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A re-examination of the role of religion in education in Nigeria

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Abstract

Religion has played major roles in other facets of human endeavours, be it political, economic, medical or educational. Right from the Middle Ages when the church reached its zenith of expansion, the field of education was positively enhanced with the establishment of about eighty Universities in Western Europe. Interestingly, records showed that these universities were theologically oriented because they metamorphosed from schools attached to churches. Furthermore, the missionaries who propagated Christianity took along with the Gospel a certain kind of Education in order to enlighten their converts and train them in institutions they established. However, in recent years, some government's policies have undermined the place of religion in education most especially in Nigeria. Religious subjects have been de-emphasized while science related courses are promoted in order to boost technological advancement. Secondly, individuals, corporate organizations and some educational institutions seem to have the notion that religion today has little or no relevance in education. No wonder the population of students into the Department of Religious Studies in few universities that offer them is low when compared with other departments in the Faculty. Furthermore, it is saddened to note that most of the private universities especially the mission-established ones do not give the study of religion the priority it deserves. This paper, therefore, seeks to investigate the reasons adduced by the stakeholders on the neglect of religious education in academic circles with a view to determining the relevance of religion in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Re-examination, Role, Religion, Education, Nigeria

Introduction

It is pertinent to start our discussion by defining summarily the operative concepts of religion and education.

A definition of religion that is universally accepted has become a very hard project to prosecute because scholars in all ages have made attempts at such definition based on their disciplines. Psychologists, anthropologists, theologians, philosophers, biological scientists, sociologists and of course humanists have all advanced theories from the microscope of their fields making it impossible to arrive at a consensus as regards the definition of religion. Leuba's, Bolaji Idowu's and Hall's definitions were considered inadequate on the concept (Adelowo E. Dada, 2001:12). Hence Eriwo maintained that:

Religion has so far defied any precise definition, a defiance that is perhaps, accounted for by the changing nature of the subject. It has not meant the same thing to all men (Eriwo S.U. in Jermiriye, T.F. 2005:3).

Yakubu corroborated this opinion when he likened religion to a mountain at whose base many observers stand to watch but catch different pictures different from others (Yakubu, N.R. 2001:18). Religion is to some, a system of faith and worship with absolute rights, wrongs, no compromise and totality (Berry, C.G. 1964). To others like Karl Marx, religion is pretence shrouded in deceit, ignorance, self-desertion, avoidance, relegation and no authentic claims. It is an opium of the people, an infatuated fantasy. In a more simple but general setting, religion is the human quest for God. It is the search for, or response to God, god, Gods, gods, GOD or

GODS by men. Religion is a cause, principle or system of tenets held with ardour, devotion, conscientiousness and faith. It is a value of supreme importance in life, death and beyond (Groove, P.B. 1971).

In an inclusive statement, the Marian Webster's New International Dictionary defines religion "as the outward art or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of a god or of gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service, and honour are due, the feeling or expression of human love, fear or awe of some super human and over-ruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observance of rites and ceremonies or by the conduct of life"(Webster in Jemiriye and Eniola 2005:6). Tylor (1871) defines Religion "as a belief in spiritual beings" while Bellah (1970) sees religion "as a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence". Vos posited that religion is the embodiment of all other virtues in the society (Vos, G. 1954:41).

Moreover, a survey of the numerous definitions of religion would be more informing than any new proposal. Every definition ultimately implies theories of reality and indicates the place that religion should hold in the world of life and thought.

Education on the other hand is simply defined by the Complete Christian Dictionary for Home and School (1990:205), as "the development of the mind and character, through a system of training and instruction". Education in this regard can be viewed as an instrument to position people for future endeavors. For the purpose of this discussion, the paper will limit its scope to formal education. Reason being that it is this aspect where religion has suffered neglect. Informal education through home front, church or mosque, has to a large extent, enjoyed the collaboration of religion in imparting moral ideals based on religious inclinations.

