CHAPTER FORTY ONE

THE PROMINENCE OF RELIGION IN THE ATTAINMENT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

Nigeria is a pluralistic society. This is evident in ethnicity, religion and culture; three concepts that are intertwined and yet different. Most of the conflicts experienced in Nigeria are blamed on these concepts, especially religion. Nigerians do not freely discuss religion. It is a volatile subject to be discussed as a national issue. Religion, nonetheless, underpins and gives force to ethnicity and culture. Of the three dominant religions in Nigeria, Ancestral Religion cushions the missionary religions (Christianity and Islam). In their missionary character, they compete for sphere of influence and indoctrinate people unto fanaticism. The consequence is mutual hatred that often leads to the loss of lives and property. Religion is then seen as dysfunctional to development. The problem, however, is that people are not educated, formally and informally, on the possible contributions of religion to human development. Nigeria's tertiary institutions serve as the starting point.

A lot of ink has been spilt and energy spent on issues of development especially in the so-called less developed countries of the world like Nigeria. At the turn of the 21st century, the International Community set for itself a twenty-year plan of development to reduce human suffering and mortality. The plan is tagged Vision 2020 or Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Nigeria is not left out in that global agenda.

It is interesting that attention on the parameters of development is shifting from infrastructure and economic considerations regarding Gross National Product (GNP) to humanistic considerations of the actual wellbeing of humans. The dominant factor now is the quality of human beings that make up the human society. Happenings around the world indicate that economic, political and technical advancements do not offer all it takes to live. These are material accretions that serve humans as quantitative beings. They serve the quantitative dimension of life. But there is, also, the spiritual, the qualitative dimension of humans. These dimensions rest on the composite character of the human person as body and spirit. The spirit is the seat of reason and as such ought to guide the actions of the body. The spiritual is the invisible domain of humans that propels and enables relationships not only with fellow humans but also with the invisible realities of nature. It is the domain of religion, a term so perverse and so common that it is felt by all and lived by all even by those who claim to be non-religious or antireligious but not fully known by all.

Religion is fundamental to humans' life and living, thinking pattern, attitudes and relationships. Religion is, therefore, considered critical for any meaningful, total and sustainable development in any human society. In pluralistic societies of culture, ethnicity and political affiliations, religion can institutionalize along those lines. This is because religion originates in a culture that is more often than not determined by an ethnic group that is defined by a dominant political party/body. If this plural structure of the society (including religious) is not properly managed, it becomes an instrument of conflict than stability, a situation that undermines development and as such would not have any development to sustain. The way out of dysfunctional character of religion in human

society is rigorous study of religion especially in institutions of learning. The aim would be to understand religion as such: its meaning and content, the basic differences and similarities with the determination to play down the differences and emphasize the similarities. This paper argues that a rigorous study of religion is important for sustainable development in Nigeria, a pluralistic country of varied cultures, ethnic groups, political affiliations and consequently religious groups. The focus is on how to resolve the conflicts that often greet pluralism to the destruction of sustainable development.

A Multidimensional Approach towards Religion

Religion is a multifaceted and contested, if not vague, concept. To gain a proper understanding of the relationship between religion and development and the corresponding causal mechanisms, it makes sense to disaggregate religion into several dimensions. The idea of a multi-dimensional concept of religion is not new. For example, Barro and McCleary 2003; Campante and Yanagizawa-Drott 2015; Feess et al. 2014 and Durkheim 1995 acknowledged the multidimensionality of religion by emphasising the beliefs and practices that religious communities follow. However, the different dimensions are often not clearly defined and separated. Following Durkheim 1995, our disaggregated definition of religion comprises four dimensions: religious ideas, religious practice, religious actors and organisation, and religious identity.

Religious ideas are the foundation of any consideration of religion. These ideas refer to transcendence in order to explain the world and provide a meaning of life to individual believers and society as a whole. Religious practice, identity, and actors and organisation are epiphenomena of religious ideas. Religious ideas include written and formal norms (e.g. commandments and other holy writings), oral traditions, and inward religious ideas. More ambivalent exegeses of religious writings or ideas (e.g. by individual clerics) as well as religiously legitimised comments on contemporary events are also subsumed under religious ideas. They form the preferences of religious individuals and inspire their behaviour. The strength with which each individual believer follows these ideas varies and is commonly referred to as religiosity.

