

Looking at Religion in Relation to the Moral Situation in Contemporary Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper attempts to look at the various immoral activities available in the Nigerian society such as cultism, armed robbery, corruption, abortion, fornication, obscene dressing, theft, violence, looting, killing, and many more. These are some of dreadful acts which have deprived Nigeria of its due development. Many of these vices are traceable to religious houses and to religious leaders. However, findings show that true religions which people claim to profess, preach moral virtues. Yet, Nigeria still lags behind in many areas including moral. This paper therefore, looked at where the problems lie and it was discovered that enough has not been done by the religious leaders in using the teaching of their respective religions to assist Nigeria reach the high level she ought to have reached. The paper finally offers some suggestions on how religion (in Nigeria) could help promote moral standard in particular and all other aspects of life as a whole.

Introduction

When one considers the proliferation of religious houses and denominations in Nigeria nowadays, no doubt will ever remain in one's mind that Nigeria is the divine temple of only the righteous. One would look at Nigeria as the abode of the angels where all moral virtues originate. But alas! Nigeria is far away from such descriptions. It is a society where moral values have given way to immoralities. A nation whose surface shines but is filled with stinking filth in the inner part. It is a nation where dubious men and women use religion to mar rather than to make; A country where 'hyenas' in human skin hide under religion to 'kill' their 'preys'. One would think that a country so blessed with both human and material resources should use religion in its pristine form to sincerely glorify God for all that she is endowed with, but most of the glorifications and adorations being offered appear to be fake and are meant only to cajole innocent people. Talk of any immoral act, it is available in Nigeria. One expects that as religious as Nigerians appear to be, religion should have served as a medium through which people are reformed and properly molded in order to build a virile nation. It is for this reason therefore, that this researcher has chosen the title of this paper as a way of using religion to address the moral decadence in Nigeria in order to build a virile nation.

Religion and its Origin

Many theories have been propounded on the word "religion". Philosophers, Historians, Aesthetician and Theologians, look at religion from different perspectives. In the evolutionary theory of religion as represented by scholars like Edward B. Tylor, Sir James G. Frazer and Robert Bellah, religion is described as being "an effort to deal with the many puzzling phenomena that the 'savage mind' had insufficient knowledge to explain" (Goets 1988:543). Frazer traces the development of human thought as originating from magic to religion and finally to science (Goets 1988:539), while Bellah suggests five stages through which religion moves. They are: primitive, archaic, historic, early modern and modern stages. He however asserts that the modern stage is the scientific stage when religion has given way for science (Goets 1988:539).

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Religion, in the words of sociologists “is the pattern of belief and practice through which men communicate with or hope to gain experience of that which lies behind the world of their ordinary experience” (Holland, 1988). “It is human beings’ relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual or divine” (Goets 1988:539). Based on the opinions above, religion may therefore be defined as a spiritual and practical way of adoring and serving anything in which there is faith or belief. To have faith or belief in what is regarded as holy and supernatural is therefore the major feature of any religion. Religion and man are two integral components. This means that religions are cocksure that God is He who created man and other creatures and that man lives with the spirit of God in him and that man owes God services and adorations.

Qur’an says:

Say: It is He who has created you (and made you grow), and made for you the faculties of hearing, seeing, feeling and understanding: Little thanks it is ye give. Say: It is He Who has multiplied you through the earth, and to Him shall ye be gathered together (Q67: 23-24). The Bible buttresses this by saying that “God created man in His own image” (Gen. 1:26) to show that there is relationship between man and a supreme Being in relation to man’s existence. According to Martin and O’Meara (1977: 214), there are a number of universal categories of religious behaviour all aiming at presenting religion as a product of the earliest attempt of the human mind to achieve a sense of security in the world. And moral is anything having to do with right and wrong behaviour and character (Kirkpatrick, 1984:321).

