relations with the government to create a wedge between the citizens and the national leaders, so as to make progress in developing what to sustain. Religious groupings in Nigeria are not properly harmonized. They continue to play the role of policing the welfare of their members to the exclusion of exploring better ways of collaboration. Some have relied on religion for their own dubious reasons to mobilise their people. If the Christians in Nigeria pick up the challenges and dare to discharge the spiritual and social responsibilities consciously to the nation, there will be no limit to the enduring and attractive edifice that could be built on the concrete foundation.

CONCLUSION

Religion is the ever current machinery for sustainable development. For positive sustainable development in Nigeria, the different religious Leaders must desist from asserting exclusive claims to both the truth and the right of existence. Confronted with national unity and development they should allow their common concern with ultimate values to motivate them to carry out their revolutionary function. They should stand on the same platform as the Prophets of old pointing out the ills of society without fear or favour. Sustainable development is people oriented programme, as spiritual Leaders, they should come together and call the attention of our National Leaders and the citizens to the realization that leadership and election carry with them responsibility, that Nigeria can only continue to enjoy her privilege position in Africa, if God's injunction to be our brothers' keepers, to help the poor and needy, is obeyed, and that disobedience carries with it punishment. Let the words of our Political Leaders be translated into action admired by the religion.

RECOMMENDATION

From the points raise from the paper, following are recommended for the enhancement of the role of religion in sustainable development of Nigerian Nation:

- Religion partners with State in national development and sustainability.
- Nigerian Leaders and citizens should not deviate from their faith and embrace only politics.
- They should see themselves as agents and collaborators in the national development.
- They should build on the good foundation laid by their predecessors, thereby consolidating and encouraging the policy of continuity and discharge their duties in the national interest.
- For effective sustainable development in Nigeria, the words of our political leaders should be translated into actions and, efforts should be intensified in working on such factors that unite.
- There must be concrete dialogue and mutual understanding among the political and religious leaders or groupings in the country.
- Any national decision that affects the populace should be brought to public debate.
- There must be that sense of Spiritual consciousness that credible sustainability of any development is informed by religious beliefs and achieved by democratization.

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