Objective of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to establish the fact that religion remains the only field that affects every activity of life. It directs and presides over every ceremony of man in this world, from birth to burial. It gives a guide to moral integrity in a world of moral perversion. In addition, the study aims at reawakening in both the state and faith-based organizations the consciousness to collaborate with each other to engender the dawn of virile, egalitarian and just society in Nigeria in order to rid the country of general decay in our educational institutions. If religion is given its proper place in education as the "queen of all sciences", global moral debauchery will be reduced to the minimum.

Review of Related Literature

Ohadike asserts that Nigerian religious adherents are indisputably "obsessed with illusion" and live a life of atavistic escapism He warns his fellow citizens of the "need to realize that any society that draws its entire inspiration from religion, whether traditional or universalistic, lives in the past. Such a society progresses in a cyclical fashion, living under the same old economic, legal, and political systems, and in concrete terms, achieves nothing"(1992).

Thus in the political calculations of Ohadike and the like, the presence of religion in politics constitutes an illicit courtship. For by the very nature of the case, the true God has no business with politics or economics; these are mundane zones that could defile God's pure nature. Sowande shared this view by expressing thus:

- All religions reek with the blood of human carnage, not because God is blood-thirsty but because in the primordial irony, man created a god limited by man's own weakness; lust for a political base, economic dominance. By way of

generalization, the God of the "Christians" or the Allah of the "Muslims" in Nigeria who now seek for political constituencies are the God or Allah they created (Bode Sowande: *The Punch*, 30 August 1988).

Although there appears to be no consensus within this school of thought as to why religions in Nigeria have been so obtrusive upon and subversive of national unity, these views represent the official position of the government. From the latter's perspective, the problem originates from the nature of the two organized religions in Nigeria, (Christianity & Islam) which have always shown the "negative tendency" to "create competing social orders" and define themselves as "the most basic community", thus challenging "the national community of Nigeria" and delaying its integration.

Onaiyekan seems to have denounced the polemic approach in various quarters between the government and religious bodies with the agreement that children in schools need to receive religious instruction. To give weight to his position or feeling that to implement that exercise could be a Herculean task, he reminded the stakeholders about the declaration in the constitution that Nigeria is a secular state, how sensitive and explosive religious issues can become and finally the qualification of teachers who would teach religion in schools (1982:186).

Klaus shares the same view with scholars earlier mentioned when he said that, in many societies which have been transformed by technology and secularization, the churches' position is therefore an illusion. If it still occupies a position of power, is this not often at the price of abandoning its real tasks that of being an uncomfortable counterpart to all forms of secular power? He therefore suggests that the Church should try to break away from its isolation, not by imposing measures from above, but through small groups acting from spontaneous inner conviction. In a democratic order of society, the Church should not claim a privileged position; it should function as a group side by side with many other groups where this is needed. The Church must overcome prejudices that spring from the 19th century (Klaus 1960:12-16).

Klaus therefore identified the following as the tasks before the Church. The Church must encourage the new social structures to be genuinely secular and not to be infected by ideological or pseudo-Christian ideas. The church should adapt its message to present day conditions in order to meet the real needs and to solve the problems confronting contemporary people in Africa, just as the Gospel met people's needs at the time of Christ.

On the other hand, there are scholars who believe that religion has a vital role to play in education. Lewis traces the Church and State involvement from the pre-colonial era in the development of modern education (1571-1725). According to him, the Portuguese merchants gave the people of what their first experience of education as practiced in Europe. From the beginning of their trading enterprises overseas in the 15th century, education was regarded by the Portuguese as a fundamental importance to the spread of Christianity (Lewis, L.J. 1965:24-26). Subsequent missionaries of the 19th century did not only see the "Bible and plough" to be complementary, they worked assiduously to give education the priority it deserves.

