

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA THROUGH RELIGION: A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Sustainable development has always been the craving of all societies and communities. There is no society or community anywhere in the world that does not crave and hope for development that is both sustainable and enduring. Thus, Nigeria as a nation has over the years craved and hoped for sustainable development. This development cravings cut across the social strata of the Nigerian society ranging from food, road, rural infrastructure to socio-economic and even political strata. It is the view of this write up that religion could be a very potent means through which sustainable development in Nigeria could be achieved. This is given credence to by the development roles of religion in any society. If religion (its tenets, belief system and practices) is applied positively to the Nigerian developmental cravings sustainable development would be achieved in Nigeria.

Nigeria as a nation has in the past and in the present employed different means by which she hoped to achieve a significant level of development which could be sustained. These have found expressions in Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI), Mass Mobilization for Social and Economic Recovery (MMSER) war against Indiscipline (WAI), National Orientation Agency (NOA) and a host of others. The developmental strategies that the Nigerian nation has applied and implemented over the years have all grossly failed. This is as a result of insincerity, lack of commitment, corruption and or bad implementation. Ona and Agwu (2008) averred that these developmental strategies failed to cure Nigeria of her malady. Achebe (1983) and Uche (2010) identified corruption as the cause of the failure of the developmental strategies in Nigeria. Omoregbe (1993), described the Nigeria society thus: “An immoral society is also a sick society. By an immoral society we mean a society permeated with corruption, dishonesty, fraud, selfishness embezzlement of public funds and other acts. Such a society is sick and cannot be in sound order. Its organs cannot

function properly because they are not in sound healthy condition. Life in such a society is increasingly difficult, insecure and unhappy... (p. 65)". Functionally speaking, any society that has the above description is far from being healthy and sound. Since every human or societal problem has a beginning and a possible cure, it is plausible to posit that the Nigerian developmental problem must have a solution which may not be out of sight.

This paper submitted that since religion is one of the social institutions in the society and also a GIVEN, it could be a panacea to the sustainability of developmental cravings of the Nigerian society. Religion, though a social institution, goes beyond the social realm. It is supra-sensible and meta-physical. It deals with neumena realities. Through the act of worship and communication with the divine, religion makes the power of the divine to come to the aid of man. Thus, through religious activities, the neumena unites with the phenomena bringing down the power of the divine and ultimate reality in the favour of mortal beings. Religious practices such as covenant, oath-taking, ostracism, moral bond, filia deity obligation and devotion add colour to functional perspective of sustainable development in Nigeria" (Uche, 2011). In order to save Nigeria from social decay and persistent lack of sustainable development despite the developmental strategies in the past, the social functions and dynamics of religion are presented in this article as means that could promote sustainable development in Nigeria.

Definition of Terms

Religion: Religion is one of the social institutions of the society. It is also understood as pre-dating any society hence it is conceived as a GIVEN. Many scholars have tried to define religion, according to the ways it appeals to them. Religion could be seen as a set of belief and worship system or form whose aim is to unite man with the divine. In this sense, religion could be understood as a relationship between man and the divine or ultimate reality. This relationship is sustained by the acts of worship and praise, devotion and sacrifices. For Uche (2011), religion has a twofold function ". a set of beliefs practices, norms and values relating man to God and to his neighbours..." Hence Nwachukwu (2008) conceived religion as having two dimensional relationships- the vertical relationship between man and God, and the horizontal relationship between man and man. Religion in its characteristic features is unique and the uniqueness of its features are manifested in its articulated belief systems, practices, norms and values, ceremonies, rituals and festivals.

Development: Uche (2011), conceived the idea of development as relative, meaning different things to different people. However, what is prevalent in the definition of the different scholars is "the striving towards national interest, a competitive economy, the quest for unity and greatness and prosperity. Development could be a reference to

innovational changes that a people experience, undergo or cause to happen in the society. Development in this context means all the activities, strategies, creative and calculated experimentations that are rationally conceived, critically analyzed and thoroughly implemented for the smooth running of the society, for the welfare of man and sustainable growth of the social order.

Sustainable Development: This is a reference to the definitive growth of the society in every sphere. A well define education, religious or otherwise is a valid vehicle for the sustainability of growth and development of the social order. Sustainable development also refers to the processes of growth in individual and socio-economic levels of progress in a given society.

