

RELIGION, LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the socio-cultural contexts of religion, leadership and sustainable development in the light of contemporary Nigeria experience. Religion is one of the institutions in the humanities that make a consistent, committed and sustainable development in Nigeria. Political office holders often drew on religious ideas, practices and symbols as tools of negotiation with the electorate during political campaigns. Candidates are often selected based on their religious rhetoric and affiliations. Nigeria as a nation has failed to achieve its sustainable development due to misplaced priorities, corruption, and ignorance, lack of close monitoring of infrastructural assets, poor funding and implementation of projects by the leadership elites. The paper adopts descriptive and historical approaches in its analysis. The paper reveals that political leaders deploy religion as a tool in gaining political positions in Nigeria. The paper concludes that in order to help salvage Nigerian situation from decay and persistent lack of sustainable development, social dynamics of religion should be articulate under filial devotion, obligation and social reorientation.

Keywords: Religion, Leadership, Sustainable Development, Nigeria.

Introduction

Successive leaders in Nigeria over the years have been craving for sustainable development. They have introduced various programs like Mass Mobilization for Social and Economical Recovery (M.AMSER), War against Indiscipline (WAI), Independent Corrupt Practice Commission (ICPC), Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC), National Orientation Agency (NOA), etc and has failed to cure Nigeria malady. The problem to sustainable development in Nigeria could be related to or contributed to corruption that has eaten deep into the fabric nation (Oko, 2020; Uche, 2008; Ukwuaba, 2002; Akpan and Udoette, 2023). Corruption adds and abrate bad leadership that is characterized by greed, avarice, moral decadence and insecurity (Uche 2011; 350). What Nigeria suffers most in her journey to nationhood and greatness is nothing but recycling of old men, parochial and medio-critic idea, policy and lack of will (Amanambu, 2013:181). This also affirms Akpan's (2023) position that Nigeria has been unfortunate with leadership" (30). Bad leadership has constituted the reasons why intelligent people are denied employment opportunities and admission into tertiary institution in Nigeria mostly because they do not have anybody in the corridors of power who should advocate for them. Painfully in that workers are not adequately or

regularly paid even when they are reluctantly paid, the galloping rate of inflation in the country makes this payment a mockery as this cannot fetch them anything.

It has been observed that the crave for material things has expression in shameless dishonesty, selfishness and unbridled woofing of public treasury by some of our politicians. This has made Nigerians economy to milked dry and this has made Nigeria state in all intends and purpose is a society in trouble. Corruption is deeply institutionalized in the structure of Nigeria. Religion is one of such institutions in the humanities that could make a consistent committed and sustainable development in Nigeria. It teak with the super sensible world through worship, heaven could come down to humans assistance. Religion practice such as covenant, oat taking, ostracision, moral bond, filial deity, obligation and devotion add colour to functional perspective of sustainable development in Nigeria. The attitude that nothing works in Nigeria does not allow a functional flow of ideas that may promote sustainable development in Nigeria. Okpiliya and Akpan (2020) put the blame on the feet of the leadership. In order to help salvage Nigeria from collapse and decay and persist lackof sustainable development, social dynamics of religion are articulated under filial devotion, obligation and social reorientation.

A Scholarly Consideration of the Term: Religion

The term “religion” has no single definition that is universally accepted as Chineke (2016) observed. Fraser and Moore (2019) argued that this lack of consensus among scholars on the definition of religion is due to the fact that religion functions in dynamic ways. Accordingly, two strands of definitions have emerged namely: substantive and functional definitions. Generally, those who hold to the substantive definition of religion conceive religion simply as a system of beliefs, symbols and practices that tend to provide understanding of the world in which we live. For example some scholars conceived religion simply as a transcending system of various beliefs and practices which help a society, group or individuals to understand the meaning and purpose of life (Sibani, 2020; Barkan, 2012; and Okujaku, 2006). Moreover, Iyer (2016) observed that the substantive definitions of religion attempt to investigate it as a system of beliefs or as a philosophy with a view to understanding the world. This conception is also common with Durkheim (1912) who conceived religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices pertaining to sacred things, where “sacred things” may refer to things set aside and considered forbidden such as: beliefs and moral practices which unite into one single moral community. Similarly, Radhakrishnan (1928:25) has noted that “religion is an expression of the spiritual experience of a race, a record of its social evolution, and an integral element of the society in which it is found”. Hence, religion, from its substantive conception, is connected to beliefs and practices that are accepted by religious individuals and religious communities, as a guide to human life and purpose on the one hand and society on the other hand.

