

**RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS INITIATIVES THROUGH THE  
DECADES OF NIGERIAN INDEPENDENCE TOWARDS NATION BUILDING**

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**Abstract**

The dream of Nigeria since independence in 1960 is to turn itself into a viable and cohesive nation. Thrust of paper is to investigate the role of religion and religious organisations toward nation building in Nigeria. The theory of structural functionalism which has its roots from the works of the founding fathers of sociology such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons is adopted as a theoretical nucleus for the discourse. The paper investigated the factors militating against nation building in Nigeria and examined the place of religion and religious organisations in nation building. Thereafter, it concluded that Religion, just as its dysfunctional aspect has functional aspect as evidenced in morality, justice, truth, economic development, educational and social services which it can render through its various institutions. These functional aspects can be incorporated to the benefit of the nation's building, when religious dialogue, tolerance is given its due place. The paper also gave some recommendations among which include the need to carry religions along in government policies to always inculcate moral principles, justice, truth, equity and honesty which is a reagent to personality change thereby, reduce corruption.

**Introduction**

Nigeria is home to a variety of religions which tend to vary regionally. Several religions in Nigeria exist, helping to accentuate regional and ethnic distinctions. Nigeria is a religiously pluralistic state or multi religious society. The three basically practiced religions in Nigeria are Christianity, Islam and African Religion. The country could be seen as having a dominant Muslim North, a mixed Christian and Muslim South West and Middle Belt, a non-Muslim, primarily Christian South-East and South-South with each as a minority faith in the other region (Abogunrin, 1999:11). Christianity and Islam constitute the major religious climate in Nigeria, because they enjoy large followership. The adherents of these major religions enjoy a great amount of national religious freedom, both in practices and propagation of their religious beliefs. It is worthy to state that Nigeria constitution has so far attempted to forge unity through the diversity of religions. Thus, section 10 of the 1999 constitution states that: "The government of the federation or of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion". Section 38 of the same constitution declares that: "Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion including freedom to change his Religion to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance". This is to submit that

Nigeria is a multi-religious society; a state where one religion is not to be super imposed on the other. It should be noted that the three major religions in Nigeria have many common values to make them serve the purpose of the nation building. Adeyomo (2002) reechoing the views of Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber on the role of religion in social institutions such as economics and politics accentuates that religion is an interactive force in a society because it has the power to shape collective beliefs. It provides cohesion in social order by promoting a sense of belonging in collective enterprises. The major religions in Nigeria all believe in God as the source of being – creator, the preserver, the source of society and human community, and so of the nation. In the words of Balogun (1986:61), each of these religions have norms which are similar and which if sincerely observed, can nurture and strengthen the nation. Some of these norms include concept of reward and punishment, accountability before the source of being, including the idea of the hereafter and judgment which are meant to discourage deviants in the society and encourage good performances among fellows. To say the least, religion is a real factor in human societies that it cannot be ignored if they have to be purposeful coexistence and holistic development. Thus, according to Igboin (2011):

Religion and development have continued to be affected either positively or negatively. But it is pertinent to state categorically that religion in itself does not provoke negative consequences to development. It is some of the operators that skew it to meet their narcissistic end...when viewed from the positive side; it is incontrovertible that religion is a sine qua non for development. The challenge therefore is that the positive contributions of religion can be got only from those who are colonised by its precepts and values”. He further stated that, “religion is about the human mind in relation to himself, others and God, while development is about the human person” (Igboin, 2011:223).

Ogundowole (2004:6) in his paper, *Philosophy and Nation Building or Societal Development*, also points out that: “A true standard of measuring development must take the real material and spiritual needs of the people and the actual material and spiritual possession attainable to the people. This implies that for development to be possible, the spiritual needs of the people must be met. It is a fact that traditional religious rulers have contributed immensely to the development of Nigeria as a nation especially in the pre-colonial era and even in our modern society. This is to say that religion has also contributed meaningfully to the development of moral values in Nigeria.