Abe states that in Islamic religion, the primary education pursuit among ancient Muslims was centered on the study of the five pillars and principal doctrines within the confines of the mosque (Abe, 2008:158). Later courses such as Arabic grammar, literature and rhetoric, prophetic tradition, Islamic Jurisprudence and philosophy were studied (Tames, 1982: 144f). Medieval history traces the origin of higher institution to the church and mosque since religion dominated the life of the people. Foster supports the claim by adding that learning was initially centered on theology and philosophy (Foster, 1974:122f) which were necessary for analyzing the scriptures.

He added that subjects such as Law and medicine which at that time were called Natural Philosophy were later introduced for the training of priests theologians and bureaucrats. All these continued until the 19th century when reforms became necessary as a result of socio-political formations and industrial revolution. The secular state, since then, emerged on the scene claiming the predominant responsibility of all levels of education.

Methodology

This study employed historical-survey design. Both the primary and secondary sources were gleaned to strengthen the study. This involves library and archival search and other relevant literature to elucidate information on the subject of study. The tools used include structured interview conducted on the stakeholders; managers of schools, academia, pupils and students, for the purpose of collecting data which were content analysed. The study was premised on Adelowo's concept of the complementation of religion and education. He contends that education can only serve as a veritable tool for human development if moral or religious aspect is emphasized (Adelowo, E.D. 2006:153). Failure to do this will render it tasteless and turn it to a tool for various forms of misdemeanors.

Religion and Government Education Policies in Pre and Post Independence Periods

To state that religion dominated the education sector during the period of European missionaries is indisputably stating the obvious. At the initial stage, there was ecclesiastical control of schools where the schools, located close to the church were manned by mission teachers, where the head teacher played a leading role in church on Sundays and in some cases where school buildings were used for worship on Sundays (Orebanjo, 1982: 46). Apart from the above mentioned, the curricular of schools were saturated with the teaching of scripture, singing and learning of catechism and Christian hymns and songs.

The missionaries intensified their activities to provide the pupils and students with elements of good agriculture and hygiene, gave them training in simple crafts and home economics and kept the trainees in touch with the indigenous culture of their tribe. By the close of the nineteenth century, they had achieved considerable success in the field of education by founding as well as staffing a network of schools.

A cursory survey of government policies in pre and post independent Nigeria showed that the exigencies of time dictated the operation in different eras. The British Colonial Administration for the Gold Coast, of which Lagos was a part, promulgated a policy on education which eroded the ecclesiastical control of schools (Gold Coast and Colony of Lagos, 1882 Ordinance). The religious clause of the ordinance states among other things that admission into schools should be opened to children without distinction of religion or race and that no child should be forced to learn religious instruction objected to by the parent or guardian (see paragraph 9, 6 and 4).

Significantly the era of Sir Frederick Lugard brought a new trend to the issue through his education ordinance enacted in 1916 (Annual Report of the Department of Education 1st April 1951 to 31st March, 1952; 7). Lugard devoted great attention to the question of moral and religious instruction which he made obligatory in all Government and Assisted schools. To the question of whether religion should be made compulsory, he argued that Christian assisted schools can make religion a compulsory subject since it is the avowed basis of their efforts, and pupils who do not desire to receive religious education need not attend.

Concerning examination in religious subjects, he declared, "I see no reason, however, why the Government Inspector of Schools should not examine classes in religious subjects, both in

Government and in Assisted schools". He also advised that Inspectors who could not carry out assignment on denominational grounds could seek the assistance of the headmaster. Mohammedan schools were also to operate along the same lines. The missions must have been greatly pleased with the provision of section 15 sub-section 9. In pursuance of the sub-section, Regulation 46 provided that a time be set aside in accordance with the syllabus for religious instruction.

That meant religion became one of the subjects in the curriculum, which could be examined for the purpose of grants-in-aid to a school. The rights of parents were safeguarded with the provision that children whose parents objected to religious instruction could be given some secular assignment during the period of religious instructions.

On the whole, the 1916 Education Code encouraged expansion of schools. In other words, the missions established and managed more schools. The establishment of assisted training institutions also guaranteed a steady flow of qualified teachers into the mission schools. There was also no difficulty in getting Christian teachers to propagate the faith.

