



YOUTH EMPOWERMENT
for
**SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT**

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Religion and sustainable youth development

Aniekan S. Brown

1. Introduction

The future, which contains selective elements of the past and the present, belongs to the youth-the succeeding generation (Mohiddin, 1999:146) and the extent to which they harness the available elements in the challenge of sustainable development arouses academic interest. More so, social institutions, namely: the family, economy, polity, education, and religion have been suggested as capable of enhancing sustainable development. This paper recognizes the persuasive value (potency) of religion and focuses on the possible contributions of the religious institution in the challenge of sustainable youth development. It also observes that religion is a socio-cultural force with great potentials; but that there are doubts as to the actual extent to which this is true. The need for an urgent assessment of the potential of religion in the challenge of sustainable youth development becomes timely.

In other words, there are doubts cast by the slothfulness-inducing utterances of religious chieftains who tend to encourage unsubstantiable claims of faith in God as the one who makes rich and/or poor. This position is opposed to the Calvinist movement's promotion of the virtues of hard work, thriftiness, savings and subsequent investment for greater yield, and discouragement of ostentatious living. It should be noted that The contributions of the Calvinist movement proved instrumental to the economic development of 18th century Europe.

Against this background this paper attempts a critical appraisal of the current relationship between religion and the challenges of sustainable youth development. To this end, the paper covers the following: conceptual issues; religion and the environment; religious practices and youth participation in development; religion and sustainable youth development; and conclusion.

2. Conceptual Issues

The concept of religion.

It was Emile Durkheim who conceptualized religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred things...set apart or forbidden" (Haralambos and Heald, 1999:455). And Yinger (1970:7) views religion as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with their ultimate problems of human life. According to Glock and Stark, it thus consists of institutionalized systems of beliefs, values and symbolic practices which provide groups of men with solutions to their questions of ultimate meaning (Ekong, 2003:200). It is a universal human institution which entails a set of basic beliefs and ritualistic practices.

There is, however, no consensus amongst scholars as to the origin (Ifeanacho, 1998:92). To Karl Marx, religion is a creation of the ruling class in society; to Taylor, it is traced through animism; while to Muller through naturalism (Haralambos, and Heald, 1999).

Muller's naturalism is expatiated thus:

Nature contains surprises, terror, marvels such as volcanoes, thunder and lightning. Awed by the power and wonder of nature, early man transformed abstract forces into personal agents. Man personified nature, the force of the wind becomes the spirit of the wind; the power of the sun becomes the spirit of the sun (Ifeanacho, 1998:93-94).

Thus, man's *intellectual* quest for explanation of events, and the challenge to meet emotional needs describe the origins of the naturalism and animism schools.

Amidst these variations, scholars have developed integrative models of explanation for religion. To Durkheim, God is society. As such, religion is worship of the society. To Sigmund Freud, religion is an illusion and to Karl Marx, it is an ideology (Spencer, 1976). In the above lack of consensus, Ezra Pound dismisses religion as just another of those numerous failures resulting from an attempt to polarize art (The Punch, 21/07/2000:34).

Nevertheless, Marshall (1998:562) opines that religion is a set of beliefs, symbols and practices which is based on the idea of the sacred and which unites believers into a community. The sacred is contrasted with the profane because it involves feelings of awe. Religion, therefore, is the

ultimate concern which all human beings have to address.

As a social institution, it has its own intended functions. These include:

- (i) the explanation of the unknown and irregular physical occurrences e.g. lightning, thunder, flood, earthquakes, etc;
- (ii) the justification of human existence by stating the nature and role of man in terms of a supernatural design;
- (iii) the rationalization of individual suffering in the material world thereby making such suffering bearable;
- (iv) the promotion of group solidarity as religion is a cultural possession;
- (v) the celebration of human achievement;
- (vi) the strengthening of moral order and promotion of social control; and
- (vii) the support for other social organizations and institutions as evident in schools, hospitals and welfare services (Ekong, 2003:200).

It follows that a peaceful atmosphere (which is necessary for development) can only exist in a society pegged and entrenched in high moral and religious motivation, for (with religion) man lives a virtuous and peaceful life in the community which he finds himself (Abdul, 1986:4). In sum, religion greatly shapes ways of life, structures, processes, and institutions. Its influence on the process of sustainable development can only be underestimated at the risk of success.

The concept of youth.

There is yet no consensus on the concept of youth. Various, the definition of youth is based on age, economic strength, marital status, level of mental strength, etc. Yusuf (1998:73) opines that the term 'youth' defines that segment of the population comprising young people who fall between ages 18 and 35 years.

With 63% of its population under the age of 25 years, Africa has a large population of youth. This trend is 13% more than global records. This segment of the continent's population is growing rapidly; and it is appraised that in 2005 there was a 27% increase in the number of people under the age of 25 years (UNFPA, 1997).

