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NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT : A COMMON RELIGIOUS ISSUE FOR MEN & WOMEN IN NIGERIA

One of the major forces which sustained the zeal for independence was the need for development. Many nationalists believed that development would necessarily follow independence. These nationalists maintained that as soon as citizens were allowed to manage their own affairs without directives from the colonial masters, they would so conduct the nation's affairs that they would be at par with the level of development already reached by the developed countries. With this in mind, development was seen in terms of increasing the material well-being of the nation. That this was the case was amply shown in the policies and programmes of the first Republic, for as soon as independence was attained the government put forward an elaborate development plan. Since then the country has planned on five-year basis.

It is unfortunate that many have not yet realized that nation development is a herculean task. They only see it as consisting mainly of technological development, the erection of all kinds of modern structures, accumulation of an almost inexhaustible supply of the most sophisticated and deadly weapons, being able to defend the nations frontiers, high percentage of mass literacy, controlling a buoyant economy. For them development is regarded as being in possession of all kinds of material goods which can make man happy here on earth and guaranteeing national security by force of arms.

With this myopic concept of development, education becomes the only known avenue to attain the envisaged goal and as a result a demarcation is drawn in the teaching subjects. This is clearly seen in the report of the Ashby Commission on Higher Education which had among other opinions recommended an increased pace of training in the sciences. It is hoped that the nation will embark on massive industrialization and, therefore, needed technologists. To make the nation's dream of massive industrialization realized, the government stepped

in to build laboratories and quarters for science teachers recruited mostly from India.

Among the students themselves there arose a distinction between the future leaders (science students) and the others in the 'oji-onu' (talkative) disciplines. As science was extolled, the very obvious dunces opted for the Sciences in aspiration to belong to the wanted class. As should be expected religion came off worse among the nicknamed 'oji-onu' group for many people portrayed development as the benefit of science and the conquest of religion. But development should be seen as an overall social process including social, economic, political, cultural and moral aspects. It therefore implies ethical values which presuppose a concept of man in the process of sustaining life in his environment.

Many have removed religion from aspects of national development. They forgot that Africans in general are "incurably religious" (Ogbu Kalu (ed) 1978 p 39).¹ It looks very strange that in the quest for national development there is tendency in some quarters to ignore the core values in a faddist appeal to foreign heroes and foreigners' prescriptions. They failed to realize that concept of progress as seen in the Renaissance is a product of Western world view which is very different from the African's world view. It is questionable why religion which is accepted as "the strongest element in traditional background and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned" (Mbiti 1970 p.1)² should be overlooked when planning for national development. It is not fair to discuss nation development in our context without recognizing the religious factor which undergrids our moral values, traditions and thinking for it had been commented by irrepressible missionaries like Bishop Shanahan that "nothing was farther from (the African's) mind than a materialistic philosophy of existence" (J.P. Jordan 1971 p. 115).³

A look at one of the stanzas of the 1960 national anthem makes one doubt whether the words were understood before acceptance. For the

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1. Ogbu Kalu: "Precarious vision: The African perception of His World" in O.U. Kalu (ed): *Readings in African Humanities African Cultural Development*. Enugn Fourth Dimension 1978.
 2. Mbiti, J.S.: *African Religions and Philosophy*. London Heinemann 1970.
 3. Jordan, J.P.: *Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria*. Dublin Eco Press 1971.

same nation when in her development plans feels that religion is merely an opium had a stanza of her national anthem run thus:

O God of all creation, Grant this our one request
 Help us to build a nation where no man is oppressed.
 And so with peace and plenty
 Nigeria may be blessed.

In this anthem the nation is praying to God generally accepted as the Creator of all things, to help her build a nation in which oppression is absent, a nation in which justice shall usually reign supreme, a nation in which everyone gets that which belongs to him by right. Here brotherhood in the family of one God was given the dominant place for the survival of the country. Nigeria prays for peace that God will bless her with peace. Oh! how unfortunate that the same nation asking God to help her build a nation should exclude religion – the only discipline that discusses about God – in her national development plans. What then is peace prayed for? Does it only mean absence of wars? To this the Second Vatican Council says

Peace is not merely the absence of war. Nor it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies. Nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called “an enterprise of justice” (Is. 32:7). Peace results from that harmony built into human society by its divine founder and actualized by men as they thirst after even greater justice⁴ (Abbot 1966, p. 290).

