

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, PEACE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Nigeria has over the years lacked peace and consequently economic growth which are important for sustainable development. Nigeria is battling with so many security challenges such as armed robbery, kidnapping, and religious extremism, among others. Instability is the order of the day and poverty has become a vicious circle. Nigeria is a country with high religious consciousness. One will think that this will boost the moral lives of the citizens and bring about peace, and development. But the reverse seems to be the case in Nigeria. The aim of this paper therefore, is to explore the importance of religious education in peacemaking and sustainable development in Nigeria. The study reveals that different religions in Nigeria have ethical standards and bequeath principles of good behaviour to their adherents. Findings also indicate that when religious and ethical values of these different religions are well harnessed and disseminated in the society, an enabling ground would be put in place for sustainable development. The study recommends that in teaching religious education areas of similarities among the dominant religions should be emphasized instead of areas of differences. More awareness should be created on the importance of interfaith dialogue between the leaders of these religions.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Religious education, insecurity, peace and sustainable development

### **Introduction**

Every nation of the world clamors for peace. The issue of peace remains one of the major focuses of national and international community. This is because there is a relationship between peace and sustainable development. Peace is actually a catalyst for national development. Development cannot also take place in any nation without human security (Akamode 2004). In essence, there is inextricable linkage between peace, human security and sustainable development.

Regrettably, many countries, including Nigeria are plunged into crises of multifaceted dimension leading to loss of human capital and material resources. Nigeria has over the years lacked peace and consequently economic growth which are important for sustainable development. Nigeria is battling with so many security challenges such as religious extremism, insurgencies, communal clashes, armed robbery, abduction and kidnapping, political violence, among others. Nigeria is seen as a security risk country and many foreigners have warned her citizens against travelling to Nigeria. There have been violent conflicts between different ethnic groups in Nigeria. For instance, Ife-Modakeke crisis in Osun State, Jukun-Tiv war in Taraba-State, Odi Massacre in Bayelsa State, Urhobo, Izon, Itsekiri crisis in Warri, Jimeta conflict, (Egwu, 2001 and Alanamu, 2004 cited in Sulaiman O. K. and Ojo 2012). Religion has also been wrongly used as a source of conflict in the country. There is high religious consciousness in Nigeria. Religious identities in Nigeria are usually classified into three – Christian, Muslim and Traditional. Religious conflicts have proliferated Northern Nigerian political landscape since 1980s till date. Most of these involve conflicts between Muslims and Christians, with clear ethnic undertones (Ajaegbu 2012). For example, Kaduna riot on 28 Feb. 2000 over the attempt to implement Sharia law led to the killing of about 300 people within the first two days of the crisis (Jando 2011). September 2001 crisis in Jos left over 1,000 people dead (Okafor, 2007). In 2001 about 500,000 people were displaced and 250,000 in 2002 after ethnic and religious conflict in Nigeria (Isiramen 2010). On February 18, 2006, over 50 people were killed and properties damaged in the conflict between Christians and Muslims in Maiduguri, Bornu State. In 2008, over 700 people were killed and thousands were internally displaced in religious crisis that took place in Jos, Plateau State (Sampson 2012).

With the emergence of Boko Haram Islamic sect in the North eastern Nigeria, the rate of conflicts heightened with devastating impact on the economy of the nation. The Boko Haram insurgency has affected the human and material resources needed for any credible development. With the killing and displacement of people, especially in north east, the area is deprived of veritable means of production with cumulative effect on the development of the country. Cases of Boko Haram attacks abound. From 26 – 30 of July 2009, Bauchi, Borno, Kano and Yobe were attacked by the radical Boko Haram sect and this attack claimed the lives of over 700 persons

and 3,500 persons internally displaced over 392 women widowed; and several property destroyed, The 25th December 2011 bomb explosion at St Theresa's Catholic Church in Madalla, Niger State left many dead, and many injured (Onah, Ibenwa, and Okwuosa 2016). On October 2012 in Adamawa State, 40 Federal Polytechnic Mubi students were massacred by Boko haram sect. On September 29 2013, there was Boko Haram attack at college of Agriculture, Gujba in Yobe state where over 40 students killed on campus while more than 150 sustained injuries (Babatunde, Unwana-Obong and Olanrewaju 2014). Religion is therefore seen as dysfunctional to development. The problem, however, is that people are not well educated formally and informally on the possible contributions of religion to human development (obiefuna and Uzoigwe 2012).