The dream of Nigeria since independence in 1960 is to turn itself into a viable and cohesive nation. This paper addresses the role of religion and religious organisations toward nation building in Nigeria.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Structural functionalism**

The theory of structural functionalism has its roots from the works of the founding fathers of sociology such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, and Talcott Parsons. Functionalism takes society as its unit of analysis. The theory likens society to a living organism that has different but interrelated systems which functions to maintain the whole. The foregoing is corroborated by Macionis (2010; cited by Sibiri, 2014:521) who avers that functionalist perspective sees society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity, social order and stability. The society is seen through a macro-level orientation, which is a broad focus on the social structures that shape society as a whole, and believes that society has evolved like organisms (DeRosso Deb, 2003; cited by Sibiri, 2014:521). According to Herbert Spencer (cited by Kwaghmande, 2017:39) societies like living organism exhibit varying degrees of structural differentiation or complexity which can

be understood in terms of the number of units or elements in the system. There exists greater interdependence of parts of the same system when it is internally differentiated than when it consists of identical elements. According to Spencer, greater differentiation of internal structures leads to greater integration of the whole system. Consequently, due to these differentials, the organism or system witness functional harmony of the structures and it is able to survive and endure overtime, by reducing the internal disharmony. Functionalism assumes that an entire way of life may lose its purpose or function through the process of change. The theory assumes that society has sub systems and institutions such as the family, marriage, economy, politics, as well as religious institutions. The survival of these institutions depends on their ability to perform on the average net beneficial functions to the society. The theory also assumes that stability in the society is a function of value consensus. That people share common values and that account for the continued stability and order in the society. The theory further assumes that human society has certain basic needs called functional pre-requisites. These are the need for adaptation, goal maintenance, integration and pattern maintenance. These needs are met by the economic, political, legal, family, religious and educational systems respectively. In order to ensure the survival of the society, these functional pre-requisite must be met. Functionalists believe that religion is important in the society. Furthermore, they hold that there is no society that is without one form of religious practice or the other. Functionalists insist that religion unites members of the society. Durkheim (cited by Kwaghmande, 2017:39) regards religion as purely a social phenomenon. Society, he argues, is a constraining moral force as well as a creative one with external constraints. It provides people with the moral rules and norms which they comply with and cultural resources to which they depend upon. By using the religious activities of the Australian Aborigines, Durkheim demonstrated that religion serves the function of integrating the society into a moral whole. The moral order set aside by the members of society becomes sacred and ritual activities are collective action of group solidarity and response. Society, according to Durkheim, exists over and above us known as moral entity or moral reality. Religious rituals increase group consciousness and loyalty. Religion reinforces a given social structure. It also restrains deviant behavior and strengthens social harmony and solidarity. Religion also promotes obedience and loyalty in the society. At this juncture it is worthwhile noting that although religion often welds groups together and may be deliberately used for that purpose, which is not why people adopt it. Moreover, religion often sunders groups as well.

However, Adeyomo (2002) reechoing the views of Durkheim and others on the role of religion in social institutions such as economics and politics accentuates that religion is an interactive force in a society because it has the power to shape collective beliefs. It provides cohesion in social order by promoting a sense of belonging in collective enterprises. It is against this backdrop that this paper sets to discuss the role of the Religion organisations toward nation building in Nigeria.

### **Clarifying Major Concepts**

#### **Religion**

The term “Religion” (*religio*) has two distinctive etymological roots (Derrida, 1998). Firstly, the Latin word *relegere*, from *legere*, means to bring together, to harvest or to gather. Secondly, *religare*, from *ligare*, means to tie or to bind together (Benveniste, 1973). The first meaning recognises the religious foundations of any social group that is gathered together. The second indicates the disciplines or morality that is necessary for controlling and regulating human beings. From this perspective, religion, is a system of social coherence commonly understood as a group of beliefs or attitudes concerning an object, person, unseen or imaginary being, or system of thought considered to be supernatural, sacred, divine or highest truth, and the moral