The national anthem shows that Nigeria prays to be blessed with plenty. Plenty he prays for is not that type of plenty that was witnessed in the Old Testament times during the reign of Ahab when the nation had plenty of material wealth and yet within it there were many languishing in penury and moral decadence. But she is praying for those things that make life worth living in accordance with human dignity and God’s plan for man. She is praying to build a nation of love and peace where justice shall reign. Truly the type of nation envisaged cannot be built by the mere accumulation of material things or the procurement of a life of comfort and ease often limited to a few as was the case during the oil boom and the second republic.

If we accept that man is made up of both physical and spiritual components it therefore means that national development which involves

4. Abbot W.M. (ed): *The Documents of Vatican II* London Geoffrey Chapman 1966.

man has both the physical and material aspects. Hence any project aimed at nation development which loses sight of or ignores the physical and spiritual well being of man taken as a whole cannot succeed in building a nation where no man is oppressed. To portray this idea Aristotle has this to say:

. . . . the end of the state is not mere life, it is rather a good quality of life Similarly it is not the end of the state to provide an alliance of mutual defence against all injury or to ease exchange and promote economic intercourse But it is the cardinal issue of goodness or badness in the life of the polis which always engages the attention of any state that concerns itself to secure a system of good laws well obeyed. The conclusion which clearly follows is that any polis which is truly so called and is not merely on in name must devote itself to the end of encouraging goodness. Otherwise a political association smiles into alliance which only differs in space (i.e. the contiguity of its members) from other forms of alliance where the members live at a distance from one another.⁵

Aristotle in his age is of the opinion that nation development must concern more than mere temporal care of the individual. One should realise that nation development is the development of the people themselves. Justice, love and peace which we crave for in the nation are abstract terms and therefore products of the heart and as cannot be imposed on the individual by force.

All these qualities can only be seen in the nation if they exist in the individuals for it is the individuals that make up the nation.

One may then ask where does religion come in nation development? As clearly mentioned Africa is notoriously religious and life is religion and religion is life. Religion teaches man his limitations making him realize that he is a creature of an all powerful being on whom he depends. Religion unites individuals, communities and nations under the divine umbrella of one and the same God. For the Africans in general it is not possible for an individual or society to survive and make anything out of life without manifesting his religion. If this fact is thereby known one may ask why then do our national planners look down on religion when making their plans. A look at the religions of the nation will reveal that

5. Baker E.: *The Politics of Aristotle*. Oxford O U P 1961.

the Traditional religion on its own maintains that "I am because we are" and adherents are convinced that they can do nothing if not with the support of God who occupies a unique place in their religious life and has the prerogative of creation. The religion also has certain ethical values which could stabilize the gyrating moral system of our days and as such can play a major role in modernization.

The traditional religion holds firmly that both the individual and the nation must have absolute belief in the Creator whom they should pay homage in order to survive for he—the creator—gives peace and prosperity.

The religion maintains that to be a truly successful nation a place of honour should be given to God in the national life. Once the nation has the love and fear of God strongly entrenched in its national life then the nation is on a safe road to progress in all respects. It is a wrong idea for politicians and statesmen to think that they can build a nation without any recourse to God. If they have such an idea they are directly ignorant of what the psalmist said: "unless the Lord builds the house those who build it labour in vain" (Ps 126:1).

Islam on its own is a group oriented religion with its ethics tending to emphasize virtues which bind a community and breed social justice. The religion also lays great emphasis on organization and administration for "the jihads of yesteryears were invariably followed by an administrative reorganisation" (Nigeria Magazine 113 p. 59-64).

As Nigeria probably has the Islamic Community in the majority of her population religious factor should be viewed seriously in the national development plans for Islam is both a religion and a culture. The jihads and other movements of reform within Islam pursue the ultimate goal of establishing a theocracy – a society and state ruled according to Islamic laws. Islam claims total control over all aspects of life of its adherents both as individuals and as groups. Islam insists that religion must regulate not only matters of spiritual salvation and moral development but also economic and sociopolitical affairs. The adherents of Islam advocate that its influence and practice should not be confined to the mosque but should be the same in the market places, social gatherings or political soap box.

Code of conduct is one of the elements of religion and in all Nigerian religions, morality flows naturally from religious creed. The three major Nigerian religions have belief in hereafter though conceived differently.

