



THE ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN THE DEVELOPMENT/UNDER-DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the role of contemporary religious practices in the development/underdevelopment of Nigeria. And it was revealed that despite some factors inhibiting the role of religion in the development of Nigeria, it has to a large extent contributed significantly to the economic development directly or indirectly especially in the development of manpower and human resources through the establishment of educational and health facilities. Based on these revelations, it was recommended among others to integrate religion into the development agenda of Nigeria to overcome the ignorance responsible for the disconnection some often make between their faith and their civic duties. Honestly embrace peace and mutual co-existence by understanding and tolerating one another's religious beliefs.*

KEYWORDS: Religion, Economic Development, Per Capita Income, Underdevelopment, Economic Growth.



INTRODUCTION

For a start, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, says in St. John's Gospel Chapter 10: verse 10b "I am come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly".

Are you wondering about the relevance of this passage on the above subject matter? Abundance means, an overflowing, fullness, sufficiency, copious supply, which is similar to the good/better life or economic development. Undoubtedly, certain elements within some religious circles may have underplayed the positive contributions of religion toward the economic development of nations by encouraging the wrong notion that religion and religious life are synonymous with poverty. But, if Jesus talked about abundant life in Christianity, it follows that the movement of which he was the originator must champion the crusade of economic development and social change. But in contemporary discussion of ways to attain sustainable economic development, there is a reluctance to consider the influence of religions. Some reasons being that intolerance among various religious groups, occasionally results in violent conflicts which hamper or destroy projects that can bring about the decline of nations. Others are the commercialisation of religion, the emergence of false priests etc.

However, a truly pure religion, especially Christianity which the writer is conversant with, promotes integral development that goes beyond mere economic globalisation. This paper is therefore defending the thesis that contemporary religious practices in Nigeria play a very important role in the economic development of the nations. To support the above position, James D. Wolfensohn, one time President of the World Bank foresaw the need for closer collaboration of the World Bank and other development institutions with religion and remarked: "Religion is an omnipresent and seamless part of daily life, taking an infinite variety of forms that are part of the distinctive quality of each community. Religion could thus not be seen as something apart and personal. It is a dimension of life that suffused whatever people do. Religion affects many people's attitude to everything, including matters such as savings, investment and trust in economic decisions. It influences the areas we have come to see as vital for successful development, like schooling, gender equality, and approaches to health care. In short, religion could be an important driver of change, even as it could be a break to progress".

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Issues

Religion:

Religion is so complex that it has no satisfactory or generally acceptable definition. Part of the problem is that every discipline, expert, fanatic has its definition. For example, some Christians say, Christianity is not a religion, but a way of life. Webster's New Universal Unabridged Twentieth Century Dictionary (1983) has seven different definitions of religion. Number one, says religion is "Belief in a divine or supernatural power or powers to be obeyed and worshipped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe". Number four, says religion is a state of mind or way of life expressing love for and trust in God. Also, it is one's will and effort to act according to the will of God, especially within a monastic order or community.



According to Idowu (1973), “Religion results from man’s spontaneous awareness of and spontaneous reactions to his immediate awareness of a living power, ‘wholly other’ and infinitely greater than himself; a power mysterious because unseen, yet a present and urgent reality, seeking to bring a man into communion with himself. This awareness includes that of something reaching out from the depths of man’s being for close communion with and vital relationship to this power as a source of real life. Religion in its essence is how God, as spirit and man’s essential self, communicates. It is something resulting from the relationship which God established from the beginning of (human) life between himself and man”.

What is common in all these definitions are “Deity”, “Creator” and “Almighty” who reigns in every situation in the life of man. It is also clear that man must equally respond to the Almighty God in reverence and worship. Again, religion deals with the relationship between God and man and between man and man. Religion also has rules of conduct that guide the interaction of man with his fellow beings (in the Holy Bible, Exodus 20: 1-20 – Ten Commandments; Exodus 21: 1-23; 33-covenant code).

Religion is practised for several reasons. Few among them are (i) Because it is part of the heritage of their culture, tribe and family. According to Adamu (1985) “The richest and most important heritage of Africa is religion. This heritage permeates the entire life of the African people. This heritage has dominated the thinking of African people to the extent that it shapes their cultural, social, political and economic activities. It has also shaped all aspects of African life to the extent that it becomes so difficult to separate what is religion from what can be considered secular”.