codes, practices, values, institutions, and rituals associated with such belief or system of thought. It is a framework within which specific theological doctrines and practices are advocated and pursued; usually among a community of like-minded believers (Johnston & Sampson, 1994). Religion, therefore, is a stabilising force in the society which bound the community as a social force in the social glue. It is a major force for social and moral changes. Religion is a social institution concerned with beliefs, actions and inactions of a society through which the values, norms, ethics and traditions are defined, embedded and expressed within the cosmology of the people. It is a major factor that influences the activities of human (Adebirigbe & Aiyegboyin, 1997: 23). It is this kind of reasoning that influenced Durkheim (1858-1917) to argue that religion is a collective representation that made things sacred. Religion was a worldview that created the sacred. The power to do this resided with the society. Therefore, society created religion. Durkheim felt that religion was the foundation of society (James, 2007). However, Kirkpatrick (2005; cited in Ajaegbu, 2012) sees religion as psychological attachment, a powerful emotional relationship to things. In Tylor's (1830-1907; cited in Ajaegbu, 2012) view, he considers religion as a belief in spirits. Spirits were gods, animating powers, animal-spirit companions, etc., all of which seemed to have a religious cast. Ojoajogwu (2014:72) avers that religion is one of the human engagements that have greatly influenced the life of many nations of the world. It has made noticeable impacts on the political, physical, social, moral, spiritual and economic affairs of the modern world. It is embraced by about two third of the world population which indicates the significant role it plays in the affairs of many nations. The high regards given to religion is portrayed by the diverse manner through which it is carried out in many societies. Those who face the east to pray five times daily, those who commune with their ancestors, those who approach the supreme daily through a divine mediator, and those who assume specific postures and undertake some austere practices of self-discipline as aids to mediation, reflection and enlightenment represent different forms through which man has attempted to satisfy his religious desires.

On the whole, it is worthwhile noting that though religion is commonly made mention of and practiced by people is a difficult term to define. A definition of religion is difficult to make, because religion has many facets, many of which do not appear to be religious by themselves. For example, religion involves gathering in groups. It involves communal eating. It involves theoretical discourse about the nature of the universe, and so forth. Countless definitions have been proposed by theoreticians. The most interesting thing is that an average person can tell when others are engaging in religious behaviour while many scholars and scientists have problems defining it. The concept of religion is like the concept of culture. It is easy to use in ordinary discourse, but difficult to define precisely (Ajaegbu, 2012).

### **Nation Building**

To understand the concept of 'nation-building' the underling word "nation" must very properly be put in perspective. Danziger and Smith (2015) define a nation as a set of people with a deeply shared fundamental identification. Burgess (cited by Appadorai, 2001:15) defines a nation as a population with ethnic unity, inhabiting a territory with geographic unity. In a similar vein, Leacock (cited by Falode, 2019: 82) avers that a nation is a body of people united by common descent and common language. According to Almond et al (2014:16) a nation simply refers to "a group of people with a common identity". This common identity, according to him, could be a common language, history, race, culture or simply upon the fact that these groups had occupied the same territory. In the modern period, nations have replaced empires as the basic unit of human political organisation.

Having established such backdrops, delineate nation building. It is safe to begin by asserting that nation building is always a work-in progress; a dynamic process in constant need of nurturing and re-invention. Thus, it can be defined as the development of behaviors, values, language, institutions, and physical structures that elucidate history and culture, concretise and protect the present, and ensure the future identity and independence of the nation (Gambari, 2008; cited by Ojoajogwu, 2014:73). Krieger (1993:615) in his analogy would understand nation building as: “dealing with the societal and political aftermath of conflicts and establishment of new government and social compacts. In another view, Echekwube (1999:3) sees the concept as “a notion that is very much associated with the goal of civilisation. It has to do with the production of basic needs of the people, feeding, clothing, housing and happy life. Furthermore, Ilega (1986:1) avers that nation building has been described as the attempt towards intelligent and well-ordered society that is good to the point of perfection.

