

# An Evaluation of the Role of Religion in the Development of Nigeria

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## Abstract

There has been an ongoing debate on the assertion that religion has any role to play in national development. The continent of Africa is facing great emergence of underdevelopment and Nigeria is not left out. This is evident in her educational, social and economic deterioration. This paper sought to discover the reason for the deterioration and sketch the role religion has played in the development of Nigeria to ameliorate her state. Qualitative and descriptive method of inquiry was used in this study and it was discovered that mono economy, corruption, religious intolerance and lack of good governance contribute largely to underdevelopment. It also found out that religious groups have played starring roles in national growth through the provision of schools, hospitals, micro loans in partnership with directorate of rural farmers, inculcating morals through teaching in religious and political assemblies for national growth. The article recommends among others an improved partnership of the government arm and the different religions.

**Keywords:** Religion, National Development, Nigeria

## 1. Introduction

Religion is a system of social unity commonly understood as a group of beliefs or attitudes concerning an object, person, unseen or imaginary being, or system of thought considered to be supernatural, sacred, divine or highest truth, and the moral codes, practices, values, institutions, and rituals associated with such belief or system of thought. It is a structure within which specific theological doctrines and practices are advocated and pursued; usually among a community of like-minded believers (Johnson and Samson, 1994). Religion can be found in all known human societies. Looking at the record of earliest societies on record, they show strong suggestions of religious signs and observances. During the course of history, religion has continued to be a significant part of societies and human experience, shaping how individuals react to the environments in which they live (Fagbamila, David and Issa 2014). Making further description of development, Akwala (2009) adds that development is the process that includes: Physical development which includes man-made goods produced by use of technology, personal development which includes the psychological directions of individuals and Cultural development which comprises of the values, norms and traditions of a society. In the opinion of Seers (1979) the reason for development in any given society is to reduce inequality, unemployment and poverty. For Sen (1999), he sees development as a complete process involving the reduction of lack or increase choice. He further explains that lack signifies a multidimensional view of poverty or inadequacy that includes illiteracy, illness and poor health condition, hunger, noiselessness, humiliation, powerlessness, insecurity, and an absence of access to basic infrastructure. National, according to Sumner (2003), refers to a phenomenon that embraces a whole nation. From the above mentioned therefore,

National Development is a process of improving the range of opportunities that will enable individual humans and communities to achieve their aspirations and full potential over a sustained period of time while maintaining the resilience of economic, social and environmental systems. (Munasinghe, 2004).

Dambisa (2010) opines that most African countries are confronted with major developmental challenges orbiting on leadership, corruption, insecurity of varied degrees like kidnapping, terrorism, child industry, ritual killing, armed robbery and the most endemic problem which is poverty is also wreaking. Furthermore, the scholar adds “there is no denying the fact that all these indices of backwardness are similar to what is operating in Nigeria today”.

Nigeria is grabbling with such problems such as illiteracy, hunger, poor health condition, humiliation, unemployment and expectations of accelerated development seem difficult to realize. Citizens of Nigeria are feeling frustrated, not cared for, basic amenities to keep life going are not seen while corruption and nepotism keep growing in the hands of the political gladiators. Nigeria economic prospects are now in grim and the economy is in recession (Eboh, 2016), while corruption is on the high side demoralizing every aspect of the government (Nwabughio, 2016). In affirmation of these facts, President Muhammadu Buhari, addressing his ministers on the state of the nation during Eid-el-Fitri, called for prayers for Nigeria. He emphasized that the present challenges facing Nigeria as a nation are enormous; they include economic recession, lack of development in agricultural and mining sectors, lack of patriotism, agitation from Indigenous people of Biafra (Nwabughio, 2016). The state of the nation has greatly affected her quest for improved quality of life of her citizens as poverty; unemployment and starvation still pervade the nook and cranny of the country.