Another reason is the fact that it gives people a feeling of security by a divine power that watches over them and protects them from every form of evil.

Economic Development:

Economic development, which is a good or better life for everyone, may mean different things to different people. According to Todaro (2011), development has traditionally meant achieving sustained rates of growth of income per capita. Okowa (2012) citing Lewis (1954) explained that this primary position accorded economic growth in the development literature, led to the focusing of attention on the issue of savings and investment and economic development came, therefore, to be seen in terms of growth of savings, investment and national income. When these benefits from these growths and the structural changes accompanying it would not trickle down to the poor and the unemployed, and at the same time the magnitude of poverty, unemployed and the extent of income inequalities were increasing in most developing countries, resulted in the realization in the seventies that the concept of development should be broadened.

Thus, the conception of development was broadened to encompass growth and income distribution, as well as the availability of the basic needs of food, shelter, education and health Okowa (2012).

As reconstruction and refinement of the concept of development from a modern view continued, development is now thought of in terms of three key interrelated conditionalities or core values Todaro (1981) (i) Life sustenance; (ii) Self-esteem; (iii) Freedom from servitude.



“The questions to ask about a country’s development are, therefore: What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from high levels, then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for a country concerned. If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result “development” even if per capita income doubled. Seers (1969).

According to Okowa (2012), both the traditional or mainstream school of thought and the neo-Marxist school suffer from severe conceptual inadequacies, because both view the symptoms rather than the real problems of underdevelopment. And that they did not ask or did not provide fundamental answers to the questions, for example, as to why per capita income was low or as to why the peripheries were dependent on the centres. And that the best solution is to locate and identify development and underdevelopment concerning the central position of man. That is a man-centred conception of development. In other words, underdevelopment and development must be seen in terms of the degree to which societies can devise tools, materially and institutionally with which to productively manipulate their environment.

Empirical Issues:

According to Zaheed and Alofun (2011), the early relationship between religion and economic development was established by Marx, who believed that the strength of an economy would influence a religion or belief. However, the likes of Max Weber, an eminent sociologist of the early 20th century were of contrary opinion. According to him, the source of growth of the western economy is religion, especially the reformation of protestant and its doctrine about simplicity and moral responsibility to work.

Barro and Mc Cleary (2003) cited by Zaheed and Alofun (2011) suggested that higher rates of religious beliefs stimulate growth because they help to sustain the aspect of individual behaviour that enhances productivity.

Ikporuko (2001) explained that indeed, religion is so important in society as a form of social control because people's adherence to religion has a great influence on the daily lives of Nigerians, and plays a significant role in socio-political and economic development. To drive home the point, Okeke (2006) recalled that “They arrived as Christians community and were able to establish various schools for teaching craft and to produce artisans in Sierra-Leone. By 1807, the settlers had begun with the words of Christopher Fyfe developing into a coherent self-reliant community.

The Role of Contemporary Religious Practice in the Development of Nigeria:

Religion can be involved in influencing the progress to a better world. It has contributed much to the development of the human race and it will be absurd to ignore the contributions of religion, especially Christianity and Islam. Because of its innumerable adherents and its common belief in the dignity of the human person under God, religion is committed to the promotion of human good to provide basic human needs, guarantee the protection of human rights and promote integral development of the globe. Thus neglecting religion, the source of normative meaning that grounds the architecture of infrastructural and superstructural institutions of society is misunderstanding the world process as a whole for religious people Ogbonaya (2011). And as long as secular discourse continues to exclude religion in its analysis of economic development, the results of its analysis will be defective.



The roles of religion for sustainable economic development, from various opinions, newspapers etc have been positive and negative. Positively, it serves as a reliable institution providing stepping stones to economic development. According to Sanneh (2003) “Although they were little prepared for it, the churches found themselves as the only viable structure remaining after the breakdown of state institutions, as such, they had to shoulder a disproportionate burden of the problems of their societies.

The role of religion in economic development is more pronounced in the education and health sectors, as well as the creation of job opportunities.