On the whole, Nation building as this paper would look, involves deliberate efforts by people living in a geographical area Nigeria, to identify values that promote commonness and unity. Such values could be normative principles or cross cultural and religious matters that promote and enhance an ordered or organised society where good life is the objective for the members concerned. In this way, nation building can be compared with issues of development towards enhancement of better living condition for the citizenry (Gambari, 2008; cited by Ojoajogwu, 2014:73). Hence, the concepts “nation building” and “national development” are used interchangeably in this paper. A nation, this paper believes could be made up of people of diverse backgrounds resulting from language, cultural practices but above all in this sense, religions. Thus, the potentiality of such diverse interests in religions being harnessed towards purposeful existence as a state or a geographical enclave of common political history of colonialism is the understanding of nation building as it being conceptualised in this paper. From the above views on nation building, it can be drawn that nation building is a state of developing the nation as well as making the citizens of a nation comfortable, and religion provides a platform for such.

### **Factors Militating against Nation Building in Nigeria**

In spite of series of development strategies, put in place by successive governments, and sometimes with good intentions, all attempts to generate meaningful development proved futile.

Based on this, one is now confronted with these enigmas: “Were those previous development plans or strategies bad in their context, or wrongly projected?” If nothing was wrong with the plans, then why is it still difficult to generate meaningful development in spite of the huge resources at our disposal? The solutions to these puzzles are not farfetched. A lot of factors have combined together to fetter nation’s development which include but not restricted to the following:

- i. Poor Formulation and Implementation of Policies:** There are in most cases, no executive capacity responsible for the formulation and implementation of the plan. What we usually see are officials entrusted to such a position but without any meaningful executive authority. Some of the previous development plans failed because; there was little or no consultation of the general public. Planning is supposed to involve even the peasants in the villages. Even, the Local Government officials who function at the grass root level and are easily accessible to the people were not consulted. Planning is not an edifice where technocrats operate independently (Mimiko, 1998).
- ii. Lack of Good Governance:** The lack of good governance also militates against national building. Where there is no good governance, development becomes a

classical utopian. This is as a result of bad leadership in the country. Most of our leaders have no sense of commitment to development.

- iii. **Decolonisation:** Mimiko (1998) captures the situation this way:  
“The decolonisation allowed the crop of leaders that aligned with colonial power to take over Nigeria. This ensured the sustenance of a neo-colonial economy even after political independence. These leaders on assumption of power quickly turned up the repressive machinery of the colonial state rather than dismantling it. Significantly, they have no vision of development to accompany the efficient instrument of repression they inherited. All they were interested in was access to power and privileges and not development”.
- iv. **Corruption:** High level of corruption and indiscipline is another barrier to development. Nigeria state is corrupt, managed by corrupt leaders who have made the state an instrument of capital accumulation, rather than using it to project the interest of the citizenry. A very good plan supervised by a thoroughly corrupt state can hardly do a thorough good job (Mimiko, 1998). Corruption and development are antithetical to each other, the two cannot cohabit, and so, where one is present, the other suffers.
- v. **The mono-economic base of the country:** The country largely depends on crude oil for her survival to the detriment of other resources. All other sectors of the economy are neglected. For instance, agriculture, which constitutes the mainstay of the Nigerian economy in the 1950s and 1960s, has been thrown into limbo over the years. How would government encourage export promotion when there is virtually nothing to export? The economy is not diversified and this is not suitable for a sustainable development (Mimiko, 1998).

### **The Place of Religion and Religious Organisations in Nation Building**

Beyond incredulity, religion is an integral part of every human society, which its importance cannot be over emphasized. It is noteworthy to state unequivocally here that; “experience has shown that religion exists, persists and continues to influence and determine the pace of humanity. There is hardly any part of the world that has successfully ignored religion” (Isiramen et.al, 2010: xi). Though, some scholars have on different occasions see no reason why we can depend on religion as a veritable tool for nation building, instead, what they see is a complete opposite. For instance, Wole Soyinka sees religion as:

One enemy of potential nationhood that requires, not just a separate address of its own...all of a frank, even brutally frank nature, since the intervention of religion in nation being has been of utmost savage, unconscionable and increasingly intolerant kind” (Soyinka, 2009:9).

