Promoting Interfaith Relations in a Multi-Religious Society for Sustainable Development

Lawrence Adelaja ADEIWA

lawrenceadeiwa@yahoo.com: +2348062519794
Department of Christian Religious Studies,
Sikiru Adetona College of Education, Science and Technology,
Omu-Ajose, Ogun State, Nigeria

Religion according to many religious scholars has a powerful influence on every aspect of society. Professor J. K. Ayantayo (2023) who also discussed the potent influence of religion in his book, Sociological of Religion in African Concept, remarked that religion has an impact on a person, a group of people, and a nation. This position is apparent in a multi-religious society like Nigeria. People are conscious of their religious practices and sentimental about them so much that it often influences their behaviours. The arguments over beliefs and religious superiority have repeatedly brought the disruption of societal peace and destruction of lives and properties. Although there have been efforts on the part of government and religious stakeholders to promote peace, the challenge of religious intolerance and religious differentiation in every aspect of the nation is a cancer worm that has been a recurrent decimal within our society. As a developing country with a high rate of poverty, some religious extremists have adopted dysfunctional roles to wage wars against their probable religious opponents without just cause. Interfaith dialogue among religious functionaries and their followers will enhance sustainable development particularly when there is a continuing effort on their part to respect all religions and their beliefs regardless of their convictions. Against this backdrop, this paper tends to discuss the need to promote interfaith relations for sustainable development using observation, qualitative and descriptive methodologies.

Keywords: Multi-religious society, Interfaith relations, Sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

It becomes pertinent to take the sociological influence of religion on society to be significant. Adekoya (2017) averred that the relationship between religious institutions and social development cannot be separated. This notion is collaborated by Ayantayo, (2023) who also said that religion and society have a symbiotic relationship because of the effect each has on the other. Since human experiences differ, religious convictions differ. Religion will continue to be relevant as long as man exists. Religion interacts with everything that man interacts with. Nigerians have emotional and sentimental attachments to religion because it gives practitioners the explanations and consolation on everything around them.

Nigeria as a multi-religious society still battles with religious dysfunctions like dogmatism, bigots and religious extremism. The dastardly and unlawful killing of an innocent student of Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto, Deborah Samuel and the destruction of properties in Sokoto State, Nigeria in May 2022 by her classmates on the allegation of religious provocation still shows the level of religious intolerance among Nigerians. Deborah was accused of blasphemy for believing Jesus was the saviour. (Achike, 2022)

A situation in which one considers a particular religion superior to others is not limited to religious fundamentalists but as well as politicians who exploit religion for political gains. In Zamfara State under the former Governor, Ahmed Sani, Sharia Law was legitimized in defiance of what is stipulated in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria that no religion should be adopted as a state religion. On Channels TV, the former River State Governor Nelson Wike, a Christian, publicly declared his state a Christian state, which threatens the peaceful coexistence of people of different religions in the State. Politicians tend to put their own religious beliefs ahead of others, raising alarms about religious intolerance and the need for open-mindedness and mutual understanding. (Chukwu, 2022).

People are more interested in protecting their religion than in protecting the national interest. Religious followers have been wrongly informed to think that it is good to fight to defend God and the religion they have. As queried by Ukachukwu (2009:5)," Why should the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) have fear of Islamization of Nigeria? Every action of the government is sometimes considered to be anti-Christian whenever a Muslim is in the realm of affairs over the country. There has been unsubstantiated evidence by the Christians that the Muslims have an agenda to Islamise the country. People are conscious about their religious identity and fight against alienation. Religious consciousness is carried into every segment of society with more pronouncements in the nation's politics. The fear of a particular religion dominating others has often dictated political parties' choice of candidates.

Religion is also used as an instrument to win voters' support. In the words of Ayantayo (2023:248), "Religion is viewed as a tool to stir up political sentiment, the candidate's religious affiliation is the key factor in deciding whom to nominate". Attempting to use religion as a tool in determining the choice of leaders may prevent the emergence of experienced and competent leaders that will move the nation towards sustainable development. When religion is used as a tool, the nation falls apart and development is slowed. The use of religion as a "tool" was very prevalent in Nigeria before independence (Adeiwa&Akinmeji, 2022). A consideration for religious sectionalism remains a debate in Nigeria's electioneering process and has also been observed in the 2023 presidential elections where a Muslim-Muslim ticket emerged as the winner despite all arguments against it by some Christians.

The world is made up of an array of beliefs and practices, and this diversity should be celebrated. By recognizing the importance of interfaith relations and respecting each other's beliefs, we can bridge the divide and promote greater unity. This can have a great impact on the development of society and ensure that sustainable development is achieved. Interfaith relations should be embraced and encouraged for the good of society. By engaging in relation and constructive dialogue, we can gain a greater appreciation for the unique beliefs of others and work to create positive change. This is essential in development and achieving a more peaceful and tolerant world. Mordi (n.d. p.4) observed that religion has caused some harm to the social coexistence of the Nigerian people through undue rivalry, unjustifiable religious killings and other fanatical dispositions. Every religion shares the blame and this is a misconception at least to the misnomer.