Unlike the substantive functions of religion, the functional definitions of religion focus attention on what religion does for people in terms of its role in their lives or supporting them either socially or psychologically (Iyer, 2016:398). In the light of this, Glock and Stark (1965:4) for example have argued that religion has to do with an institutionalized system of symbols, beliefs, values, and practices which relate to questions of ultimate meaning. Also, Durkheim, cited by Barkan (2012:5) outlined some roles of religion as follows:

That religion gives meaning and purpose to life;
reinforces unity and stability; is an agent of social

control and thus strengthens social order; provides greater psychological and physical well-being; and motivate people to work for positive social change.

However, some scholars are of the opinion that religion should be seen as playing a “double-edged sword” role in the sense that it could inspire violence on the one hand and on the other hand promote social harmony (Ekanem&Ekefre, 2013; Chineke 2016). This view of religion is also held by Yihua (2013) who bluntly described it as both a “spoiler” and a “builder”. The implication of the above definitions is that religion plays a major role in the lives of individuals and society. Given the above therefore, Koko (2020) has conceived religion as an integral human experience which plays both substantive and functional roles not only in the lives of the individuals but also in all that happen in human society. This includes the role of providing citizens with the motivation to promote peaceful co-existence. But beyond that, religion can also inspire leadership as well as promote sustainable development in Nigeria, which is the main concern of this paper. In the next section, we shall conceptually examine the second major variable of this topic.

A Conceptual Analysis of the Term: Leadership

The term “leadership” according to Ukpe and Tsendzuul (2018:93) can be understood in the sense of reserving the right and privilege to show direction, and influencing others into doing things”. According to Maxwell (2008), leadership is a trust, not a right. Scruton (1982:72) conceives of leadership as “the capacity to inspire confidence in the rightness of one’s purpose, courage in collective executive and obedience in the threat of resistance”. He contends that leadership is one of the characteristics that make politics a very difficult endeavour. Oko (2017) sees Leadership as a process where one person exerts social influence over the members of a group. A leader is a person with power over others, and who exercise the power for the purpose of influencing the behavior of other members of the group. This implies that for a person to be a leader, the power to influence the behavior of persons within his group or organization is very essential. In the words of Tannelbaun (1973) leadership is a process of interpersonal relationship through which a manager called a leader attempts to influence the behavior of others towards the attainment of pre-determined goals. This definition emphasized not only the ability of a leader to influence people’s behavior but also in ensuring that organizational behavior is directed toward the achievement of the goals of the Nation. A leader should take responsibility for his action as well as those of his subjects not minding the situation (Oko, 2023). Linerman (1984) describes the leader as an individual whose rationalization, judgments and feeling are accepted (responded to) by the group as basic of belief and action.

Conceptual Meaning of the Term: Sustainable Development

Semantically, the term “sustainable development” is a coinage from two English words with each having its distinct meaning as well. Thus, an appropriate starting point in understanding the concept of sustainable development is to first and foremost understand its independent components. According to the New International Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language (2010:1264), the word “sustainable” is the adjectival form of sustain which means able to maintain at a certain rate or level, or simply able to continue, uphold or maintain over a period of time. This means that sustainable is synonymous with terms like acceptable, trustworthy, reliable, dependable, valid, legitimate, warranted, well-founded, justified, etc.

Sustainability is the process of meeting the need of the present generation without comprising the need of the future generation (Oko, 2018:33). This perspective is important when compared to Udoette (2014:37) definition of a generation as “a group of people born roughly within a twenty year time period during the same era in history”. On the other hand, the term “development” is defined by the same dictionary simply as the progress from a non-viable state to a viable status (2010:350). Against this backdrop, Sakalasoorya (2020) identified two types of development that exist namely: static development which relates to a state or condition, and dynamic development which has to do with a process or course of change. /Citing Todaro who conceived development as a multi-dimensional process involving reorganization and reorientation of entire economic and social system, Sakalasoorya proceeded to define development as the process of improving the quality of all human lives with regards to three important areas:

- i. Raising peoples’ living levels, i.e. incomes and consumption, levels of food, medical services, education through relevant growth processes;
- ii. Creating conditions conducive to the growth of peoples’ self-esteem through establishment of social, political and economic systems and institutions which promote human dignity and respect; and
- iii. Increasing peoples’ freedom to choose by enlarging the range of their choice variables, e.g. varieties of goods and services (Sakalasoorya, 2020).

The implication of this definition is that development is all encompassing and affects positively the entire life of a nation- social, economic, cultural, technological and political. Consequently, development may be considered sustainable when it is likely to achieve lasting satisfaction of human needs and improvement of the quality of life which includes good health, appropriate technologies, food, employment, self-reliance, clean water, shelter and electricity for all (Sakalasoorya, 2020).