In spite of all the problems associated with religion as mentioned above the positive contributions and practical utilities to nation building in Nigeria cannot be over looked. In the work of Confucius, education is pivotal to character building (Prothero, 2010:110). Since this is true that the education is not learning trade but learning to be ‘human’, that is, learning to become more of ourselves and transform society through others; hence, the place of religion as it is known as an agent of socialisation of an individual. Through tales in the moon light, Sunday schools and the Qur’anic schools of African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam respectively, morality, ethics and good characters are formed in the life of an individual. All these can be seen as different forms of religious education in the Nigerian societies but are geared towards forming a life that is morally correct (Joseph, 2014:131).

Another major point that must be considered is the place of religious values in enhancing nation building. This by implication assesses the theological basis of the various religious teachings and their impacts on the formulation and implementation of key development concepts and practices, within the context in which the religious teachings are offered. Judging from the African Religion's point of view, their religious values, though not written down in any scripture, neither is it written in 'black and white', yet it is 'written' in all aspects of African life and that makes up its myths, folktales, proverbs, liturgy, songs and sayings. In all, the cardinal tenets of indigenous religion are devotion, peace and love (Akama, 1998:4). This becomes the basis why among the Africans, religion is life and life in itself is religious. Mbiti (1967:1) validated this when he avers that; "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices". Without mincing words, what we see as the major religious values in the traditional religion also are the common denominator in both Islam and Christianity.

As a matter of fact, these religious values are quite important in the sense that, they influence the choices people make in life and thus, decide their behaviours. Since we have earlier pointed out that there is a symmetrical relationship between religious values, character building, national transformation and development in every society, therefore, it behooves on all religious institutions and leaders to put the proper mechanism in place to impart necessary religious values that can aid growth and development. In turn, this process will bring the nation out of its doldrums of arrested growth and development. The work of Williams is apposite at this juncture.

In her work titled; "Religious Groups and the Politics of National Development" (Williams, 1992), she averred that religion and development can and do go together, and in particular that Nigeria's development as it is today cannot be disconnected from the support of religion. Though her focus is on the efforts of religious institutions, rather than an individual, but the point is that, individual's character cannot be built along the line of religious values without the agency of religious institutions. In essence, the position here is that, the religious bodies in the contemporary Nigerian society have now developed into a community of faith and dynamism, which have the potential to change people's values and perceptions about life through their teachings. Through strict adherence to religious values, transformation of individuals can be achieved, and that will give rise to character reformation, leading to nation building.

Bad governance is one of the major problems rocking Nigeria today. Many scholars have delineated this and thus stressing on the same issue here is needless however, here is an attempt to create another perspective out of this towards fostering nation building. Religion, through the agency of religious organisations must be used to raise leaders who can be relied upon as agents of transformation and the change the Nigerian nation has been waiting for over decades. The truth that we must not shy away from is that, most of our leaders see the corridor of power as a platform and opportunity to accumulate wealth for themselves and families (Joseph, 2014:132).

This mentality eventually gave rise to the privatisation of the state in such a way that it became a tool for servicing the private interests of the dominant faction of the elites – leaders (Ake, 1996: 42). The late literary Icon, Chinua Achebe was quoted in the Tell Magazine to have succinctly averred that; "Nigeria is what it is because its leaders are not what they should be." (In Joseph, 2014:132). This, by extension means that leaders are expected to be educated and morally grounded in order for them to effectively and efficiently discharge their duties and

responsibilities. It is quite unfortunate that too many of the leaders are not doing nearly enough to pull their followers into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and orient them to enjoy the best possible existence. In the words of Sule Maitama, an elder-state-man in Nigeria, at a workshop, he lamented on the ugly nature of our leaders thus:

The majority of Naija (sic) leaders are blatant thieves, incompetent morons, uninspiring mediocrities... and primitive, vision-less, plan-less or just plain lazy... too many of them squander their energies on ultimately futile political shenanigans or irresponsible partying... even the few who are smart, well-intentioned and willing to control their acolytes are too easily distracted and pretty disorganized and unproductive compared to their counterparts in the western world (Kogbara, 2013; cited in Joseph, 2014:133).