But all of them conceive that hereafter for the good is a place of enjoyment. All therefore strive to have this place of enjoyment. The traditional religion in particular believes that every individual's action, whether in private or in public is in full awareness, that the eyes of God, the divinities and the ancestors are taking note of every moral act of his so as to reward or punish him according to his actions. This awareness of the unfailing sanction from the divinities and the ancestors was responsible for the prevalence of law and order in the traditional society where there were no policemen and soldiers to enforce the laws of the state. But today with numerous policemen, soldiers with sophisticated weapons, courts of law, prisons, the nation is still plagued with armed robbers, bribery and corruption, murder, embezzlement of public funds, wide spread sexual immorality, indiscipline in schools, shameless desecration of holy places by stealing, abortion and so on.

One is tempted realising the out comes of our national development plans to conclude that these vices are aspects of national development devoid of religious elements. For when religious inclination is removed from man and the belief in his maker who rewards the good and punishes the wicked is blot out of his mind, what is left is an animal who acts out of sheer material and egoistic motives and sheer convenience. Professor Mbiti realizing this said,

African religious beliefs, values and practices are directed towards strengthening the moral life of each society. Morals are the food and drink which keep society alive, healthy and happy. Once there is a moral breakdown, the whole intergrity of society also breaks down and the end is tragic . . . Traditional African societies keep a close eye for any individual weeds in its moral life and often uprooted them before they twined human life into an immoral waste land . . . Thus African religion emphasizes the importance of morals in practice and insists that they must extend into all areas of life for the welfare of the individual and society at large (Mbiti 1975 p. 181).⁶

Conclusion

On October 1st 1960, Nigeria celebrated her independence granted by the British Colonial Government. With development plans Nigeria

6. Mbiti J.S.: *An Introduction to African Religion*. London Heinemann 1975.

aspires after greatness striving to build a united state, a state free from all tribal hatred and prejudices. She envisages a state free from the vices of bribery and corruption, a state where justice, love and peace reign supreme. As stated by General Olusegun Obasanjo, "As a nation we are still far from the type of society we are striving to build but foundations have been laid on which we can continue to build to achieve our desired objectives of a disciplined, fair, just humane and self-reliant African Society. There must be equity in a society to strengthen the stability and security of the Society" (The 1979 Constitution p. vii).

As all the afore mentioned noble aspirations are qualities of the heart they are virtues and cannot be imported from abroad even during the oil boom neither can they be imposed with force of arms. As Nigeria wants peace, prosperity and internal cohesion room must then be made for the author of the virtues in her national development plans. Religion which therefore concerns itself with the ways of the author of the virtues should be given a spacious room in the national development if the laudable noble aspirations are to be achieved.

The three major religions in Nigeria, the traditional religion, Islam and Christianity are saying the same thing that religion is an indispensable recipe for building a happy and stable nation. The traditional religion in particular provides religious and moral structures needed for the construction of a solid national edifice. It holds firmly that man is a composite of matter and spirit and there is a hereafter where one gets one's due reward for one's conduct. The religion provides incentives for doing good and avoiding evil. It makes it mandatory to always behave in a manner that is conducive to the welfare of both the individual and the society.

Islam itself is both a religion and a culture aspiring to build a theocratic society in which the people are governed according to Islamic laws.

It regulates not only matters of spiritual salvation and moral development but also economic and socio-political affairs. It claims total control over all aspects of life of its adherents both as individuals and as a group. Islam lays emphasis on rational organization, administration, commercial entrepreneurship, discipline and literacy. It is open to changes and these characteristics make it possible to contribute to development.

The religions supply the basic principles of morality which if adhered to help man to live a good life and reform himself when he erred. The

crisis of our society today are crisis borne out of sheer neglect of God and the denial of religious and moral values in our development plans. Our religious systems supply ethical ideals for domesticating transfer of technology and for ensuring development. Hopefully, therefore, it is obvious now that it will be unreasonable to ignore the religious factor in planning national development. As has been pointed out, religion is the only discipline directly concerned with moulding the characters of men in order to build a nation where no man is oppressed. It is religion that teaches man to love one another, to fulfil one's civic obligations to eschew bribery and corruption and other forms of behaviour inimical to the well being of society. Therefore, the peace, stability and progress of any state will obviously depend on how much place is given to God in the life of that state.