The Education Sector

Education is a continuous and creative process that aims for the enrichment and progress of society, by equipping students with spiritual, moral and material knowledge. Education in terms of knowledge, qualities, skills, attitudes and capacities enable individuals to become conscious subjects of their growth and active responsible participants in a systematic process of building a new world order. Education is the key that unlocks all the forces of economic growth and development in a nation. This fact is in line with Todaro (2011) when he cited Prof. Harbison, H. that ‘human resource constitutes the ultimate basis for the wealth of nations’. Capital and natural resources are passive factors of production, human beings are the active agents who accumulate capital, exploit natural resources, build social, economic and political organisations and carry forward national development. According to Okowa (2012), education is the fundamental instrument in the development of human capital. In addition, education is so vital to the quality of human life that most societies accept the position in line with UNESCO. In Nigeria, religious bodies pioneered the establishment of primary, secondary schools. They are also not left out in the establishment of higher institutions. Some of them are listed in the table below:

Table 1.0 Some Religion-based private higher institutions in Nigeria

S/N	Institution	Founder/Sponsor
1.	Bowen University, Iwo - Osun State	The Baptist
2.	Fountain University, Osogbo –Ondo State	NASFAT Islam
3.	Bishop Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo-Oyo State	Anglican Churches
4.	Al-Hikama University, Ilorin –Kwara State	Islamic Foundation (AROIF) and World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY)
5.	Redeemer University, Lagos State	The Redeemed Churches
6.	Wesley University of Technology, Ondo State	The Methodist Churches
7.	Covenant University, Lagos State	Living Faith Church
8.	Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Osun State	Christ Apostolic Church
9.	VERITAS University (Catholic University of Nigeria), Abuja	The Catholic Churches

Source: Culled by Zaheed and Alofun (2011) from a list of private universities in Nigeria



Health Sector:

The spread of western ideas including medicine and social welfare also owed much to the advent of religion in Nigeria. By 1914, various Christian missionaries had established hospitals. For example, Iyi Enu Hospital near Onitsha, Wesley Guide Hospital, Ilesha, Baptist Hospital, Ogbomosho, Sacred Heart Hospital, Abeokuta etc. Even where orthodox medicine failed, some religions have been playing significant roles to proffer solutions to cure illness (watch Emmanuel TV, Mercy TV etc).

They are also active in the eradication of superstitious beliefs about some diseases such as smallpox, twins etc.

Negative Impact of Religion

However, despite its significant role in promoting good life, religion in Nigeria has in some ways inhibited economic development. For instance, Christianity and Islam are often antagonists, leading to ethnic and religious conflict resulting in loss of lives and destruction of properties.

Another way is the failure of religious leaders to challenge the unjust structures that give rise to bad governance, corruption and social malaise. Again, we have the emergence of fake religious leaders and subsequent commercialisation of religion in Nigeria.

Table 2.0 Some of the Religious Crises in Nigeria in the last decade

Date	Events	Victims
Sept. 2001	Violent clashes between Muslim and Christians in Jos, Plateau State	3,000 people killed
July 2007	Violent clashes between Sunni and Shi' a Muslims over the murder of a Sunni cleric in Sokoto	5 people killed
Sept. 2007	Rioting in the Northern State of Kano	19 people killed
Dec. 2007	Three churches burned in the Northern State of Bauchi	10 people killed
Dec. 2008	Violent clashes over disputed election result which degenerated into religion crisis in Jos, Plateau State	400 people killed
July 2009	Two days battle with radical Islamists in two Northern cities of Yobe and Bauchi	150 people killed

Source: Culled by Zaheed and Alofun (2011) from the records of UNHCR, GlobalSecurity.org and Mail and Guardian online, 2009.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In the foregoing, an attempt has been made to examine the role of contemporary religious practice in the economic development of Nigerians. And it has shown that despite the factors inhibiting the role of religion in the economic development of Nigeria, to a large extent, it has contributed significantly to the economic development directly or indirectly. This is so because



of its effort in the development of manpower or human resources especially through the establishment of educational and health facilities.

In the light of the above discovery, the following recommendations are put forward,

1. Religion should be integrated into the development agenda of Nigeria to overcome the ignorance responsible for the disconnection that some often make between their faith and their civic duties.
2. Religious leaders should figure out ways to honestly embrace peace and promote mutual co-existence by understanding and tolerating one another's religious beliefs.
3. Faith Based Organization (FBOs), and religious leaders should fight against corruption and injustice.

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