

Christianity, National Growth and Development: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

The Bible is the Christian book of faith. It gives us not only how the Church began but also the history of how things were created, their growth and development including humanity. It contains abstract issues and non-abstract issues, concrete and non-concrete, divine and human discourses. It is therefore the book of action(s) revealing the birth, growth and development of human and society. It is a “transformer” that brings transformation into places where it exists or found. But is this applicable to Nigeria where there exists Herder-Farmer clashes, the onslaught of bandits and Boko Haram insurgency that represents typical instances of economic and culturally motivated clashes? Prior to the coming of the Bible- Christianity to Nigeria, the level of the state of living was full of chaotic predicaments. But did the Bible made any impact to alleviate the status or condition of the society? Has there been any development since the Bible – Christianity –was introduced? What activities were put in place by the missionaries who brought the Bible to bring a change in the society? In what ways has the Church contributed to the growth and development of the nation? In attempt to explore or examine the Bible and growth and development; the Nigerian experience, this research uses historical method. This method involves the use of primary and secondary sources of information.

Keywords: Bible, Development, Growth, National, National growth

Introduction

Growth is an essential characteristics of living organism and it expected in every facet of life likewise development. For this to take place some elements must have played some roles. In the light of this we want to look

at “The Bible and National Growth and Development: the Nigerian experience.” In order to understand the discussion, there are some key words to be defined such as; National, Growth, Development and Bible.

National: This word has its root in the word nation. A nation according to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is a country considered as a group of people with the same language, culture and history, who live in a particular area under one government. It also implies all the people in a country. Therefore, national has to do with or connected with a particular nation; shared by a whole nation.

Growth: This word literally has to do with the process of growing physically, mentally or emotionally. It involves an increase in the size, amount or degree of something. It could also imply an increase in economy activity. This word (growth) when used medically, it means a lump caused by a disease that forms on or inside a person, an animal or a plant. In a simple word growth refers to something that has grown².

National Growth: This is a growth that goes across a particular area, a whole community, state and nation. It is a growth shared by a whole nation.

Development: This has to do with the gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger etc. It is also a process of producing or creating something new or more advanced (e.g. new product). In the area of new event, development is a new event or stage that is likely to affect what happens in a continuing situation³.

Bible: The Bible is the Christian book of faith. It gives us not only how the Church began but also the history of how things were created, their growth and development including humanity. It contains abstract issues and non-abstract issues, concrete and non-concrete, divine and human discourses. It is therefore the book of action(s) revealing the birth, growth and development of human and society. It is a “transformer” that brings transformation into places where it exists or found. The Bible is in name of a special book among all books in the world. The name was derived through Latin from Greek “*Biblia*” meaning “books”. The Bible is the

only “biblia” which are acknowledge as canonical by the Christian church. A term which is synonymous with “the Bible” is “the writings” or “the scriptures”(GK. Hai graphai, ta grammata). This term was frequently used in the documents in whole or in part.⁴ For example in Matt. 21:42, it is written “have you never read in the scripture?” also see Mk. 12:10, 2 Tim. 15-16, 2 Pet. 3:16 acknowledged by other religious. For example the tawrat (which in Hebrew is tora) and also the injil (which means evangelion in Greek i.e. gospel). This can be found in Sura 3.

The Bible is God's written words. It goes beyond mere historical book or newspaper giving report of events. It is an active word, living word, revelation, divine compass, spiritual mirror and its contents is power. As power it transforms life and society if applied meaningfully. The Bible reveals God's love towards mankind to us right from Genesis to Revelation or how contemporary society come to know or hear about Jesus Christ – the Gift of God.

The Bible is to the Christians what a compass is to a pilot, what atlas or map is to a geographer and what a stethoscope is to a medical doctor. The Bible is the book of books.