Functional – This is from the school of functionalism and refers to the understanding of how people, institutions and society relate and operate. It explains the interrelated nature of human society. Every part of the society is to be examined in the light of their contribution to the maintenance and wellbeing of the society. Uche (2011) observed that the parts of the human society must function in harmony if it must worth its name, combining social cohesion, harmony and solidarity. Each part therefore should be structured to maintain its stability and social obligation. Functionalism is a reference to a strong and vast social network of connected structures, each contributing its quota to the growth and maintenance of the entire system. Functionalism takes cognizance of the positive contributions of the societal parts or institutions like religion and overlooks or deemphasizes their dysfunctional aspects. Functionalism could be used to x-ray the various challenges of the social institutions; religion in particular and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Nation Building and Religion

Religion is a veritable tool or vehicle for nation building. This understanding would help us to appreciate the impact of religion in enhancing sustainable development in the Nigerian society. This is because in Nigeria, religion explains a social living and prevails in all spheres of life. The influence of religion on the cultural, economic, socio-political, psychological 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, between the mundane and the spiritual, between the noumena and the phenomena, between the transient and the lasting, between the natural (material) and the spiritual. To sustain this link or connectedness, some rules and regulations, norms and values and covenant agreements have been put in place, in order to forestall rewards and punishments of man and his society. Some reasonable degree of freedom has been granted man by the divine and so he freely makes his choice in the events of life. This explains why in the view of Oputa

(2010), God has been in constant touch and communication with man since creation and particularly in Nigeria, God has been in constant touch with his people, since its emergence as a nation.

John Mbiti wrote that Africans are notoriously religious. By this, he meant that Africans are in all things religious, in their thinking, in their social, economic, political and spiritual lives. Religion therefore cannot be divulged from the daily lives of Africans and by implication, Nigerians. The truth of Mbiti's assertion is given credence to by Mala's statement that in Africa, we see myriads of religious sign posts, congregational prayer on Fridays and Sundays. With the number of churches and mosques and shrines of other faiths in Nigeria, a lot of religious functionaries help to compliment effort in nation building. These have been achieved through worship and sacrifices, rituals crusades and evangelical outreaches, visitations, counseling, religious and secular education and other socio-spiritual functions they render to the Nigerian society. In Nigeria, the missionaries evangelized the people through the media of schools, hospitals and church activities. Those who have moved the nation in the past and some in the present were the products of the mission schools. Moral education, which is a very important aspects of nation building was the goal of the mission schools. Today, many states have began the process of handing mission schools back to the mission churches that owned them ab-initio and the main reason or argument for this action is "to restore morality to our morally decadent society".

Though religion has caused some harm to the social coexistence of the Nigerian people through undue rivalry, prietcraft, unjustifiable religious killing and other fanatical dispositions, it has however tried and still tries to uphold and display spiritual charisma in Nigeria. Religion has been a very active agent of mobilization in complex social engagements in Nigeria. In the view of Uche (2011), religious priesthood restores peace and order between the visible and the invisible, between the spiritual and the mundane, between the noumena and the phenomena realities, settle quarrels, preside over festivals and coronations. Religious functionaries according to Uche (2011), are "...depositories of customs, traditions, taboos and theology. The religious functionaries, in the context of religion remain moral requisites and join this to their roles as mediators and in this way, improve their function as a social force in Nigeria. An analytical survey of the Nigerian society would reveal that we need leaders with esoteric power and knowledge and religion helps to achieve this. Once these leaders are in place, religion would help them offer explanations and solutions to the problem of meaning of life and other mysteries associated with human existence in Nigeria. Dauda Attah (2009), averred that ignorance of the power and impact of religion has led Nigeria to the state of developmental backwardness in which she find herself today. Obedience to the word of God and his prophets or priests brings progress, blessing and exaltation.

Religion and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Religion is a very portent instrument for nation building. This is observably clear from the study of European history. It is the case that from the period of the scholastics to the beginning of the 18th century, education, government (politics) and other socio- cultural aspects of human endeavour were in the hands of the church. The church encouraged and promoted learning, first from the monastic school centres and then the cathedral schools and later other universities, seminaries and centres of learning. The classical and oriental Greek philosophies of Plato, Aristotle and other orient writers were preserved and promoted by the church. The writings of churchmen and functionaries like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, Albert the Great, Francis Bacon and a host of others are still relevant today. On the moral front, church functionaries and officials served as both moral guides to kings and their subjects and legal consultants. Bad and despotic kings were deposed and excommunicated by the church, to give a sigh of relief and freedom to the masses. The church also encouraged technology (as it was known in those days), monks wrote and copied biblical manuscripts and other ancient writings with their hands and preserved them. The church equally encouraged and promoted the act of painting drawing sculptrship and other artistic ingenuities that modern technology has not rivaled.