Religion and Moral Standard in Nigeria

Morality is part of religion. It is one of the important teachings of many popular religions in the world. Despite the high level of religious awareness in Nigeria, the whole society is still polluted and endemic with immoralities such as corruption, advanced-fee-fraud popularly called 419, embezzlement, adultery, fornication, cultism, armed robbery, obscene dressing, lack of respect (for parents, elders, and constituted authority), and a host of others. And for the fact that Nigeria still witnesses all these vices even at fifty four years of independence may lead to questioning if Nigeria really exists. There is a popular saying that a fool at forty is a fool forever. Nigeria, as a nation, would be considered a fool if, by now, meaningful attempts are not made to put right all the wrongs. But thank God that the inauguration of the fourth republic in Nigeria on May 29, 1999, when the country is at her twenty ninth and a half years of independence and within which serious steps have been taken to combat immoralities in the society, has saved the nation from becoming everlasting fool. Among such laudable steps so taken is the anti-corruption bill passed by the national assembly to check the excesses of some ‘greedy’ administrators. Another step is the launching by the Federal Government, of the campaign for national rebirth. Also notable is the bold step taken by some university authorities in Nigeria in releasing dress code which students must observe while on campus. Top on the list of such universities are: the University of Ibadan, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko and university of Lagos, (Sunday tribune, 20th June 2004). This problem of poor dressing habit together with cultism and examination malpractices are cankerworms eating deep into the fabric of Nigerian society, especially in the academic institutions.

In the Nigerian society, women are seen moving around half naked, wearing tight trousers and other transparent materials that show the shape of their bodies. As a result of this, some men are seduced and tantalized. And when such men lose controls of their sexual passion, they are forced to commit rape and involved in sexual harassment. Section 39(1), (2) and (3) of 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria gives the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion to every Nigerian. Section (40) even declares that “every person shall be entitled to assemble freely and associate with other persons, and in particular, he may form or belong to any political party, trade union or any other association for the protection of his interests”. However, section 38(4) states that “nothing in this section shall entitle any person to form, take part in the activity or be a member of a secret society”. Ironically, despite the entrenchment of the above in the Nigerian constitution, cultism still remains strong as many political office holders, judges, lawyers, traditional rulers, lecturers, students and many other highly placed people are said to be indulging in secret activities as a source of getting political or economic power or as a source of building security around their heinous deeds in the society. Killing of innocent people for rituals, killing and maiming of rivals, wanton destruction of properties, oppression and threat on the authority, characterize the activities of cult members. In the religious scene, people now ‘serve’ money rather than God. Evil ones are honoured and decorated with religious title because of their wealth. School-leavers, rather than using their expertise to work for the prosperity of their nation, claim to have been anointed to establish religious houses where huge sum of money is gathered at least every service day. Prayers and miracle sessions are organized where people are ‘deceived’.

There are devastating captions on the pages of newspapers and magazines on 'Men of God' engaging in fraud. For example, in the cover page of "The News" magazine of June 9, 2003, is a headline captioned "Pastor of thieves, how Oyakhilome received another stolen money". Also, in the 30th of June, 2003 edition of "The News", some pastors were alleged of stealing N50 million. There are cases of wanton destruction of lives and properties in the name of religion (Mu'muni, 2002:29). Commenting on the destruction of properties and killing of innocent lives in Kaduna in the name of defending Islam, Babarinsa (2002:66) observed that "those behind the mayhem are not worshippers of God: They are worshipers of power". The acts discussed above are some of the factors impeding the development of Nigeria and the time is now ripe to seriously address the problem.

The Way Forward

1. Religion and Religious Leaders

Leaders in any given society have much to do if the society should succeed. When the head is good, the whole body is said to be good. Leaders, especially at the religious realm, should therefore be sincere, dedicated, and God-fearing in their religious affairs. They should consider the present moment as a turning point when they put an end to all religious deceit. Qur'an says: Do ye enjoin right conduct on the people and forget (to practice it) yourselves, and yet ye study the scripture. Will ye not understand? (Q2.44). Religious leaders are symbols for the religions which they profess. Many followers do not care to read their religious books but attach their faith and commitment to what their religious leaders say or do. In addition to this, efforts need be made to put in control, the day-to-day proliferation of religious houses where immoralities are being 'nursed'. Establishment of various religious denominations has become the most lucrative business in Nigeria now as many young school leavers claiming to be anointed, now engage in the 'business' rather than contributing their quotas to the development of the country. All these must stop while efforts should be intensified on preaching and teaching the religions in their pristine forms.