According to Bruce, “the Bible's central message is the story of salvation, and throughout both testaments three strands in this unfolding story can be distinguished: the bringer of salvation, the way of salvation and the heirs of salvation”.⁵ He further posits that this could be reworded in terms of the covenant idea by saying that the central message of the Bible is God's covenant men, and that the strands are the mediator of the covenant, the basis of the covenant and the covenant people. God himself is the Saviour of his people; it is he who confirms his covenant mercy with them. The bringer of salvation, the mediator of the covenant, is Jesus Christ, the son of God. The way of salvation, the basis of the covenant is God's grace, calling forth from his people of faith and obedience. The heirs of salvation, the covenant people, are the Israel of God, the church of God.⁶

It is the church that brought the Bible to our beloved great nation –

Nigeria. Prior to the presence of the Bible in Nigeria, our nation was pervaded with “thick” idolatry. Religiously, the people were tenaciously pagans, educationally unlettered and commercially the nefarious businesses of slave trade (a form of human trafficking) were the business of the day. Human beings were exchanged for a bottle of alcohol, cigarette, packets of sugar, gun powder or sold at a little amount or used as collateral, twins were seen as curses from divinities or gods and were not given right to live but killed in some societies. Slaves were buried alive with the corpses of kings with the concepts of guarding and going on errands as well as playing other roles for the kings on their way to the world beyond the physical. Darkness was not just upon the water but upon our land and nation during this period of no light. According to Awolalu and Dopamu, “apart from the clothes used to dress the corpse, some materials like household utensils, and money are buried with him. In the old days, slaves, men and women were made to accompany a deceased king or chief into the other world. It is believed that the deceased will make use of those things and persons buried with him when he gets to the spirit world”⁷.

At a period of time, there came a divine intervention because God loves Africa and Nigeria in particular. He took the step of abolishing the nefarious inhuman business of slave trade. There was an attack and agitation for its abolition by the Christians in Europe. As this was on going, God opened the way for the gospel to reach West Africa and Nigeria in particular when the ex-slaves started returning via Sierra Leone. The first batch of Christian missionary that came to Nigeria in the 19th century episode land at Badagry in September, 1842 led by Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman (of Wesleyan now Methodist). This group was later followed by the Church missionary society (CMS) now Anglican Communion led by Rev. Henry Townsend⁸ in 17th December 1842. The missionaries constantly preached and condemned the slave trade and the dealers. In 1843, the campaign against slave trade went beyond open air preaching to classrooms by these missionaries when they started the elementary school called “Nursery of the infant church”⁹.

National Growth and Development

Growth as earlier stated involves a process that is defined in line with the

increase that occurs over time in the life of an object and observable in amount, size, strength or its extremities. Inculcating this into national development implies

an essential principle that encompasses all facts of a nation's life. Thus, a nation's economy, culture, politics and spirituality will certainly determine its degree of growth. Moreover, the individual growth of its people is paramount because it is the individual who constitutes a country. General growth is thus equal to the advancement of the nation in its entirety.¹⁰

In human society, development is a mere-side process. According to Rodney, development at the individual's level “implies increase skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being. Some of these are virtually moral categories and are difficult to evaluate depending as they do on the age, in which one lives, one's class origins, and one's personal code of what is right and what is wrong. However, what is indispensable is that the achievement of any of these aspects of personal development is very much tied in with the state of the society.”¹¹ Asadu notes that development can be structural and functional as well as physical such as high-rise buildings, factories, institutional building etc. Development can also be mental especially when priority is given to education over structural development.¹² Development must be progressive starting first from man and then the infrastructure.

The misconception of national development by Nigeria has led the nation into socio-economic cum political crisis. It is worried some as Nigeria is been called the giant of Africa, blessed with numerous natural and human resources as well as having records of economic growth but its benefit does not reflect on the common man on the street. As posits by Achimugu, a nation's prosperity is measured on its citizens who are educated as well as religious and work for the growth of their country, but not on the strength of its army, the wealth of its income, nor on the beautiful look of its environment.¹³ Asadu opines that a nation that has no moral agency that can inculcate in its citizens' values cannot attain this overall development. There is no gainsaying that the fact that

Christianity has the capacity to instil in its converts strong moral values, regard for human life and integrity through religious education. Many institutions of learning and hospitals were built by Christian missionaries. Christian leaders are also active in fostering the rule of law, equity and the overall well-being of the people, which is to help a country achieve national development¹⁴

The Beginning of National Growth and Development in Nigeria started with the abolition of nefarious trade of slave trade. The missionaries apart from preaching and condemning the slave trade juxtaposed it with culture of love and brotherliness for one another. They preached human equality before God, the colour of skin notwithstanding. A treaty was eventually signed between the chiefs and king with the British government in March 18th, 1852¹⁵.