In Nigeria today, religion also encourages, promotes and sustains development. The vital question however is” how is this possible especially in a complicated society like Nigeria? An analytical survey of the integrative value system of religion could be helpful here. First, religion promotes integrative value system in every society religious beliefs, practices, norms, values and tenets are brought to bear on the cultural life of every society where it is practised. This is manifestly true in Nigeria. Religious values have permeated the social fabrics of the cultural life of the Nigerian people. In this way, it helps in contributing to dynamic beliefs systems which preserves the awe-inspiring aspects of Nigerian cultural heritage. The use of taboos by religion in Nigeria helps integrate functionally, the Nigerian integrative value-system. Obiorah (2006), defined taboo as “... those acts or activities, deeds and performances of people that are regarded and believed to be forbidden and as such constitute offences in a particular group or community”. Taboos are prohibited acts, actions and practices that are forbidden, frowned at and unacceptable by a group or community. Mairi (1998) saw taboo as “ anything which is forbidden or disapproved of for religious reasons or by social customs”. Uche (2011), in agreement with Ogunbameru and Rotimi held that “taboo is a prohibition of some actions. This view indicates some acts, action and prohibitions in one community which may not be prohibited in another.

From the above analysis, it is evident that people are aware and conscious of taboos and they know the consequences of breaking them. Whenever any taboo is broken, sacrifices of propitiation are performed to appease the divinities that are

believed to have a constant check on man. For the Christian religion, anytime a taboo is broken or sin is committed, the offender (penitent) goes through some penitential rites in the form of going for sacramental confession if a catholic, or doing some other penitential rituals like fasting, praying for forgiveness, giving alms or some other charitable acts. Religious taboos serve as a cohesive factor and bind the society together. In a complicated pluralist 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. Hence religion steps in to cohesively preach against such tendencies and encourage people to be morally responsible.

There are other psychological role of religion in Nigeria's sustainable development cravings, through the integrative value systems of taboos. Uche (2011), agreeing with Kayode noted that it “ creates fear in the minds of members of the community who would have treated religious injunctions with impunity”. The religious doctrine that incurring the wrath of God through disobedience to his word and thus being sanctioned divinely, teaches Nigerians to uphold, promote and respect the norms of the society. In consequence, they serve as a mechanism of integration which strengthens the sacredness of religion. Taboos in this way helps to ward off the terrors of nature, cruelty of fate and compensate Nigerians for suffering. By helping to create a humane social order, social harmony and community security, taboos act as integrative value system that promote sustainable development in Nigeria.

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

In Nigeria, corruption seems to be the mother of all social economic crimes people commit, especially those at the corridors of power and this has bedeviled the social fabrics of the country, the culture of “get rich quick at all cost”, and “looting of public funds for all one cares”, seem to defy solutions. Religious leaders and functionaries have a big challenge to brace up to their responsibility as moral guides, providing moral and spiritual checks and balances in the Nigerian nation. They should articulate vividly, functional ways of addressing the immoral dispositions of Nigerians and in this way they would have addressed to a reasonable extent, the moral decadence in the Nigerian society.

Religion, conceived and understood as a powerful instrument of social change and liberation, has and could still transform the most criminal of all men in various societies. Through religious beliefs, values, morality and ethical teachings, religious

functionaries and ministers have effectively and can still appeal to the consciences of Nigerians to take up new hearts and spirits and become better humans, better religious men and women and better Nigerians by shunning corruption and all other socio-moral vices that are inimical to sustainable development and nation building. Religion indeed has and will continue to form and reform persons who are truly human and truly Nigerian to join in the task of nation building.

The Challenges of Sustainable Development in Nigeria

Every developmental endeavour naturally has observable challenges. In the same vein, there are observable challenges to sustainable development in Nigeria. These challenges are so pressing that they need prompt and urgent attention. The greatest challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria is the problem of misplaced priority. Our inability to set our priorities right as a nation and people has hampered the sustainable developmental projects of our great country. This to a large extent, explains our retrogressive movement in developmental endeavours, Nigeria for instance, is one of the leading oil producing countries. Unfortunately, the same country that produces crude oil in a reasonably large quantity, exports the crude and imports the refined oil at a very high rate. The non-functionality of our refineries and our inability to build new and better ones is an open display of our misplacement of priority. The transport sector of the Nigerian economy especially in the area of the neglect and abandonment of railway system of transportation for the road transport system tells much about our misplaced priority.

Corruption is yet another big and deadly cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian nation. Corruption has not only affected our developmental projects but has destroyed them. Any country, nation or people that entrench corruption in their system can hardly develop. Nigeria's sustainable developmental bid has crumbled because of corruption. This is because it milks the national economy dry, frustrates developmental endeavours shifts government's spending away from the social areas such as education, health, social services, instead of focusing on the needed areas of development, corruption leads to the construction of unneeded and unpopular projects.

Ignorance and illiteracy is another challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria. Ignorance among the populace and even the political leader has hampered Nations building. Ignorance here suggested that people either do not know what to do, how to do it or are incapable of doing it. This in itself is the result of putting the wrong persons in positions. If the right persons are put in the right places, they would likely be more productive than the wrong persons occupying those positions. Illiteracy also plays a very deadly role in frustrating the sustainable developmental projects of the Nigerian nation. Illiteracy here means lack of proper education. It does not mean inability to read

or write. Illiteracy in this context means having a wrong orientation about something . for instance in Nigeria, many people believe that holding a public post (political, social, economic) means enriching oneself with public funds. This is an error of reasoning and belief and is attributable to literacy and ignorance.