The activities of Fulani herdsmen have added to the problem bedeviling Nigeria and can fuel more conflicts if not checkmated. The recent crisis of December 2016 in Southern Kaduna where 808 people and properties worth billions of naira were destroyed is not a welcome development (THISDAYLive 2016). The above are few cases of violent conflicts in Nigeria. In all these lives are lost, properties destroyed and poverty entrenched. These scenarios underscore the fact that there is an undeniable nexus between peace and sustainable development. The instability and volatility of Nigeria call for peace building initiatives for any meaningful development to take place in the country. Since most religions in Nigeria have peace as part of their fundamental teaching, religious education should be emphasized. The paper argues that change in the attitudes of adherents of different religions is needed for the required transformation to take place. Religion has been known to help people develop spiritual qualities for peaceful co-existence. With this in mind the paper seeks to examine the importance of religious education in peacemaking and sustainable development in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Definitions of Religion, Religious Education, Peace and Sustainable Development**

#### **Religion**

Religion has been variously defined. According to James (1902:31-32) religion is the “feelings, acts and experiences of individual in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand

in relation to whatever they consider the divine”. Glenn M Vernon (1962:55) defines Religion as:

That part of culture composed of shared beliefs and practices which not only identify or define the supernatural and the sacred and man’s relationship thereto but which also relate them to the known world in such a way that the group definitions as to what is good (in harmony with or approved by the supernatural) and what is bad (contrary to or out of harmony with the supernatural).

In his own view Max Muller in Nigosian (1975:3) asserts that “religion is a mental faculty or disposition which, independent of sense or reason, enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names and under varying guises”.

Religion can be summed up as the relationship between a human being and his or her creator; an attempt of man to attain a sort of communication or communion with God (Imaekhai 2010: 53). Religion is the belief in the Supernatural being who has control over the affairs of man.

### **Religious Education**

Religious Education is chiefly concerned with building the sense of Sacred in man, teaching him of where he comes from, why he is here on earth and where he is going (Ezanya, 1988). Religious education according to Akubue (1992:8) is “education designed to produce well ordered personalities or men of strong character for the nation”. In the view of Kitause and Achunike’s (2012:83), religious education connotes education that “provides morals, ethics and standards that are normative for life, living and patterns for human existence and relations”. Religious education involves an organized system of learning that guides people towards moral and spiritual development. It directs people towards living a virtuous life.

### **Peace**

There are many definitions of peace. Peace as defined by Phil-Eze (2009:392) is a “state of harmonious relationship, absence of violence, war, freedom from disputes, mental stress or anxiety between individuals, groups, states or nations. Peace is “a societal condition which ensures relative social stability and order through the dispensation of justice, fairness and

opportunities for accommodation by formal and informal institutions, practices and norms” (Miller cited in Elaigwu 2013). Francis (2006:16) identified six meanings of peace as agreed on by many peace researchers. These include:

Peace as the absence of war (absence of direct violence), peace as justice and development (absence of structural violence), peace as respect and tolerance between people, peace as *Gaia* (balance in and with the ecosphere), inner peace (spiritual peace), and peace as ‘wholeness’ and making whole’.

Peace means a state of harmonious relationship, a just order between individuals or group of people. Peace is essential precondition for sustainable development.

### **Sustainable Development:**

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). Anyaehie (2011:158) 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 Emas (2015:1) 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.

### **Methodology**

The study relied on data generated from books, journals, Newspapers and other classical materials. Being a qualitative research, the data collected from the documents were critically analyzed. The aim was to highlight the importance of religious education on the lives of Nigerians for peace and growth of the country. The descriptive phenomenological method was employed in this paper.

### **The role of Religious Education in Peace and Sustainable Development**

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 1997). Referring to this religious consciousness of Africans, Mbiti (1969:262) 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 (1974:124) 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”. Subsequent educational policies in the country gave protection to religious instruction in schools (Madu 1997). Meanwhile the five main national objectives of education as stated by National Policy of Education (1981:7) which are the springboard for national development in Nigeria include:

1. A free and democratic society
2. A just and egalitarian society
3. A united, strong and self-reliant nation
4. A great and dynamic economy
5. A land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.

The same document stipulated that the philosophy of education has to be “geared towards self-realization, better human relationship, individual and national efficiency, effective citizenship, national consciousness, national unity, as well as towards social, economic, political, scientific

and technological progress”. These cannot be achieved in a society plagued by violent conflicts and insecurity.

Religious education should be used to inculcate respect for the dignity of man. It should emphasize virtues such as love, tolerance, brotherhood, reconciliation, kindness, justice, humility, unity, self discipline and respect for human life. These values can therefore act as catalysts to achieving peace and tranquility in the Nigerian society. Peace and tranquility enhances economic growth and sustainable development. As Ogwu (2001:1) notes no religion proceeds with the primary objective of provoking chaos and precipitating social disintegration among peoples and communities. Rather, all religions seek to reconcile and integrate people across ethnic, racial, class, and other socio-cultural divides. According to Ikani (2002: 10) Religion is “an efficient means of social control stimulates social habits and checks anti-social tendencies”.