Religious practice only includes direct religious behaviour such as worshipping, making pilgrimages, fasting, meditating, and constructing temples; it does not comprise any other activities not directly related to religious practice (Anderson 2004). For example, if certain religious ideas encourage hard work, the resulting behaviour, although religiously inspired, cannot be considered religious practice. The activities of religious actors are also not included in the dimension of religious practice.

The latter activities are subsumed under the dimension of *religious actors and organisation*. The term actor refers to individuals such as clerics as well as to the formal organisational expressions of religious communities such as single groups, Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs), religious networks, or associations of several religious groups. The organisation of religious groups comprises formal and informal rules that govern religious communities, including official state and non-state laws and the unofficial organisational rules and hierarchies of religious communities. Religious practice and religious actors as well as the organisation of religious groups can reinforce existing religious ideas or promote new religious ideas.

Finally, *religious identity* refers to individuals' identification with religious groups. People with the same religious identity share the same core beliefs and build group identities. Religious identities can follow the same in-and out-group mechanisms as other group identities (such as ethnicity or class), sometimes independently from particular religious ideas within a given community.

A Multidimensional Approach towards Sustainable Development

The term ‘sustainable development’ has gained in importance since the late 1980s. Although there is no commonly accepted definition, most scholars agree that sustainable development is multidimensional and results from human actions (carried out by individuals, groups, or organisations) on both the private level and the state level. In September 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes 17 goals and 169 targets. Unlike the preceding millennium development goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are integrated in that the targets of individual SDGs emphasise the interlinkages between SDGs. A second novelty is the agenda’s universal character: the SDGs are directed towards both developed and developing countries.

A conceptual problem arising from the integrative character of the 17 SDGs and their targets is that they often comprise multiple, overlapping aspects, which makes some of them vague and ambiguous. Thus, instead of separately reviewing evidence on the link between religion and development for each SDG and SDG target, we classify the SGDs into economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (as described in Figure 1 in the Appendix) and structure our review according to these three commonly distinguished dimensions.

The Link between Religious Dimensions and Sustainable Development

Conceptualising causal mechanisms requires a number of assumptions. First, sustainable development results from human actions and requires an agent’s willingness and capacity (or opportunity) to act. Willingness refers to a motive to act in a certain way or direction – that is, for or against development. Capacity (or opportunity) refers to an actor’s ability to influence the scope or strength of the outcome. If the willingness or the capacity to act is absent, development cannot take place.

Second, different religious dimensions – although often occurring in conjunction – exert distinct influences on sustainable development through the different effects they have on agents’ willingness and capacity. They can hinder or spur sustainable development, depending on the *direction* and *strength* of their effects. For example, the religious practice of Ramadan Fasting has the potential to slow down economic growth (Campante and Yanagizawa-Drott 2015) (*direction*), yet the magnitude of this effect depends on how strictly Ramadan practice is followed within societies (*strength*).

Third, different religious dimensions have different effects on various dimensions of development. This results in quite a large number of possible “bilateral” causal relationships, which take different forms and go in different directions. For instance, religious ideas on work ethic could foster economic growth, whereas certain religious practices (such as a significant amount of time being devoted to prayer) could hinder economic growth. More-over, a religious dimension can have differing effects on distinct development dimensions. To take one example, the behaviour of believers motivated by the religious idea of giving to the poor may reduce inequality and foster social relations, but it may also hamper economic growth if less money is available for investment. The magnitude of these effects in turn depends on the relevance of the religious idea.

Fourth, in addition to direct bilate relationships between religious and developmental relations, there can also exist indirect mechanisms. Religious dimensions can be related to other religious dimensions, and the effects of these relationships can indirectly impact development dimensions. For instance, religious practices often function as an amplifier for religious ideas or identities. The practice of visiting religious services may strengthen certain religious ideas and religious identity. In addition, religious dimensions can impact non-religious and non-developmental dimensions, which then affect development. For instance, basic social services are provided by faith-based

organizations. They offer ethnical, spiritual, material and organizational resources for ending poverty and hunger, providing healthcare and quality education and working towards equality at different levels.