2. Education

God created man to serve Him (Q51: 56). Man is not to serve God in ignorance. He needs to know about God and to learn how to serve Him. Religion is in support of search for knowledge. The Bible urges man to seek for the truth for him to be set free (John 8:32). In the same manner, Prophet Muhammad is reported to have encouraged all Muslims to search for knowledge (Abdullah, n.d. : i). It will be absurd if one thinks that only religious education is being referred to here. It encourages all kinds of useful education. Science, technology, law, agriculture, arts and whatever knowledge, is meant here. However, care should be taken not to allow whatever education one is pursuing to take away one's religion and moral. This has happened before. Muhammad Outb (1976:243) observed: "Dazzled by the achievements of science during the 18th and 19th centuries, many westerners thought that religion had exhausted all its usefulness and surrendered to science once for all". In contrast to the position of these westerners, science should be used to appreciate the blessings and mercies of God who endowed man with different knowledge. 'The god of science has, however, turned out to be extremely fickle, ever-changing and constantly shifting positions, upholding one thing as a fact and reality today and rejecting it the other day as false and spurious. Consequently, its 'worshippers' are doomed to a perpetual state of restlessness and anxiety, for how can they find rest and peace of mind under such a capricious god? That the modern West is afflicted with this uncertainty and restlessness is borne out by the large number of psychological and nervous disorders that are so common in modern society today" (Outb, 1976:244).

3. Teaching of Religious and Moral Education at Schools

In the past, when the teaching of religious and moral education was given serious and adequate attention in the school curriculum in Nigeria, the effect was noticeable in the high moral standard of students and socio-moral development of the country. There was God-consciousness and therefore less criminal record. The current school curricula do not encourage the teaching of religions. What we have is only paper policy which is not adequately implemented in schools. The educational policy of Nigeria now attaches great importance to science, technical and commercial subjects at the expense of Arts subjects where religious study is taught. By the time students register for Ordinary Level examinations, certain subjects are chosen as being compulsory after which religious studies hardly get a chance. In order to put the situation in proper perspective therefore, more attention should be paid to the teaching of moral and religious education to our young generation in order to upgrade moral standard in the Nigerian society.

4. The Role of the Family/Parents

Family is an important agent of socialization. According to some sociologists, "no other agent of socialization is as important to the total make up of the child as the family; his primary socialization begins here" (Aderounmu, 1992:40). Parents can help build the nation through the type of education given to their children at home. This is where religious and moral education is to be first instructed to children who will make the nation in future. A religious-conscious family hardly produces criminals and hooligans. Therefore, parents should sit-up and supervise the religious commitment of their wards in order to help build the nation.

5. Employment Opportunity

Crime wave started to rise in Nigeria when employment opportunity became narrow. People engage in prostitution, armed-robbery, proliferation of religious societies, cultic activities and so on. This is in line with a common saying that devil finds job for jobless hands. Government, wealthy individuals, and private bodies, should endeavour to create jobs for the jobless. By doing this, there would be drastic reduction in the crime rate and other immoralities in Nigeria. Finally, religion as discussed above is a medium which, if properly utilized, will assist tremendously in promoting the life standard of Nigerians in all ramifications. It serves as an agent of moral education. And it plays vital role in the moral uprightness of individuals. Every religion has a code of conduct or a set of values that adherents of that religion are expected to observe. This suffices to say that, the type of values which any religious group cherishes will reflect the lifestyle of such group. Every religion preaches worthy virtues and frowns at bad habit. Therefore, the success of Nigeria at this time depends on how seriously the people embrace religious and moral values.

As observed by Goets (1988:543):

Religion, functionally, serves to give people shared goals; thus reducing the sharpness of their competitive goal; it promises later rewards thus softening the anguish of present frustration; it helps to define the meaning of suffering, thus reducing the threat of chaos. Religion, thus, is a functional prerequisite for society.

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