Religious education is very essential in Nigeria because of religious diversity that exists in the country. The three major religions educate their members differently either through their sacred books in their various places of worship or oral traditions handed down from their fore fathers. In schools the emphasis should be in the relationship or area of similarities among the religions instead of paying attention to area of differences. For instance, Christianity teaches peace and non violence. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew5:1-12, is one of the teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. Here Christ laid down rules for His followers. The sermon also known as the Beatitudes contain a summary of religious virtues. Peace is one of the central themes on this sermon on mountain. In Matthew 5:9 Jesus Christ proclaimed “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”.

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 (Q3:124) 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 (Q 3: 200) (Sulaiman and Ojo 2012:3). Highlighting these relationships will promote mutual understanding and tolerance among people of different religions.

Regrettably, religious education is not compulsory in schools. Attention has shifted to science subjects because of the so called era of science and technology. However, science and technology have not been able to solve the problem of crime and insecurity in the world. It takes a morally sound individual to desist from anti-social behaviour. To ignore religion is to ignore an essential phenomenon in human society. Religion regulates man's relationship with God and with his fellow human beings.

In the words of Sheen (1954:244) cited in Nnadi (2004:117)

Man, by attempting to exist either apart from God or defiant to God, has made the world as delirious as his own mind is neurotic. ... It is man who has to be remade first, the society will be remade by the restored new man...the constant refusal of man to allow a suprahistoric divine power to break into his closed mind is the pride which prepares catastrophe.

Man learns through his religion that certain actions are good or bad and this directs him towards living a virtuous life. This is needed for good relationship among individuals and for national development. It is pertinent to recall here Mbiti's (1975:199) assertion that:

... No society can exist without morals. Religion enriches people's morals, for the welfare of the individuals and society at large. It is morals which build relationships between people and between them and the world around.

Religion enables man to see meaning and purpose in life. By providing man with a worldview and describing man's place within the scheme of things, religion enables man to see human life as meaningful and purposeful, thus providing him with a sense of direction in life (Omoregbe1993). Thus, religious education has a goal of transforming human behaviour through teaching people about God and the last things; death, judgment, reward and punishment. This helps people to know that they are obliged to live in harmony with one another and achieve divine blessing. In a country where there are violent conflicts, abuses of human rights, insecurity of lives and property, development suffers setback. In view of this, Ekpenyong (2011:95) states that "violent conflict disrupts the process of production, creates condition for pillage of the country's resources and diverts their application from development purposes to servicing war".

Isiramen (2010) observed that in present day Nigeria, the study of religion has been rationalized by government policy. At level of primary school, religion is taught as civic and moral education and at secondary school level it is taught as Christian religion and Islamic religious Knowledge. At the tertiary level there exists decline in patronage of religious education because people clamour for science education. She also noted that in recent years the government has spent huge sums of money on scholarship for only science students. As noted by El Mahdi (2001: 19) “the challenge before our communities is to recognize religious worth in its own right ... and harness the considerable religious energy in nation building and national development”. Religious education provides the synergy for harmonious living and peaceful co-existence in the society.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the above discussions, the paper recommends that religious education should be made compulsory in primary and throughout secondary schools. At the tertiary institutions, courses in religious education should be taken by students specializing in other fields. This will help to enrich intellectual and moral development of the children and youths.

The government should give equal opportunity to students in Arts, social sciences, Education and other Sciences. They all have their quota to contribute if sustainable development of the will be achieved.

Ethical values of the three different religions should be well harnessed and disseminated in the society through religious education.

More awareness should be created on the importance of interfaith dialogue between the leaders of these religions. This will help in achieving understanding among the leaders which they will transmit to their followers. The re-orientation of the people is needed for tolerance and peaceful co-habitation.

Deviant behaviour should be discouraged and appropriate punishment given to the offender irrespective of the person involved. Sustainable Development can only be achieved where security and wellbeing of individuals in the society are guaranteed.

## **Conclusion**

Nigeria has over the years lacked peace and consequently economic growth which are important for sustainable development. Nigeria is battling with so many security challenges such as armed robbery, kidnapping, communal conflicts and religious extremism, among others. Instability is the order of the day and poverty has become a vicious circle. Nigeria is also a multi-faith society with Christianity, Islam and ATR as the three dominant religions. One will think that the presence of these religions will boost the moral lives of the citizens and bring about peace and sustainable development. But the reverse seems to be the case in Nigeria. Nigeria remains a country in dire need of peace and sustainable development. This paper explored the importance of religious education in peacemaking and sustainable development in Nigeria. Religion is a potent factor in national development. Religion regulates man's conduct and promotes good relationship between man and his fellow man and between man and the Supernatural Being. In a country besieged by insecurity, there will be lack of investments which in turn undermine economic growth. This will consequently deny the government the resources to build infrastructure and provide the basic necessities needed for sustainable development. When ethical values of the three different religions are well harnessed and disseminated in the society through religious education, an enabling ground would be put in place for sustainable development.

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