In light of the above Joseph (2014: 133) asserted that the thoughtlessness we see in our leaders on daily basis will not allow us to maintain a contrary view to the above expressed view. As a matter of fact, it is too obvious to be contradicted. Nevertheless, the hope that the Nigerian nation still have is that, the overwhelming religious experience, through the presence of religious organizations across board, leaders of integrity and reputable character can still be raised to lead the nation to her 'Promised Land'. This can be better understood in the words of Herbert when he captures the point most poignantly:

With transformational leadership, a landlocked country can create coastal waters and become a powerful State like Israel. With transformational leadership, Japan, a country devastated by World War II and devoid of natural resources can become a leading industrialized nation. With transformational leadership, a country can convert its desert into an oasis, like United Arab Emirate that is now a world-class tourist destination and international financial centre. With transformational leadership, a country can transit from Third World to First within 20 to 30 years, like Singapore under Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. With transformational leadership, a country can transform from a backwater, commodity exporting country to become one of Asia Tiger's economies, like Malaysia under Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad (Herbert, 2012).

Over the years, all the three major religions, especially Islam and Christianity have done greatly well in the area of rendering of services and provision of social amenities that can enhance the well-being of humanity in the society. Among these are building of schools (from the grass root level to the highest levels of education), hospitals, construction of boreholes, drainage systems, and some provide counselling system for people either at a lower cost or free of charge. These all we praise them for their good works. However, we wish to call their attention to another dimension on this same point.

Our society can be better transformed if these provisions of social amenities can be carried out in a way to send signal to the government on the need to revitalise the government's own facilities. What we have today now is the utter annihilation of the government system in such a way that the private establishments can thrive. It is instructive to note that, in most cases, the same system that establish and control the religious-based schools, hospitals among others are the same hand running that of the government's. The mind bugling question remains, why are government's own not working as they ought to, but that of the private/religious-based establishments thriving at the peril of the state's? In answering this question, all religious organisations must be sincere enough and be ready to help, partner and support government's programmes, policies and projects (3Ps) so as to enjoy a total continuity, consistency and commitment (3Cs) (Joseph, 2014: 134).

## **Conclusion/Recommendations**



Religion is characterised by functional and dysfunctional element, most especially in Nigeria; it is also admitted that it deals with abstract things, that is, conception of God is intuitively mediated quite unlike science which has a conceptual knowledge which centers on sense perception. Religion, just as its dysfunctional aspect has functional aspect as evidenced in morality, justice, truth, economic development, educational and social services which it can render through its various institutions. These functional aspects can be incorporated to the benefit of the nation's building, when religious dialogue, tolerance is given its due place. Multiplicity in religion is the fate of Nigeria and therefore tolerance and dialogue must be an antidote to reap the benefits of these religions. In view of the issues raised in this paper, the article puts forward the following recommendations.

- i. Religions should be carried along in government policies to always inculcate moral principles, justice, truth, equity and honesty which is a reagent to personality change thereby reduce corruption. This is because laws and plans on eternal aspects of man exploiting scientific models are falling Nigeria.
- ii. The study of moral education should be made compulsory in all categories of learning and national orientation agency should also include it in their plans.
- iii. Promotion of the culture of Religious tolerance, through education and enlightenment of the people through the mass media, civil society organizations and educational institutions to respect and tolerate other religions as well as extol the culture of others is helpful. It will effectively mitigate the persistent occurrence of religious violence in Nigeria.
- iv. The government needs to be proactive in promoting the culture of tolerance by adherents of religions. The best way to do that is the enlightened of various religious adherents through the use of credible religious scholars, to imbibe the habit of reporting through the right channel.
- v. Also government should make use of the various organs like Council of Religious Groups (CRG) provided by different religions in the country to carry its message to the people. Moreover, proven and virtuous religious people should be used in the sensitive areas in political social and economic goals of national development to prevent constant failures of government well-conceived programs.

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