The dignity of human and his value were acknowledged and people started seeing his neighbours as their fellows. The message of the Bible was introduced to people with its transformative power, love and care by the missionaries. The areas, through which Bible influences National Growth and Development especially in Nigeria, are numerous.

Education

In the arena of education, Bible played a vital role. As earlier stated, prior to the introduction of Bible to our fore fathers, our people were unlettered. It was the Christian Missionaries who brought the gospel message and light to our people. In order to help them understand and read the Bible, the missionaries established schools so as to tutor the people. Although, as noted by Nnadi, “the first attempt to establish school in Nigeria was in 1515 by the Catholic missionaries in Oba's palace”¹⁶ But according to Fatokun, it could not endure as several factors affected the first episode of Nigeria's contact with Christianity¹⁷. The first school to be established in Nigeria was called the infant of the Nursery church. It was established in Badagry in Lagos State by Mr. and Mrs. De Graft of Methodist missionaries in 1845. It was the first primary school in Nigeria. In 1846 the CMS (now Anglican) also follow suit by building schools in two places in Abeokuta namely Igbein and Ake. In 1854, the first school in Eastern Nigeria was opened at Creek Town by a Christian

missionary called Rev'd Hope Waddell of the Scotland Mission. Similarly, in December 1858, Samuel Ajayi Crowther opened the first school in Onitsha for girls between six and ten years old. It is germane to note as observes by Fatokun that “the oldest Teacher Training Institutions in the country today were opened by the Missions e.g. St. Andrew's College of Education, Oyo (Anglican), Baptist College, Iwo, etc. These missions did not only set up schools, but some went as far as setting up management boards to help regulate the curriculum, teachers' salaries conduct, etc. Products of these mission established schools consequently emerged as the first generation of Nigerian indigenous teachers¹⁸. Fafunwa acknowledges that when intensive missionary activities began from 1842 in Nigeria, the government paid little or no attention to the educational needs of the people. That sector was entirely left to the missions. Everything was sponsored by the missions.¹⁹ And as succinctly put by Asadu,

they laid the foundation of primary and secondary education in Nigeria and painstakingly bore the financial burden of it overall development, which include among other things the remuneration of teachers, provision of books and other writing materials, building of physical structures etcetera. They did this for years without assistance from the colonial administrators.²⁰

For instance the Church Mission Society (CMS) founded four schools in Lagos including Grammar school which was opened in 1859 and by 1873 there were increase in number of schools by this mission. Onyeidu asserts that “there were twenty one day schools in the country connected with CMS alone. In these schools were twenty nine teachers engaged in educating 688 boys and 554 girls. Over 800 of these children are being educated in Lagos alone, and the entire expenses of this work have so far been thrown on CMS”²²

Schools were also established in other parts of the nation by other missionaries. For example, in Igboland, Rev. J. C. Taylor opened a school at Onitsha in 1857. The children brought to him by their respective parents and guardians were 20 in number. The Roman

Catholic Mission (RCM) who had established its first school in Lagos also extended the gesture to Onitsha in 1885 through Fr. Shanahan who believed that schools could serve as best medium of evangelism. He built schools near in every village under his jurisdiction. The missionaries in attempt to make people understand the message of the Bible made enormous financial sacrifices not only in converting the people but also in educating them and developing them. Today there are thousands of primary schools, secondary schools, colleges of education, polytechnics, seminaries and universities in the country as a result of what the missionaries' began. Thus, providing employment for people in the country. In deed credit should be given to God for sending us the Bible with education.