A country is classified as developed when it is able to provide qualitative life for its citizenry. Nigeria in the last fifty years has been battling with the problems of development in spite of abundant material and natural resources in her possession. According to Williams (1990), general misconception is that religion and development do not mix; that religion (must) have a negative repercussion on development. He also argues that religion and development can, and do go together. He submits that Nigeria's development had had the assistance of religion and still does; that without the close collaboration of religion and development in the past, Nigeria would have charted and therefore taken a different course, and maybe has a slower rate of development. Following this view, Adeyomo (2002) reechoing the views of Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber on the role of religion in social institutions such as economics and politics. He said that religion is an interactive force in a society because it has the power to shape collective beliefs. It provides cohesion in social order by promoting a sense of belonging in collective enterprises. It is against this backdrop that this paper sets to discuss the role of the Religion in nation development. This paper will consider only Christianity and Islamic Religions. This paper is divided into four sections; the first will address the origin of religion focusing on the background of the two major religion this paper seeks to address. The second section addresses the factors hindering National development, the third section deals on the role of religion in promoting national growth and the fourth is the conclusion and recommendations.

## **2. Origin of Religion**

The question of nature, origin and usefulness of religion is a topic that has witnessed a long period of debate, particularly in the modern time. The rationalists like Ludwig Feuerback (1872), and Berth(1955) see it as outdated and only useful in the primitive past, while non-rationalists like Rudolph Otto (1898) quoted in Gooch(2000) and Schlemacher (1991) see it as continually relevant to both the past and present. Radin (1937) sees religion as "one that came to give answer to emotional tension created by puzzling and mystifying environment". If one analyses this statement further, it means that religion came into existence to give answer to the fear environment created during inchoate stage of man's development. This then means that religion is a thing of the past, and not of present when man is almost in his apogee in his development through the interplay of intellect and will. But Ugwu (1999) quipped that, "... Religion is – and seems likely to remain-an inevitable part of human life". According to him religion is a means of tackling the problems of suffering, evil and hostility in all ages. It is when religion is seen as useful to man that it can then make meaning when it is applied to nation since it is a group of people that make a nation.

### **2.1. A Brief Background of the Christian Religion**

The word Christianity was first used at Antioch in Syria where the disciples of Jesus were first called Christians, meaning the followers of Christ. According to Ugwu (2000), the origin and the basic beliefs of Christianity were stated in the Apostles Creed. It affirms that Jesus Christ is the son of God and God sent Him to the world to die for the redemption of mankind. The Christian population includes Roman Catholics who constitute the largest denomination of Christians in the country. Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterians, Baptists Lutherans. There is in Nigeria a growing number of evangelical and Pentecostal Ministries, Seventh Day Adventist, Jehovah's witnesses' and a host of other white garment churches (Udoidem, 1997).

### **2.2 A Brief Background of the Islamic Religion**

Islam as one of the world religions was founded in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D by Mohammed Ibn Abdullah who received a call from God to restore the worship of God to the people. Islam in Nigeria is predominantly Sunni. There are also sects like Ahrnadiyya, Sanusiyya and Quadriyya. There are groups that aim at propagating Islam like Jamaatu Nasril Islam (JNI) and Supreme Council for Islamic Affair (SCIA) (Osaghae and Suberu 2004).

## **3. Factors that Hinder National Development in Nigeria**

In spite of series of developmental strategies put in place by successive governments, and sometimes with good intentions, all attempts to generate meaningful development proved futile.

### **3.1.Poor Formulation and Implementation of Policies**

There are in most cases, no executive capacity responsible for the formulation and implementation of the plan. What is usually seen are officials entrusted to such a position but without any meaningful executive authority. Some of the previous development plans failed because; there was little or no consultation of the general public. Planning is supposed to involve even the peasant in the villages. Even the Local Government officials who are close to the people were not consulted. (Mimiko 1997).

### **3.2. Lack of Good Governance**

This militates against national development. Where there is no good governance, development becomes a mirage.

This is as a result of bad leadership in the country. Most of our leaders have no sense of commitment to development. Mimiko (1998) captures the situation by asserting that;

### 3.3. Decolonization

Decolonization allowed the crop of leaders that aligned with colonial power to take over Nigeria. This ensured the sustenance of a neo-colonial economy even after political independence. These leaders on assumption of power quickly turned up the repressive machinery of the colonial state rather than dismantling it. Significantly, they have no vision of development to accompany the efficient instrument of repression they inherited. All they were interested in was access to power and privileges and not development.