But sociologically, the term 'youth' is seen as an ascribed status, or socially constructed label, rather than simply the biological condition of being young (Shaeffer and Lamm, 1995; Ress, *et al*,

1992). Interestingly, the term is fathomable in three (3) ways:

- (i) very generally to cover a set of phases in the life-cycle from infancy to young adulthood;
- (ii) in preference to the rather unsatisfactory term "adolescence", to denote theory and research on teenagers, and the transition to adulthood; and
- (iii) less commonly now, for a set of supposed emotional and social problems associated with growing up in urban industrial society (Marshall, 1998:711).

The youths tend to have a sub-culture. The third proposition above is in tandem with Modukpe Obasa's assertion that: "poverty, corruption and sexual harassment (constitute) the bane of Nigerian youths" (Aruwaji, 2005:29). The youth certainly occupy a critical sector in all spheres of life, yet they are also victims of the malaise plaguing our societies. They are therefore largely disadvantaged. To this end, youth-serving agencies have identified the challenges facing the youth as follows:

- (i) prevailing value crisis in society;
- (ii) societal pressure;
- (iii) rapid social changes urbanization, armed conflicts, war, health pandemic, etc.;
- (iv) opportunity crisis (limited access to education, jobs, income, and social esteem);
- (v) cultural alienation;
- (vi) political revolution (democracy) which requires the youth's defense of their human rights as a matter of duty and self-affirmation;
- (vii) scientific/technical revolutions; and
- (viii) information explosion, which implies that the youth must process much more information even in its complicated forms than did their parents (Gana, 1990).

In sum, Benjamin Di-Sraeli's position that: "the youths of a nation are the trustees of posterity" (Di-Sraeli, 2000:34 as cited in *The Punch*, July 27, 2002) is assumed here as a canon.

Development and sustainable development.

Development, like the state, is a social fact (Eshiet, 2004:31). And succinctly, it is seen as the process of improving the quality of all human lives in the society (Todaro, 1981). Put differently, development is the process "...by which people create and recreate themselves and their life

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circumstances to realize higher levels of civilization in accordance with their own choices and values" (Ake, 1996:29).

The above implies progress which is ideologically guided by economic development measured in terms of man's conquest or exploitation of nature and natural forces. This situation, however, risks life in the future. The challenges for secure life in the future enunciate the sense in sustainable development - a notion, a movement, and an approach which has developed into a global wave of concerns, study, political mobilization, and organization around the twin issues of environmental protection and economic development.

Sustainable development thus seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future. To this end, Nigeria's Threatened Environment (1991:282-283), holds that sustainable development is: "...a process in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are all in harmony to meet human needs and aspiration" (Aina and Salau, 1992:2).

The key elements thereof include:

- (a) ecological integrity and sustainability;
- (b) equity and distributive justice at all levels;
- (c) socially relevant economic productivity and technological development;
- (d) popular participation and collective autonomy; and
- (e) prevalence and institutionalization of human and democratic rights (Aina and Salau, 1992:3).

Okeibunor (1994) thus argues that sustainable development involves equity and avoids uneven attention to differed groups (including the youth) which will tend to divide a people and undermine their capacity. The strategy for it, therefore, concerns empowerment (of the youth), for it is only when people have requisite power that they can influence, or be influenced by development (Bryant and White, 1982).

The challenge to build a greater and sustainable society is a challenge for all (including youth). But for the youths to pursue the sustainable development goals, they themselves need to be developed on a sustainable note. The extent to which the religious institution has done this is the crux of this work.

3. Religious Practices and Environment

Environment here is conceived on an all-encompassing note: natural, psychological, social, and cultural. All these are viewed within the confines of Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria. The area is dominated by Christians and has the Islamic and traditional religions, free thinkers and atheists co-existing. These are represented in the churches, mosques, temples, and shrines available in the area. Personal proclamations, however, justify the positions of free thinkers and atheists. All the faiths grant insights into magical, bio-medical and fatalistic beliefs (Ekong, 2003:203-207). It is common knowledge that the area is bedeviled with great inclination to ostentatious living. This creates a situation where most members of the society are lured into unjustifiable desires for economic success. This situation raises the tendency for anxiety, fear, and desire for socio-economic success in life. Worsening this situation is the bizarre orientation of religious teachings, which emphasize faith in God as the ultimate enhancer of hands to create wealth, and undermine the underlined clauses that lead to wealth creation.

Akwa Ibom State is dominated by Christianity, and this writer is from the area and is of the Christian faith. The tools of information are therefore observation and interviews. Because of the dominance of the Christian faith in the study area, *religion is here considered synonymous with Christianity*.

From observation and interviews, the realities of contemporary religious economy have tainted the worldviews of people. Chieftains of religious institutions have lately brought ostentation to bare - live in cozy and expensive apartments with fleets of luxurious cars and gorgeous outfits. A word for their lifestyle is flamboyance. Young faithfuls are thus hypnotized by grandiose and ear-tickling testimonies in which the impossible smokescreens for the possible. As such, a centripetal force towards dependence on religion with blank faith becomes tangible. Little wonder an average unemployed person in the area sees religion as a ready-made solace for his poor state. He thus nurses the ambition of making a career in the clergy (a lot of them have actually gone into pastoral work establishing their own churches and over-seeing same). The result is the proliferation of churches as evident in Obio Imo Street in Uyo, the State Capital. The street, which is less than one kilometer long, hosts up to sixty-six (66) churches. This justifies the idea inherent in the concept of supermarket religion (Berger *et al*, 2001), which argues that economic successes recorded from the standpoint of religion have tended to enhance the proliferation of churches.