Industrial education or human capital development is another great contribution that the Bible or Christianity has added to national development in Nigeria. The missionaries provide industrial education through opening of vocational training centres in various places for both men and women respectively. Parts of the vocation women were taught include crafts and domestic duties such as ironing clothes, binding, sewing, weaving, basket making, etc. while men were taught brick-making, brick-laying, carpentry, cabinet making, coopering, tailoring, boat repairing etc. as observes by Nwankiti, “the first industrial school was established in Abeokuta in 1851 by CMS and the first set of students were sent abroad to be trained in brick and tile making, industrial management, horticulture and navigation by the CMS.”²² Other places where CMS and the Church of Scotland and other missions engaged vocations such as agriculture, ginnery, brick-laying, carpentry, etc include Lokoja, Calabar and Onitsha. The Roman Catholic Mission also established the Top Industrial School for delinquent children in Topo near Badagry in 1876. Also CMS opened Industrial Institution in Brass. Boys of an average age of 16 years were admitted into this school and trained in carpentry for a year. Fatokun notes that “this mission did not only provide the trainee free boarding with allowances went as far as donating tools worth of four pounds to each apprentice at the end of their training to enable them to start on their own. Through this way, some Nigerians were made self-employed in vocations of western civilization.”²³ As knowledge started to increase so enlightenment was on

going, human capacity were being built and developed.

Technology

Apart from helping the people to become literate through education, the missionaries also helped in developing the indigenous languages. According to Ayandele “the main languages of Nigeria were preserved by the efforts of the missionaries as a lasting legacy to Ibo, Yoruba, Efik, Nupe and Hausa. In fact, the reduction of these languages into writing resulted in a linguistic homogeneity that never existed in these tribes.”²⁴

The enthusiasm of the Missions to translate the Bible into languages of the people made many of them to study the local languages of the Nigerian people. Through this, the development of the languages' grammar and syntax as well as documentation of the oral traditions began. For example, Taylor who was one of the foundation members of the CMS Church at Onitsha translated the New Testament Bible into Igbo language in 1866 for publication in England. The Presbyterian Mission in Calabar produced the Efik alphabets and languages. Rev'd Bowen, the American missionary of the Southern American Baptist Convention was so proficient in Yoruba language that he produced “Grammar and Dictionary of the Yoruba Language” as well as other books in Yoruba. The Nupe Dictionary was produced by Rev'd Banifield. He also translated the Bible into Nupe language in 1927 but published in 1947. Rev'ds Townsend and Gollmer also studied Yoruba and they made great contribution to its development. Samuel Ajayi Crowther wrote grammar of Yoruba language. He also translated part of the Bible for their worship.²⁵

Technologically, Christian Missions laid the foundation for the establishment of modern communication network especially Nigeria in particular, in area of printing as well as in publishing. Nigeria has its first record of printing press in 1846. The printing press was opened by Rev'd Hope Waddell of Scotland Mission in Eastern Nigeria. While in 1852 Rev'd Henry Townsend of the CMS opened another one in Abeokuta which was first of its kind in Western Nigeria. In 1859, this press produced its first indigenous Newspaper called *Iwe Irohin*. This has brought a great development to the nation.

Economy

Christianity the Bible did not give mere education; it does influence the people's economy. Peoples' jobs were reshaped and coloured. Although, the nefarious business of slave trade was very lucrative in West Africa in general and Nigeria in particular due to this the traders or slavers did not want to stop it nor initially welcome its abolishment. However, when it was finally abolished many thought of no hope but the missionaries and the British government encouraged the people to get involve in legitimate trade such as palm oil and other farm produce. This later became very lucrative trade. "The farm produce provided the raw materials required for the industrial growth of Europe."²⁶ This boosted the economy of our nation. For example in 1935 in Badagry, like other parts of the world, experienced a definite trade revival to the extent that the average price of oil rose from £6:3:10 in 1934 to £10:16 in the following year and that of palm kernels were £3:13:10 and £7:4:0 respectively. This change of fortunes without any doubt has reflection in the volume of produce exported from Badagry,"²⁷ Nigeria.