Fifth, all mechanisms are embedded in a context of surrounding conditions that may influence development independently or in interaction with religious factors. Conflicting relationships between the religious dimensions are possible as well and have already been outlined with regard to religious practice. Similarly, complex and ambiguous are the interrelations between developmental dimensions. Thus, the causal impacts of religious dimensions on developmental dimensions can be ambivalent, interrelated, reinforcing, reversing, or conditional upon each other. Figure 1 shows a simplified model of the link between the dimensions of religion and sustainable development.

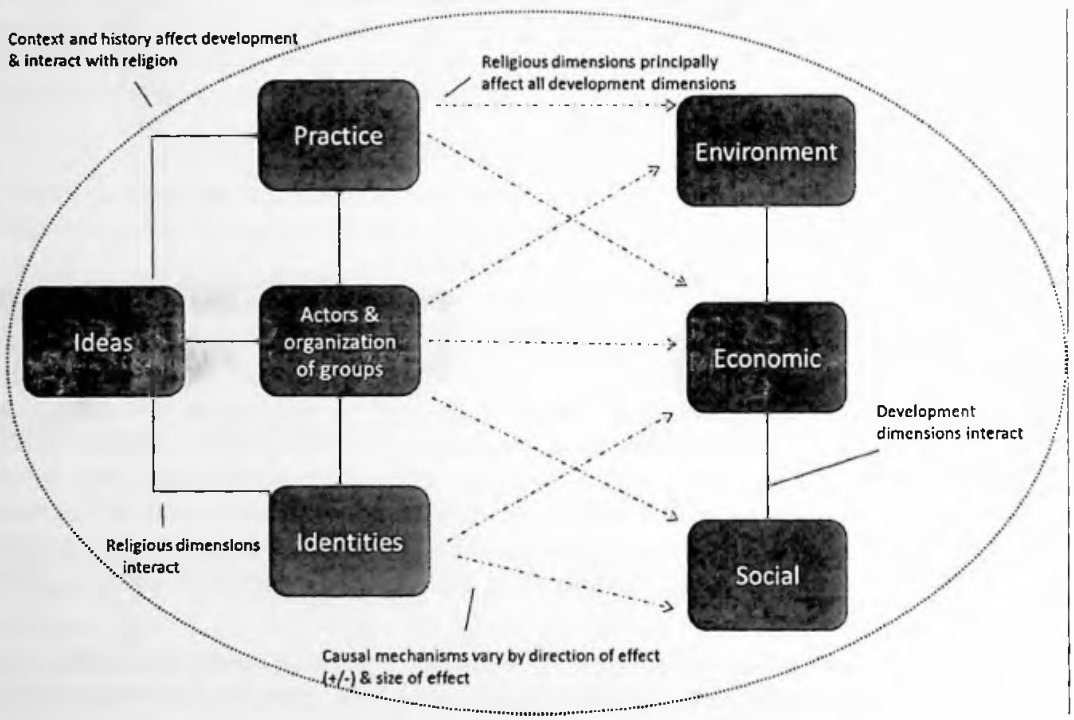


Figure 1. Simplified Model of the Religion–Development Link

Given the complexity, we focus mainly on direct effects in our review. Indirect effects are only considered if they play a major role in the literature. The proposed framework provides us with a comprehensive, well-structured guideline. Figure 2 in the Appendix summarises the causal mechanisms discussed and tested in the literature for each development dimension and its sub dimensions. Each causal mechanism is assigned a unique code, which we then refer to in the main text when presenting the empirical evidence on the respective mechanism.

The Importance of Religion in Achieving Sustainable Development

Sustainable development occurs within religion contexts. Therefore, religion must be integrated into sustainable development strategies. In addition, religion is a driver of sustainable development. The religion sector promotes economic growth. For instance, through religion in sub-Sahara Africa, some 50% Of basic social services are provided by faith-based organizations. They offer ethical, spiritual, material and organizational resources for ending poverty and hunger,

creative industries, agriculture, food and medicine. Traditional agriculture and food preparation practices enhance food security. The inter-linkage between religion and natural heritage is a foundation for environmental sustainability and biodiversity preservation.