Religion for sustainable development posits religion not only as a spiritual institution but also as an institution that regulates how a man should relate with his neighbour and his environment. Uche (2011), cited by Mordi, stated that religion has two sets of rules: rules that guide man's relationship with God, and man's relationship with his neighbour. Religious beliefs and values can either make or mar sustainable development depending on how individuals and groups interpret and use religion. Those making use of religion as a weapon of terrorism are not true followers of religious tenets. Adekunle (2003:118) asserted that those promoting religious terrorism have hidden agenda. This agenda is often about selfish interests using religion as a cover-up.

The dysfunctional aspects of religion have over the year retarded socio-economic and political development. Everyone hides under religion to promote personal interest." Religion is not respected but rather used as a tool by dishonest politicians, false prophets, traders, and married couples for their gain through coercion, manipulation, and deception." (Adeiwa&Akinmeji, 2022:41). Nigerian society depicts Karl Max views about religion as the opium of the people. Religion has become a means of exploitation in the hands of religious actors and a source of hope to religious followers. Arinze (1988) cited in Ninyio (2001) also added that religion can damage a nation where adherents of religions ignore one another, rival one another and engaged in unfriendly actions. It is expected that religious adherents live by the values of religions they embrace, the values that are of positive impact.

Tveit (2016) referred to what Nabarro considered as characteristic roles of religious communities and faith-based development in advancing the Sustainable Development Agenda: These are;

> Promoting the inclusion of different groups; Offering peaceful channels for conflict resolution; Upholding the human rights of the most vulnerable; Reminding political leaders of their duty to enable all people to realize their rights; Helping ensure that investment takes place in communities, with people at the local level making those investments with their resources; Mobilizing people everywhere, especially young people; Sharing expertise on how to deliver services to those who are hardest to reach.

This study will draw upon observation, qualitative and descriptive methods to gain insight into how individuals within religious communities approach sustainability. It discusses meaning and the need for interfaith relations, its challenges and how interfaith relations can promote sustainable development. The perennial problem of conflicts and fear of religious domination among religious adherents can be resolved when there is good relationship, tolerance and dialogue despite religious diversity.

The study will make an essential contribution to the literature on religious beliefs and sustainable development. Furthermore, the findings of this study can be used to promote a better understanding of the role of religion in achieving peaceful co-existence and sustainable development goals.

Meaning of Sustainable Development, Multi-Religious Society, and Interfaith Relations
Sustainable Development: It is a goal that every society strives to achieve for the betterment of life. It seeks a better world that caters for the wellness of mankind and other creatures. Sustainable development put into consideration the human environment and various institutions that man interacts with. As asserted by Rifka and Najim (2021), it revolves around human social well-being, and environmental sustainability. It attempts to address the challenges faced by man with efforts to provide solutions.

Multi-Religious Society: According to Cambridge Advance Learner Dictionary, a multi-religious society involves several religions. Nigeria is a typical example of a multi-religious society. A society where people practice different faith base on beliefs is a multi-religious society. Religious practices in Nigeria are categorised into three, namely: African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity.

Interfaith Relations: Interfaith is also called religious pluralism. Inter-religious relationships are about giving up the belief that our religion is the only possible religion acceptable to God. It is to respect the religion of others and be tolerant. According to the Collins Dictionary, interfaith means the participation of more than one religion. It also means "occurring between people of different religions". It's about understanding our important differences, but also recognizing our commonalities, working together for peace, justice and healing in our world." (Wikipedia)

Auguste Comte's Theory Of Religion
Auguste Comte's positivist theory of religion is essential to this work in that it advocates the unity of mankind for development. True religion should have creeds and beliefs that are capable to foster progress in society. Religious tenets are to be used to create an enabling environment for development. Giving credence to Comte's view, Dzurgba (2009:24) advocates a religion of humanity, which "directs people's efforts towards the improvement of the nature and conditions of man". This form of religion is

not only about spirituality but directing its activities for the well-being of mankind. Three principles are given for a true religion that is needed for inspiring and cooperation among members of the society. These are stated as follows: "Love is the principle, Order is the basis; Progress is the end" (Dzurgba, 2009: 25).

As expatiated by Ayantayo, Comte believed that order is necessary to promote cooperation in the society, which in turns would translates into progress and breakthroughs in industrial and technical enterprises. Religion in the view of Comte is that of a peaceful coexistence among mankind. Religion is to promote virtues of social order, "love, discipline, and justice which are important for social cohesiveness and societal stability" (Ayantayo, 2023:68).

The Position of this Paper

The position of this paper is that social cohesion is needed among people of various religions to promote sustainable development. Religious organizations and religious leaders must encourage adherents of religions to cooperate and tolerate one another to solve common problems. These problems include how to coexist without fear of any form of terrorism, how to have political stability and leadership accountability that will impact the dividends of democracy without religious sentiment in the electioneering process, how to alleviate poverty through economic cooperation, how to live in a world free of war and how to solve environmental and other social problems. Religion by its functions if adhere to should promote peace, unity and cooperation necessary for socioeconomic and political development.