Another challenge to the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria is lack of proper project monitoring and inspection. Contracts for projects are awarded and pursued for financial and material gains. Some are even abandoned half-way to their completion. Some contractors are not even paid at all and for this reason, they abandon such projects. Accountability, transparency, fairness and probity are all lacking in the Nigerian system. For this reason, people have developed the culture of impunity, since no one monitors any thing.

Religion and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: A Functional Approach

Functionalism was formulated by the great sociologist, Emile Durkheim, who opined that religion has a function and this function is found in the reality of its work or what it does in the society. Giving credence to Durkheim's view, Dzurghe averred that the social function of religion include, the promotion of unity, harmony, solidarity and integration among people in a given society. In the same way, religion as a system of worship and a social institution; provides ethical system which rules and govern human behaviour, relationship, institutions, interaction and individual actions.

From the functionalist view point religion serves as an instrument of social control. In Nigeria, the truth of this statement is established by a close study of religious symbols such as palm fronds, emblems of religious divinities and religious functionaries, especially the priesthood. The priesthood in religion serves as a veritable instrument of social control through pastoral care programme, of praying for members, counselling, pastoral visitation and other pastoral activities, such as case settlements reconciliatory programmes, and creating enabling environment for peaceful co-existence among people, which on the long run, makes business to thrive.

Religion is also seen as a veritable instrument of social order. Through the use of religious traditions, religions make restriction, prohibition and peace drives. This is achieved through the means of socio-religious sanctions and ostracism. In addition to the above, religion helps to maintain law and order in the Nigerian society and the maintenance of law and order are the essential ingredients for sustainable development. No country can develop under tension, disorder, and chaos. By preaching peace, and obedience to the laws of the land, religion promotes order which snow-balls into a favourable atmosphere for business to thrive. In this way, religion helps to bring about sustainable development in Nigeria.

Religion provides social welfare for its members. The providence of schools, motherless babies homes, care for widows and the poor, building of hospitals, old people's homes are all evidences of the contribution of religion to sustainable development in Nigeria. Religion is known for preaching values that sustain society. In Nigeria, religion has set values which have strengthened social harmony and solidarity. For instance, the Christian religion has demonstrated her commitment to values like forgiveness and tolerance especially in the face of the Boko Haram insurgence, in which churches have been burnt and many lives and properties lost. This commitment to values fosters sustainable development. Added to the above is the fact that religion 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

Religion is a powerful force in Nigeria, which has identifiable social functions. These functions could be weakened by the dysfunctional roles of some religious fanatics. However, the functional roles of religion in the Nigerian society is so much overwhelming that the negative tendencies of some misguided religious practitioners could be overlooked. As a force to reckon with, religion performs the role of social control, offers social services and promotes social co-existence and integration. Since all these are ingredients for development, religion therefore by implication fosters sustainable development in Nigeria.

Recommendation

From the above analysis, it is evident that religion plays a very vital role in the development of any society. In Nigeria, religion has equally contributed immensely to sustainable development through the use of religious taboos, sanctions and prohibitions. In the light of this therefore this paper recommends the followings:

- (a) Religion should be encouraged: Religion is a panacea to problem of sustainable development and growth especially to the Nigerian society. Through the media of schools, hospitals, healthcare services and other social and humanitarian services, religion brings growth and sustainable development to the society. For this reason it should be encouraged.
- (b) Social coexistence: Religion is a very strong agent of social coexistence in every society. By preaching the brotherhood of all human beings, love and respect for the human persons, religion fosters peace and unity among people. This peace unity and love are essential ingredients for sustainable development in any society. Religion therefore should be allowed to thrive.

- (c) Man by nature is a religious being: This underscores the relevance of religion to any human society. Since the human person is to act according to his nature and being religious is part of human nature, religions therefore is very essential to the development of the human person who is the agent of societal growth and development. Religion therefore should be encouraged.
- (d) Religion complements efforts in nation building: churches, mosques and shrines in Nigeria make way for employment opportunities through the recruitment of religious functionaries. These functionaries could have been unemployed thereby adding to the number unemployed Nigerians. Religion complements the efforts of Nigerian government in tackling the problem of unemployment. For this reason religion should be encouraged.
- (e) Although religion has its dysfunctional aspects, like any other human and social organization, the functional relevance of religion especially in Nigeria is enough to assert its relevance. No religion teaches violence and disorder but some religious fanatics may encourage such in their confused understanding of religion. The actions and activities of these religious fanatics should not be used to discredit the relevance of religion.

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