Economic benefits of religion and culture: Both contributes to economic development in many sectors, including tourism, creative industries, agriculture, food and medicine, and fisheries. Additionally, religion and cultural practices provide peace and economic growth, food security and social safety nets for vulnerable populations, including women, children and elderly.

Valuing religion and culture: There insufficient quantitative and qualitative evidence to support the economic and social benefits of religion and culture. The lack of evidence has often resulted in an under valuing of culture. The first Regional Cultural Statistics Meeting was held in Suva, Fiji 25th to 27th May, 2011 to build capacity in the area of cultural statistics.

Trade, marketing and access to finance: Strong pro-cultural and religion policies for institutional capacity building; marketing of cultural products and protection of Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs); financing of small-and medium-sized cultural enterprises and initiatives; and promoting international religion and trade of cultural products are necessary to harness the full potential of Pacific religion and cultural industries.

Gender and human rights: Culture in Nigeria has been used to justify inequity, discrimination and violence, especially against women, minorities and children. This is unacceptable and a misuse of culture. As noted in The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, culture should not be used as an excuse for behaviour which is not in accordance with human rights. Pro-cultural policies should support culture as an enabler of tolerance, empowerment and diversity.

Bio-cultural diversity: Cultural activities and expression, including language, are integral to cultural preservation and social cohesion. The cultural practices rely on biodiversity, access to land and availability of natural resources, including both terrestrial and marine. Implementing cultural preservation policies, as well as infrastructure and facilities, including festivals, museums, etc., can support the preservation of traditional knowledge and the promotion of ethical and informed heritage tourism.

Conclusion

The quest for sustainable development is good. This is without prejudice to those who hold opposite view. Nigeria cannot have sustainable development if it does not have the political will to discuss religion as an issue of development. Islam and Christianity have been on each other's neck since the amalgamation of the country. The paper contends for the study of religion as religion would lay the foundation for sustainable development in Nigeria. The overall dividend is peaceful co-existence between the major religions in Nigeria especially Islam and Christianity. Their identity would be respected while mutually respecting each other. That is the only way to live happily now and have a promising future. It remains to work out modalities for achieving this.

Recommendations

Based on the above facts, this paper recommends that Nigeria should encourage the study of religion in its tertiary institutions. Every tertiary institution in Nigeria should establish a Department of Religion. If that institution is specialized, for example, University of Technology or Agriculture, religion should be a two or more semesters General Studies (GS) programme. Religion should also hold as a GS course for all tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This is important so as to divest the students of some of their religious Absolutes before their youth service. They would learn, as

Anderson (2004) indicates, of the paradox of the "one" and the "many" in religion, meaning that religion *as* religion is one but with many systems. Again, in exploring the unity of all religions, Durkheim (1995) has equally argued that paths are many but truth is one. When, therefore, students are tutored unto convictions on these realities, it would help to reduce inter-religious crises experienced in some institutions of higher learning which most of the times turn out to be national religious conflicts.

The paper suggests that each religion is free to establish its own study center which should be monitored to make sure there is no "indoctrination" to the hatred of other religions. The monitoring should be done by experts in religious affairs, graduates of religion, with the authority/backing of Nigerian government.

There should be no discrimination against graduates of religion in Nigeria's economy. In fact, the more they are employed the more the opportunities they have to formally and informally build bridges for religions in Nigeria, especially between Islam and Christianity. They do this through dialogue and communication.

Since religion is relational; and sustainable development in Nigeria, as this paper has argued, rests principally on cordial relationship between Nigeria's two major missionary religions, Islam and Christianity. It is suggested that no department in any tertiary institution in Nigeria should be identified with the study of either Islam or Christianity. This is not secularism. It is a step towards religious sanitization in a religiously beleaguered society. It would create neutrality in the study of religion that would enhance such religious relations in Nigeria that would heal old wounds and manage new problems. It would lead to reducing religious conflicts drastically.

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