### 3.4. Corruption

High level of corruption and indiscipline is another barrier to development. Nigeria is corrupt, managed by corrupt leaders who have made the state an instrument of capital accumulation, rather than using it to project the interest of the citizenry. A very good plan supervised by a thoroughly corrupt state can hardly do a thorough job. Corruption and development are antithetical to each other, the two cannot cohabit, and so, where one is present, the other suffers. (Chuta 2004)

### 3.5 An Import Dependent Mono-Economy

Another important factor is the mono-economic base of the country. The country largely depends on crude oil for her survival to the detriment of other resources. All other sectors of the economy are neglected. For instance, agriculture, which constitutes the mainstay of the Nigerian economy in the 1950s and 1960s, has been thrown into limbo over the years. How would government encourage export promotion when there is virtually nothing to export? The economy is not diversified and this is not suitable for a sustainable development (Afamuefuna 2006).

### 3.6 Religious Intolerance

Since the independence of Nigeria, she has witnessed a variety of religious disturbances some of which have threatened the existence of the country as a nation. There are always palpable fears at the slightest provocation of inter-religious skirmishes especially in the northern parts of Nigeria. The persistence of this monster has become source of worry for most Nigerians. It is against these problems that this paper will look at the role religious groups in this country in promoting national development.

## 4. Role of Religions in Promoting National Development

Nigeria, in every ramification, is a pluralistic society. To be specific, there is religious pluralism in the country as there are adherents of Islam, Christianity, African Traditional Religion and several others. There is also ethnic pluralism, there are Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and several others, all of them belonging to a common nationality that is known as Nigeria. Apart from this, each of these tribes has its own culture. All these differences make life interesting and challenging to the various religious groups. With regards to the issue of national development, People tend to bury their cultural differences and work together as a team in order to develop the country regardless of cultural and religious differences. The researcher is going to examine the contributions of each of two religious groups in the development of this Nation

### 4.1. Social Roles

The recognition of social justice implies the recognition of God in the scheme of things and this tantamount to progress and development. After all, God is the maker of man and sole source of all that is good; prosperity, peace, justice etc. The recognition of God also presupposes social justice. And we know that, true religion teaches man that he is a creature of all powerful Father on whom he depends for his life and well-being and to whom he must render an account of life. Man learns from religion that he has specific obligations to himself, to his fellow human being and to the society to which he belongs and above all, to his maker. This is social justice in action. Also the three religious groups agree that man is dependent and contingent and need to be guided by the ultimate - God, Supreme or Allah and gods (Aremu 2003).

As the central motive of this paper is national development, the religious teachings on morality comes in, since man cannot develop without it. According to Ezeanya (1980) "to attempt to build a nation without God is to hope to construct a massive structure upon the foundation of sand, such building will collapse at the slightest gust of wind and the fall will be great". So it is apt to add that one of the universal functions of religion is to help to promote the society. The role of religion in national development is to tell the people that, social justice, egalitarianism and building of a country is not merely man - conceived, but it is ordained by God. Peace is the absence of war. But Okwueze (2003) said that:

...it is not merely the absence of war nor can it be reduced solely to be maintenance of a balance of power between enemies nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called, an

enterprise of justice, peace results from that harmony built into human society by its divine founder and actualized by man as they thirst after ever - greater justice.

One of the ways Religion can help in national development is by securing the peace of the nation. And this is done by appealing to the conscience of the people through ethical teachings.

According to Agha (2003) conscience is defined as a faculty of the human mind responsible for different capabilities or abilities which the human being attempt to exhibit. It is the inner sense of right or wrong in moral choices that a person makes. Also, it is seen as a practical judgment concerning the morality of a concluded action where there is an appeal to one's conscience when he does right or wrong Okwueze (2003). The Muslim scholar and leader, Usman Dan Fodio (1754-1817) aptly captures it when he describes conscience as an open wound which only truth can heal. So ethics or codes of conduct become necessary because people are living in an interacting human society wherein divided choices or desires are made, if man is left alone to act according to his will, there will be series of conflict in the society and conflict breed anarchy. Therefore, in national development the religion will be continually appealing to the conscience of their members (Nigerians) to pursue peace and avoid conflict. By so doing, Nigeria will be a place where people will live in harmony both citizens and non-citizens. Foreigners come can freely will be coming in without any fear of being kidnapped. Nigeria will be a country where every tourist will like to visit and such men will also come with their investments.