Another reality of the religious environment is the *fear* of witchcraft, ancestral curses and covenants, diabolical and spiritual attacks, etc. These tend to be accused for every misfortune that befalls a typical dweller in the area. Religious personae, in turn, have capitalized on the situation to exploit the bedeviled. The bedeviled, therefore, are vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation. The results have been multiply negative to families, relationships, social peace and the economy, hence, the sordid ritual against sustainable youth development.

It is also known that the state has no known religion as informed by the constitutional freedom of worship. But adherents to different religious faiths often create dichotomous relationships amongst themselves, which climax in conflict and violence. They reject Robert Burton's suggestion that "one religion is as true as another" (Burton, 2002:215). This grants credibility to the fact that religion, throughout history, has been abused and misunderstood. Some people use it as a means of exploitation and suppression, a source of power and domination over the elite and masses alike; and wars have been waged; freedom of thought and conscience oppressed; science persecuted; individual rights of expression denied; man's dignity and honour debased; and injustice inflicted on humanity (Abdul, 1986:4-5). And aptly, Karl Marx in the *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right* submits of religion as: "...the sigh of the oppressed culture, the feeling of a heartless world and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people" (Marx, 2002:218). But the Marxist drift should not depotentiate the fact that only persistent truthful religious teachings and guidance can help the youth to abstain from becoming immersed into the negative vices that have prevented them from achieving sustainable development.

Regrettably, this is an age where churches are plagued with narrow theological interpretations of the scriptures and material/political ambitions (Ekpenyong, 2001:59). For religion to aid development, the teachings of the supreme God must be mastered. But building mushroom churches and collecting money to embark on unprofitable and showy projects constitute the order of the day instead of fostering economic ventures such as opening of schools, awarding of scholarship to students and establishing of industries (Udoh, 2001).

4. Religion and Sustainable Youth Development

...although one could not live the perfect life of Christ

under any condition, he could observe the minor virtues of thrift, hard work, honesty, punctuality, fulfillment of promises... Such attributes on the part of workers are conducive to productivity and the accumulation of wealth (Boulding, 1952:36).

The above underscores the importance of hard work, thriftiness, honesty, commitment and dedication to duty from the religious perspective in the challenge of sustainable youth development. Although the economy is a necessary factor for development, religion is also capable of catalyzing development. Emphasis here is on the persuasive power inherent in most world religions. In this light, A. K. Caincross in Tuji Olaopa's "Ake's Unfinished Journey" submits: "...the key to development lies in men's minds, in the institutions in which their thinking finds expression and in the play of opportunity on ideas and institutions" (Olaopa, 1996:20). In other words, when the institution (religion) is well shaped, development on a sustainable note is ensued. People should self-generate and accommodate facilities for development. People therefore are the agents, means, and the end of development (Brown, 1997:34).

In an area where ostentatious living is apparently the norm, aid for development cannot really be secured. Little wonder the declaration: "One cannot help a (society) to maintain its standard of life by assisting people to consume more than they produce" (Von-Hayek, 2000:34). This challenge brings to the fore the serious doubts as to whether sustainable youth development can be achieved in the face of lustful and false preaching that abound in this age.

Ostentation and flamboyance have dethroned the virtues of true and sustainable wealth creation earlier accredited to Boulding. Max Weber posits that protestant ethic eloquently speaks for the rise of capitalism which enveloped the economic development of the eighteenth century Europe (Weber, 1958). In sum, speculative religious consultancy and mere reliance on verbal faith will not deliver. It is faith that involves work than can deliver (the Holy Bible, James 2 : 26).

Bob Goudzwaard posits that it was religion (protestant principles) that natured the soil in which capitalist (developed) societies flourished (Goudzwaard, 1979:7-9). This position is inspired by the Weberian findings in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, where the religious system stirred up the spirit of industry, which

considers labour, production, and accumulation of capital, especially in the Calvinist disposition (Weber, 1958 and Tawney, 1968). It worked then, it could also work now.

5. Conclusion

From the foregoing, the question is: "Can religion contribute to sustainable youth development?" It is here argued that religion is well capable of achieving such a feat. But it could only be achieved when there is a return to mainstream Christian principles of hard work, honesty, fairness, kindness, and moderate living styles. This will enhance proper socialization, increase productivity; reduce corruption; and play down on civil strife.

In the words of William Blake:

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

By implication, religious leaders should necessarily encourage their adherents to engage their brains and hands in activities that would encourage productivity. With this, the youth of the area can be positively engaged in the process of transforming the area for their betterment in future. The challenge here is: "If God gave us two hands, but one mouth, why then should we starve?" (Abraham Lincoln).

Let the youth be sensitized to get up and work for a secure future today. The church (here) has a duty!

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