

RELIGIOUS ISSUES IN NATIONAL UNITY AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper identified the contributions religion is capable of making towards the Nigerian national unity and development. The various dimensions of religion affecting the stability and progress of the nation were explored. Among these are religion and morality; religion and education; religion as a cohesive factor. Lastly, overemphasis of technological advancement to the fundamental role of religion in national unity and development was lamented.

Key words: Religious, Issues, National Unity, Development

Introduction

Religion means different things to different individuals. The perception an individual has about religion depends on the orientation and background of such an individual. Many people, particularly the religiously committed, think of religion in an entirely different way. Some prefer to see religion as the context of people's communion with the supernatural, and religious experience as something outside of ordinary experience, while others see religion as an expression of an instinctual reaction to cosmic forces. Still others see religion as explicit set of messages from a deity or deities. All these views notwithstanding, there is also sociological dimension to religion. This is because religion is a social phenomenon and is in an interactive relationship with the social units that constitute a society. The point being made here is that religion is concerned with the sacred and supernatural as well as with social realities.

According to Johnstone (1997), religious activities are problem solving like any other social activity. And since all social phenomenon are continually interacting, and every part becomes linked with every other in at least an indirect way, religion as a Social phenomenon is, therefore, capable of ensuring national unity and development., our central concern in this paper, therefore, is to identify and highlight the avenues through which religion can foster national unity and development.

Religion as A Source of Morality

Morality is a central issue in national development. No matter the achievements made in other spheres of the life of the nation, if the moral values are defective, little progress and development will be accomplished. This same view is expressed by Nduka with the hint that any nation built on the foundation of weak morality of bribery and corruption in high

and low places, nepotism etc. is heading for trouble.

Among the features of religion is the moral dimension; although certainly not unique to religious groups. This refers to judgment a religious group or system makes that certain thoughts, certain ideas, are good and worthwhile and to be encouraged and positively reinforced, while other actions, thoughts, ideas are bad, harmful and to be rejected by the faithful. As already pointed out above, religion is not the only source of morality as have been argued by several authors, however, it is religion that intimately invokes the sacred or the supernatural in order to influence the behavior of individuals not only in extraordinary situations but in all the ordinary, routine ones as well.

Religion and Education

Defining education in relation to development, Uche (1986), opines that it is the “process by which persons usually, children or young people develop their intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical powers so as to become more fully participating members of the community to which they belong.”

The word “spiritual” in this definition portends the religious dimension. This presupposes that to have a holistic kind of education, the religious dimension is indispensable. With this notion in view, it is, therefore, not accidental that the history of formal education in Nigeria cannot be complete without the activities and involvement of religious organizations. In fact the missionaries were said to be pioneers of formal education in Nigeria.

This, however, was followed by other social developments that would be discussed somewhere in this paper later, it needs be stressed here that though the kind of education brought by the religious bodies have come under criticisms by different authors, they have to take credit for pioneering the educational enterprise in Nigeria.

Religion as Socializing

Religion serves a reinforcement function in society to the degree that it teaches and emphasizes the same norms and values as the society at large. This may be at very general level of teaching such values as human dignity and freedom, equality before the law, respect for legitimate authority and faithfulness to one's role. Or it may be specific, such as “Thou shall not kill” etc. Religion, therefore, can be seen as socializing agent in the society. Here religion is seen as one socializing the several institutions involved in by citizens. Educational agencies, families, peer groups, mass media and various voluntary associations are all involved in this process but religion, according to Johnstone, is one that touches a majority of people with some regularity.

Furthermore, religion occasionally pushes the societal norms even further. For example, society has norms against murder, but does not usually try to control what you think about your neighbor so long as you do not harm their persons or property or infringe on their rights. A religious system may go further by teaching, for example, “whosoever hates his brother is a murderer”, “bless those who persecute you” etc. As adherents conforms to such religious injunctions, Society would benefit and would be getting citizens with a level of commitment and dedication that they might not have in the absence of religious influence and training.

Religion as A Cohesive Factor

An exceptionally important function performed by religion in the society is that of bringing individuals into meaningful relationships with others in a group. Religious groups bring people of various kinds together, immigrants, social isolates, various minorities, socially maladjusted persons etc. Though, religion is not unique in performing this task for the society, religious groups do it in large part because of their reputation for being concerned about life purposes. They also raise person's sights beyond current mundane problems, and attract relatively large proportions of persons in need of meaningful interpersonal contact. Society needs such groups to do this. People function better when they feel they have some personal worth and have meaningful, satisfying relationships with other people.

It needs be pointed out here also that religion as a source of internal cohesion affects national unity. It has been observed that in religiously homogenous societies, relative peace is enjoyed as opposed to multi-religious societies. There is a lot said today about separation of religion from politics or its corollary, government. But this should not make us forget the fact that for most of human history, politics and religion have gone hand in hand.

In the great ancient civilizations of the world, kinship and priesthood were very closely related. At times, it was not clear whether we were dealing with a king with sacred powers, or a priest with political authority. The priest king was a common phenomenon, examples cut across all continents. Similarly, in our African traditional societies, political life was interwoven with religion. The rulers were agents of the gods of the land and custodians of the wishes of the ancestors. The people on their part accepted the political arrangements governing their lives as religious obligations.

The question of the relationship of religion and politics is, therefore, an inevitable and important one. The reality is that both are tied together by the very nature of things. This fact brought to bear on Nigeria situation necessitates that concrete issues of interaction of religion and products should be handled with fairness and justice in order to guarantee peaceful co-existence in the nation. This position is corroborated by Achebe when he said: "without peace no meaningful social programme can be undertaken; without justice, social order is constantly threatened." The import of this assertion is that national development can only be achieved in an atmosphere free of chaos and religious wars.

Religion As Factor In Adjusting To Personal Crises

Another issue in the function of religion that some feel actually getting close to the fundamental purpose or essence of religion itself is the help it gives to people facing various crisis situations in their lives. The rate and degree at which religion helps people grapple with emotional crisis shows that religion is performing an important service in the society. Religion attempts to relate human problems by placing them in eternal perspective and providing solutions to irrational events. In some occasions, some metaphysical problems that might have defied human solutions have been solved through religion. The society needs functioning members who perform their social roles with skill and attention. Society cannot afford to have great numbers of members incapacitated for prolonged periods of time. The society is being, therefore, greatly aided as religion helps in this task.

Religion As A Source Of Social Welfare

Welfare institution is another major function performed by religion in the society. As already pointed out above, the pioneering activities of the religious organization in Nigeria in the 19th century came with some social developments. Religious groups were in the forefront of the movement for establishing orphanages, schools for the deaf, blind and mentally retarded, Red Cross society, hospitals and similar welfare and service institutions. Today, most of these agencies derive the major portion of their monetary support from non-religious sources through fees, voluntary contributions and solicitations from the general public and governmental subsidy. At first they were religiously motivated and funded by religious bodies as a response as to human needs.

It is also a common practice for religious organizations to aid victims of disasters like drought, epidemics etc.

Conclusion

In view of the antecedents, religion definitely plays a significant role in enhancing national unity and development. The situation whereby technological advancement is emphasized without due recognition of the foundational and strategic place of religion may have a back-firing effect on national development and stability. The contributors however, do not undermine the vantage position of technology in national development either.

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