The Missionaries trained people in numerous kinds of trade. Ajayi notes that

the Roman Catholics... were great believers in industrial education. They came to Lagos in 1867 and established the usual system of primary schools. Then in 1875 they started the agricultural schools of St Joseph at Topo... Children were to be taught to read and write and even more practice noble habits of industry in a Christian atmosphere. In addition, the extensive farm was to provide food for the mission, a sanatorium for the sick, and a sanctuary for the oppressed. It was to be a model Christian village from which local missionaries would arise and go out to preach the same doctrine of Christian work.²⁸

People were taught different kinds of professions and partisan work in the schools. According to Todd,

Topo created an atmosphere of happiness and industry which had its effect throughout the neighborhood...

the influence was of the same kind as that exercised by the Benedictine monasteries of the middle ages throughout Europe which often did not have any direct religious effects, but suffused the whole society with a tangible visible idea of industry and prayer, so that gradually without any striking conversions the society was changed.²⁹

The missionaries took agriculture seriously and educated the people because fundamentally for the evangelism to be holistic, not only the soul must be fed but the body as well must be catered for. Mgbemene observes that “at a wider and higher level, the Church, knowing agriculture to be a way of life of a high percentage of the population of the Eastern area early enough, showed concerned for it by including agricultural science in the primary schools, the subject was taught by teachers trained for the purpose.”³⁰

Today, no one can deny the reality that Bible has indeed improves our national economy, creates employment and improves the living condition of many Nigerians. We have many pastors, teachers, lecturers, bankers, lawyers, workers in every sector etc. These were so because of the education (school) that Bible brought to our nation.

Health

The missionaries did not only established schools they also established dispensaries in the schools and in the mission houses. They also established hospitals with qualified personnel to take care of the health of the people. For examples, CMS opened hospital in 1896 at Dobinion but moved it later to Iyi-Enu Hospital their permanent site in 1907. Mary Slessor Hospital opened at Itu by Church of Scotland Mission in 1905, Wusasa Hospital opened by CMS in 1928, Ile Abiye Hospital in 1951 at Ado Ekiti, Mater Misericordiae Hospital in Afiikpo in 1935, Mt Carmel Hospital at Emenkukwu opened by Catholic Mission in 1935, etc. Today, there are many dispensaries, hospitals and health services both private and public in our country.

Our environments are beautified with healthy and conducive houses to

improve our health. Some of the houses are even storey buildings. This was introduced to our country by the missionaries who brought the Bible to us. The first storey building in Nigeria and in West Africa was built in Badagry with the first well in 1842. It was inside this first storey building that Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther stayed to translate the English Bible into Yoruba language so that the word of God could be read in vernacular language. The Bible introduces us and opens our eyes religiously to know the true God. It also endows us with spiritual gifts given by God through the Holy Spirit. The use of the gifts by the gifted individuals had led to national growth and development in many aspects of our national life such as politics, education, economy, health, religion etc.

Although Christianity and the Bible has spread rapidly in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, but the continent, as well as, Nigeria (our nation) in particular is still beset by social, economic and political predicament. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to acknowledge the restorative and transformative potential of Bible and the true worship it presents. As observes by Anastasia Boniface Malle “as a people who gather for worship we live out the reality of God, revealed in Jesus Christ. In other words, by God's grace our worship will bring healing, address suffering and bring reconciliation”³¹ if we faithfully apply the Bible towards nation development.

Recommendation

The biblical teaching on love, peace, giving, perseverance, kindness, and community service should intensified as demonstrated by the founder of Christian faith-Jesus Christ. The missionaries' activities done by those who brought the Bible to Nigeria should be emulated. The focus of BSN should be Bible in every home and mother tongue.

Conclusion

Since it is evidently clear that the Bible had played a vital role in our national growth and development and it is still playing such role because development is an ongoing process, it therefore calls for better support from all stakeholders.

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