According to Emas (2020) and Woldeyes (2020), the first widely accepted definition of this term was provided by the report of the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations General Assembly, which expanded its scope to include issues of economic development and environmental stability. They explained that the report defined sustainable development as the kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In particular, Emas noted that this concept of sustainable development seeks to maintain economic advancement and progress while protecting the long-term values of the environment. She reiterated that the key principles as it were, underlying all others with regards to sustainable development, is that of integration of environmental, social and economic concerns into all aspects of decision making (Emas, 2020). But as Woldeyes observed, this can only be achieved through integration and acknowledgement of economic, environmental and social concerns throughout the decision making process (Woldeyes, 2020:39). This is necessary because the quest for national economic growth has often generated problems of environmental degradation and social disparities. Therefore, as a remedy, sustainable development subscribes for a more balanced approach to growth that progresses development across three underlying pillars: social inclusion, environmental sustainability and economic prosperity (The Monash Sustainable Development Institute, 2023).

It becomes expedient to add that the deployment of literature and arts is another form of projecting values to the society and ensuring sustainable development. Following this, Usoro and Udoette (2014: 61) aver that “creative imaginations which articulate dimensions of social experiences ... tickle the imagination, feed the emotion and have the capacity to teach and to entertain”. Scholars are united in their postulations of the validity of arts in social development. However, (Usoro and Udoette, 2020:139) further added that literature is meditative in that it “gives insight into the frail socio-political milieu” that disenchanting people contend with. To use the artistic medium to participate in social development, writers have devised diverse ways and means of unleashing their creative energy in the pursuits of explicating the ways to go of society.

Generally, this paper adopts the definition of sustainable development as provided above but adds that aside maintaining a balance between economic growth and the environment, sustainable development should specifically take into cognizance issues of proper management of human resource, eradication of extreme poverty and reduction of high rate of youth unemployment in a nation. With this understanding in mind, the next section will identify and discuss the nexus between religion, leadership and sustainable development in Nigeria.

The Challenges of Sustainable Development

There are many challenges facing sustainable development in Nigeria which range from misplaced priority, corruption, ignorance, lack of close monitoring poor funding to the implementation of projects. The inability of Nigerian leaders to set priorities right as a nation poses a serious challenge that explains retrogression in Nigeria. Nigeria is one of the major producers oil in the world but inability in having functional refineries has cast serious doubt in the mind of the observers as to federal government sincerity in tackling fuel crises in Nigeria continues as a liter of fuel cost sixty eight naira. Uche (2011: 345) maintains that another area of misplaced priority is on the area of becoming a member of organization of the Islamic conference in 1986. Though Nigeria is a secular state, the mode of admission into the international groups, the secrecy and fear of effort or plans to Islamized Nigeria do not favour Nigeria membership of the conference.

Corruption has been another serious problem that has eaten deep into the psyche of Nigeria sectors. It has remained a cankerworm and has affected every sphere of life in Nigeria. The former president of Nigeria chief Olusegun Obasanjo describes corruption as the greatest single bane of society today that would be tackled head-on at all levels. For Uche (2008), it is exemplified in bribery, kickback, smuggling, embezzlement, arson, extortion reposition and oppression. Corruption milks the Nigerian economy, dries, frustrates the developmental goals and ruin debase and lower quantity of service, commitment and filial devotion. It also tend to shift government spending away from social areas like education, health and social services toward the construction of unneeded projects such as high military investment in infrastructure. Another challenge sustainable development in Nigeria is ignorance. Mairi (1998) sees ignorance as lack of knowledge or awareness. Having little or no knowledge is no excuse for not joining hands in restoring the dignity of man. Illiteracy is another challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria. Literacy as unable to read and write, uneducated or ignorant especially in a particular field or subject (Mairi, 1998:672). This state of a person explains the challenge it poses in the desired collaborative efforts in using religion to achieve

functional sustainable development in Nigeria. Lack of monitoring remains another challenge to sustainable development in Nigeria. Corruption seems to becloud their sense of accountability, fairness and probity. Many projects have been abandoned by site engineers after collecting mobilization fees with a trip of sand dropped at the construction site. Some of this project have been abandoned after billion of Dollars here been suck into suck into them and a good example in Ajokuta steel rolling mill in Nigeria.

The Nexus between Religion, Leadership and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

The nexus between religion and leadership on the one hand and leadership and sustainable development on the other hand have been captured by scholars who sternly believe that one influences the other significantly. For example in writing about religion and political leadership in Nigeria, Oguntola-Laguda (2015:219) noted that political office holders often drew on religious ideas, practices and symbols as a tool of negotiation with the electorate during political campaigns. As a result, candidates were often selected based on their religious rhetoric and affiliations. The implication of this position is that political leaders usually deploy religion as a tool in gaining political positions in Nigeria. Thus, religion as a phenomenon determines to a great extent who becomes a leader or not in Nigeria.