According to Agha (2003) "No society can live without morals". He argues that morality comprises of those standards of conduct which the reasonable man approves. Conceptually religion provides believers a guideline about life and the life-after and thus provides much-needed incentives for indulging in productive activities during lifetime. Religions can be seen as a promoter of growth as they direct people towards honesty, discipline, hard work, education, thriftiness (leading to savings essential for investment and thereby growth) and absenteeism from harmful activities; though it can also encourage violence in the name of doing the will of God. In view of the above, one can say that religion plays the role of moving the nation forward by bringing the citizens together to plan for the good of the nation. Nigeria cannot develop on itself unless the citizens come together to develop it. Each of the religious groups has contributed significantly to the evangelization of Nigerians. The religious training and the principles have been the core instrument in the Nation building. Every major religious to one or another prescribes principles for the human relationship with a supreme power, political leaders and the country itself.

#### 4.2. Economic Development

Economically, one of the cardinal aims of development is to realize economic self-reliance accomplished through intensive rural farming and the articulation of other productive forces to place the nation in sound economic footing. As a result, religious groups have been working in collaboration with the directorate for rural development, road and infrastructural facilities to meet the target of the Religious groups to make this a reality. For instance, some states have begun to give back schools to churches. This shows that government still recognizes the importance of religion in this country. According to Sam (2009) different religious groups also engage in economic ventures like owning a farm -settlement in different rural areas, even in some urban areas too. Religious groups have built health care centers, and maternity homes. Many religious groups now are involved in controlling the environment that is, protection of animals and fishes, care of water supply and Afforestation-tree planting to avoid erosion, educational programs on the effects of deforestation and constant bush burning. Also they are engaged in small scale enterprises such as soap making, cream, shoe making, tailoring, carpentry, fish pond factory. They also encourage charitable organization to help in alleviating poverty (Agha 2003).

When this is done, it then means that efforts of the religious groups have added greatly to national development. Also, Ejim (2010) observed the peculiar character of Christian and Islamic economic principles of interest-free loan help greatly in developing our nation. By this, the rural dwellers can easily borrow from their religion, and feel rest-assured that the burden will not be too much for them. This encourages increase in food production and business venture.

4.3. Educational Roles: Another role religion has played in national development is on the educational sector. Religious groups have been involved in the educational sector of this country through the provision of Nursery, Primary, Secondary, Adult education, Sabbath and Sunday School Classes, *Almajiri* school, clubs for Boys and Girls, Mass illiteracy, program planning and training courses.

Religion in this country has been working hard to make sure that Nigeria has quality education in this country. This was made clear when some state Governments returned many schools to their original owners. Before now, our educational sector in this country' has experienced incessant strikes because of non-implementation of their agreement or nonpayment of salary. Agha (2003) opined that strike is like a cankerworm to national development. Religious groups took it as a challenge to invest on educational sector by providing



schools even up to University level. Consequently today, the state government and the religious bodies pay regular salaries to their teachers.

4.4. Political Role: One of the banes of the nation is lack of political education among the leaders shown by rabid display of power. As Achebe (1983) rightly observed in his work;

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with Nigerian or climate or water, air or any other thing else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example, which is the hallmark of the true leadership. It is not only the rulers; the people too contribute in no small measure to the ruin of the nation. This is done amply by disrespecting constituted authorities, sometime apathy and absence of commitment of the behaviors of the citizens' for conducive and rancor free atmosphere necessary for progress. He also observed that;

Indiscipline pervades our life so completely today that one may be justified in calling it the condition par excellence of contemporary Nigeria society. We see and hear and read about indiscipline in the home, in the school, in the public service, in the private sector, in the government and in legislative assemblies as follows: "a failure or refusal to submit one's desire and actions to the restraints of orderly social conduct in recognition of the rights and desires of others (p2).