Throughout the period described above the missions contributed immensely to the growth of formal education at the infant, primary, secondary and teachers training levels with the flow of government financial assistance from subsidized to organized grants-in-aid-system. This recognition of religion in education was sustained until the period of independence when there was a sharp separation of religion from education due to many factors.

One of the problems that cropped up later among the missionaries was the problem of denominational colouring whereby each denomination incorporated its tenets into religion instruction. Again, evidence showed that there was discrimination in the admission of pupils especially to secondary schools and teacher training colleges. The denominational sentiment also created the tendency to recruit unqualified staff. These and other problems created by the Christian and Muslim faiths with utter disregard to the pluralist nature of the country, guided the thinking of policy makers in respect of education, which played down the role of religion in the sector.

It is therefore, not surprising that the Nigerian constitution of 1960 stated as follows:

No person attending any place of education shall be required to receive religious instruction or to take part in or attend any religious ceremony or observance if such instruction, ceremony or observance relates to a religion other than his own.

Findings

From the discussion so far, the following are findings:

One, the various missionary bodies employed education for converting, enlightening and informing their members. As they opened church stations, they also opened schools. The church monopolized education control and management from the middle of the 19th century till the pre- independence era in Nigeria.

Two, during this period, moral discipline and educational standard were very high because of religious teachings imbibed by the students and the managerial know-how provided by mission bodies.

Three, part of the problems of religion in schools in Nigeria is anchored on proliferation of denominations or religions. Each denomination had the tendency of exclusive claim of religion, thereby making it inconvenient for the government to recognize any religion in academic spectrum since the pluralist nature of the country does not allow indoctrination in schools.

In addition, the take-over of schools in post –independence period by the government had resulted in not only decay in educational infrastructure but in the falling standard of the sector which the country is still battling with till today.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, the view of Pope Galasius on the harmonious relation between the Church and State, calls for urgent consideration by the stakeholders. In his *duo Sunt*, he opined that the society benefits a great deal when the Church and State collaborate in implementing policies that affect human lives. Therefore, in educational sector, the involvement of the custodians of religion could be sought in order to make holistic education achievable.

Recommendations

One, since religion serves as fundamental basis for education and the mother of learning in the historical, archaeological and anthropological dimensions of mankind, its place can not be underestimated. According to Bowen,

Our design and hopes in regards to Africa are not simply to bring as many individuals as possible to the knowledge of Christ... this cannot be done without civilization... through education (Ajayi, 1969:126).

No nation can attain greatness without education. That is why through religion the foundation was laid for the development of human capital which in turn impacts their societies.

Secondly, religion places premium on character training. This is so because material prosperity without a corresponding growth in the moral capacity to turn it to good use constitutes a danger. Therefore the argument of some people that religion does not have the exclusive right in giving moral education, based on the premise that it does not require one to be religious in order to obey the law of the country needs to be critically examined. Though morals could be taught without necessarily making application to religion, yet religion appears to be more effective than some other subjects on the issue. Lugard shared this view when he debunked the erroneous notion of his critics who mistook policy on education for a proselytizing agency and said;

The Government makes no distinction of creed, whether Mohammedan or Christian, protestant or Catholic. It recognizes somewhat tardily that religion is a force in the formation of character and of good citizens which cannot be neglected without disastrous result... (1916 Education Ordinance, Section 15).

Further still, Orebajo's submission was that religious instruction is justifiably included on the curricula of schools for other reasons besides the inculcation of moral values. Its connection with the cultural life patterns and growth of many states, its rich literacy heritage and its emphasis on the spiritual growth of man must also be taken into consideration (Orebajo, M.A. 1982)

In addition, it is pertinent to note that whatever advantages the world over may have enjoyed from educational values, all due acknowledgements should be given to religious institutions for playing indispensable roles not only in the areas of humanities but also in the totality of health preservation of society.

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