Similarly, a study carried out by Hage (2013) identified a significant relationship between religion and leadership, particularly the five leadership dimensions and transformational leadership style namely: enable, encourage, model, challenge, and inspire. The work argued that religion provides enablement for leaders by equipping them with necessary ethical and moral standards to carry out their responsibilities. In addition, (Nwiyi and Udoette, 2022:11) argue that “the religious orientation of individuals is linked with prevailing cultural configuration which predetermines attitudes and roles at a given time. This cultural configuration dictates, to a large extent, what is conventional, moral, disdainful or otherwise among members of the community”. The above position underscores the fundamental impact of religion in character development. Moreover, religion can provide encouragement for leaders as well as model the attitude and character of leaders. It can also serve as a tool under which the activities of a leader can be tested and challenged whether they conform to societal norms or not. Finally, religion can also serve as a source of inspiration for leaders by providing for them the norms necessary in building a good society. Against this backdrop, it could be argued that religion is closely linked to issues of leadership.

Adding to the above, scholars like Gaitho (2019:8) noted that leadership styles are key areas where religion manifests itself with several authors indicating that there is a significant relationship between religion and the dimensions of leadership styles. Some of these scholars believe that religion influence leadership styles and the leadership roles in organizations and some aspects of leadership including the needs to meet strategic mission and vision of an organization, information gathering, and decision making largely attract influence from religion. Therefore, to a large extent, religion plays a key role in the leadership style of any organization and this may be direct or indirect as the case may be. Gaitho (2019:9) further noted that the influence of religion on leadership roles takes many shapes. For example, religion serves as the backbone of ethics, values, and morals, thus becoming the corner stone of societies. In this case, the essence of religion is to guide spiritual and personal beliefs and since personal beliefs are largely shaped by religion, leaders tend to express their beliefs through leadership.

Hinging on the Nigerian situation in particular, Ukpe and Tsendzuul (2018:97) observed that leadership is a core issue in Nigerian development as in many other African countries. Consequently, they believed that Christian religious leadership has the responsibility to rise to the challenge of addressing the scarcity of credible leadership in the country in order to engender sustainable transformational development. For Oko (2022: 206), Christianity through her leaders has always been the voice to the voiceless. She has always been in the forefront to speak and fight for the poor. This is crucial because as they rightly observed, most of the leaders in Nigeria identify with the church and other religious entities. The task of reducing injustice in the country is in the hand of religious authorities, to ensure that their members imbibe the true virtue of justice, fear of God, love and tolerance, which will enable them to overcome the primitive tendencies of narrow mindedness and unhealthy rivalry (Oko, 2020:194).

Religion is also important to leadership because as Gaitho (2019:8) argued, some leaders have used religion to push positive transformational agendas in organizations, local communities, nations and globally while others have used religion to destroy institutions, societies, nations and harming the world at large. Literary writers are like religious advocates and prophets as they equally use their art “to interrogate ... damaging images”; question patriarchal structures and act “as agents of social change and carriers of intellectual and organizational alternatives to the status quo” (Udoette, 2014:78; Udoette and Nwiyi, 2015:197). Most importantly, the link between religion, leadership and sustainable development is that religion can influence leadership either positively or negatively while leadership in turn directly influences the development of any society. However, the kind of development a society witnesses at any given time may depend largely on the type of leaders in that society. Good leadership will definitely promote sustainable development while bad leadership will lead to deterioration or underdevelopment of the society as the case in Nigeria has shown.

Conclusion

Religion is a social component part of Nigeria. It deals with the super mundane, super empirical and as a social force; it offers meaning to life, mechanism for adjustment, offers social control, social services and promote social integration. When religion is fully incorporated it builds an enabling and conducive environment for sustainable development in Nigeria. Religion promotes compassionate love for humanity and it is in this premise that sustainable development could achievement in Nigeria. Sustainable development is possible in Nigeria if the right steps would be taken to ensure that the problems bedeviling Nigerian society today are tackled headlong. We need good governance at all levels from this point. This kind of leadership that is sincere, dedicated and faithful servant oriented since only governance emanating from the best crop of people with the right minds can salvage.

Seeking common human values, such as love, understanding, fraternity, forgiveness and compassion, between world religions can serve as a basis for a human, cultural and religious dialogue that can eventually lead to peace. There is need for collaboration between religion, states and individuals in a society and this is essential to be able to achieve peace through work that reaches all social spheres so that the different issues of importance can be covered and take charge of the different social and human aspects at stake within a society, to achieve an interreligious and intercultural nonviolent dialogue

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