If the leaders should be educated politically on what leadership entails -service; and the-led (people) made to understand their position too, obedience -the magic of decorum and political awareness would have been effective. The Nigeria political milieu has not been satisfactorily done. Religion can bring about sustainable political development through the inculcation of high sense of duty, morality, selfless service, respect for human lives, public accountability, love of one's neighbor, sense of humanity, abhorrence of violence, starting from Boko Haram crisis that has taken religio-political dimension back to the Biafra war. With religion, there is a sense of religious reawakening which is supposed to have a positive impact on the political development of the country. Religion can contribute to national integration, political mobilization, reformation of ethnic identity, nationalism, peaceful co-existence, economic social and political development (Afolabi, 2015). In agreement to the above, Marshall (2010) submits the virtues inherent from the political education of these religions has effected some changes and hence helped in the development of our nation.

4.5. Health Care System: Religious groups in this country have been doing its best to see that our country is a better place to live. It has been providing and helping people to have good health care services. For example, there are the Seventh Day Adventist Hospitals in Aba, Ife, Jengre, and Ilisan. Faith Clinic Foundation in Nsukka, Queen Elizabeth hospital Umuahia, K and P hospital in Nassarawa State, Shendam hospital Gombe, Leprosy home Uzuakolie, and many others built by religious groups (Jerome 2010).

4.6 Agricultural Sector: Religious groups encourage people, especially its members to embark on farming by providing fertilizer and soft loan to them. The members also encourage the farmers by buying their harvested goods. Religious groups also encourage their members to be hard working as no religion encourages laziness. Finally, the role of religion in national development cannot be overemphasized because they are involved in all areas of human life. However, there are some negative aspects of religion which can be seen also as a hindrance to national development. Such as; Religious Crises, which have been noted as one of the consequences of this zero-sum game. It will be recalled that since 1999-2012 almost 80% of these religious crises are fueled by political factors (Igwe 2012).

## 5. Conclusion

Religion is characterized by functional and dysfunctional element, most especially in Nigeria; it is also admitted that it deals with abstract things, that is, conception of God is intuitively mediated quite unlike science which has a conceptual knowledge which centers on sense perception. Religion, just as its dysfunctional aspect has functional aspect as evidenced in morality, justice, truth, economic development, educational and social services which it can render through its various institutions. These functional aspects can be incorporated to the benefit of the nation's development, when religious dialogue, tolerance is given its due place. Multiplicity in religion is the fate of Nigeria and therefore tolerance and dialogue must be an antidote to reap the benefits of these religions.

In view of the issues raised in this paper, the article puts forward the following recommendations.

1. Religions should be carried along in government policies to always inculcate moral principles, justice, truth, equity and honesty which is a reagent to personality change thereby reduce corruption. This is because laws and plans on eternal aspects of man exploiting scientific models are falling Nigeria.
2. Also government should make use of the various organs like Council of Religious Groups (CRG) provided by different religions in the country to carry its message to the people. Moreover, proven and virtuous religious people should be used in the sensitive areas in political social and economic goals of national development to prevent constant failures of government well-conceived programs.

3. The study of moral education should be made compulsory in all categories of learning and national orientation agency should also include it in their plans.
4. Promotion of the culture of Religious tolerance, through education and enlightenment of the people through the mass media, civil society organizations and educational institutions to respect and tolerate other religions as well as extol the culture of others is helpful. It will effectively mitigate the persistent occurrence of religious violence in Nigeria,
5. The government needs to be pro-active in promoting the culture of tolerance by adherents of religions. The best way to do that is the enlightened of various religious adherents through the use of credible religious scholars, to imbibe the habit of reporting through the right channel.
6. The government should give more power to the Christian Association of Nigeria and Islamic Society of Nigeria in promoting inter-religious dialogue and religious tolerance through organizing seminars and workshops for religious adherents which will help in building sustainable political development.

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