The Need for Interfaith Relations

People of different religions must coexist in a way that ensures the safety of their lives and property. Ayantayo (2023) identifies religious pluralism as one of the current socio-religious themes and problems in the sociology of religion. Inter-religious mean the interactions between different religions or members of different religions. Ayantayo (2023:451) says that "there are believed to be 4,200 different religions in the world." Inter-religious is the recognition that this world belongs to all of us and that we must come together to ensure a safe and peaceful world. To achieve this, it is necessary to use the positive functions of religion. People must unite to make the world a better place. The Catholic Church, through its various leaders, has always advocated world peace and the need for interfaith relations.

The Church has been using the word 'ecumenism' as a conceptual connotation met for the promotion of unity among the Christians. Interfaith relation is the movement toward unity and cooperation among the various religions in society in search of peace and solutions to common problems. No religion is more important than the others. The indigenous religion refers to as African Traditional Religion is not less important than other religions. In the words of Ciocan (2019:7) "It is simply the aspiration of peaceful, harmonious coexistence among the adepts of all religious beliefs, not

trying to circumscribe each other, but to understand and subsequently accept each other for what they already are, and not for something that could become".

Every happening in society affects people of all religions. COVID-19 and other related social problems affect all human beings and the solutions are to be jointly sought without religious discrimination. Even during war, people of different religions first see themselves as one family that must fight for survival before thinking about the religion they belong to. This was the case during and after World War II. The Church saw the need for all human beings to come together. Almost all religions claim to have emanated from God in the course of history based on experiences about the supernatural or the most Supreme Being. Interfaith relations should not aim at conversion into other religions or placing one's religious convictions over other religions. Pope Francis cited in Archdiocese of Vancouver emphasises the importance of dialogue regardless of all obstacles. He considered dialogue as a key tool for developing understanding and respect between people of different faith. It is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. The rallying point of unity is in the claim of a belief in God by every religion, and the assertion that such religion is good to be embraced.

Challenges of Interfaith Relations in a Multi-Religious Society
Observation is also one of the methodologies in the study of the sociology of religion (Ayantayo, 2023). It won't be out of place to share some observations in this paper. Nigerian society is used as a case study. Nigeria is known to be a religiously populated country with religions manifesting in every aspect of societal life. In some organisations and communities, religious consciousness is brought into play: when a Muslim says the opening prayer, a Christian will be asked to say the closing prayer, and vice versa. We can as well see religious manifestation in the name giving at a child naming ceremony, names like Testimony, Jesunimi, Muhammad, Aminat; and in the change of names after conversion from one religion to another; Ogundipe changed to Oludipe, Marriam to Marry and Isaac to Isiaka. Some of these observations include:

Social Exclusion
Social Exclusion is the detachment of "groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normal, normatively prescribed activities of the society" (Ayantayo, 2018:18). In Nigerian society, only Christianity and Islam are considered to be good religions. Even in the electoral process and various public institutions, these two religions are given prominent positions. Other religions like African Traditional Religion are given little or no recognition in public places. These acts of social exclusion are detrimental to inter-religious dialogue because it gives room for discrimination, intolerance, bigotry and inequality.

Religious Leaders: Fear of Losing Followers

Religious Leaders are the root cause of religious prejudice. This is not limited to the relation between a particular religion and other religions but also in the same religion. Some religious leaders preach hatred to their members against anyone who is not in their fold. They do this for fear of losing their followers to other leaders. In the killing of Deborah Samuel, according to Achike (2022), in The Guardian Newspapers, the murderers did so according to what they have been told on the premise of total rejection of any other religious views contrary to theirs. Religious leaders' selfish interest to retain members often resorts to the indoctrination of followers with wrong religious teachings while condemning other people's religions.

Economic Purpose

It is also observed that people hide under religion to promote their economic interests. This is not peculiar to people who hide under the name of God or religion to sell their commodities but also to religious leaders who exploit people in the name of religion. The religious leaders are placed in the position of Capitalists who control the means of production. The means of production control by religious leaders is religion itself which has become the hope of many in the present state of economic frustration and the desire to have the solution to whatever an individual regards as a "spiritual problem". Karl Marx's views about religion are very much applicable to Nigerian religious experiences, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of the soulless conditions. (Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences, 2002)

Religion is highly commercialized in Nigerian society. A childless woman told me how a prophet sold a sachet of "pure water" for #5,000 to those seeking spiritual solutions during a church programme. In the words of Ayantayo (2018:19), "This unpleasant development, which is contrary to what the pulpit teaches, is also evident in the sales of sacred and cultic religious objects at high prices in a situation that takes economic advantage of ailing, spiritually and economically deprived, frustrated and depressed religious worshipers…"

To keep religious followers under control, religious leaders either place themselves above others or place their religions above others. That explains why there is a regular argument among religious adherents over which religious leader is most powerful or better, and the religion most acceptable to God. Those who murdered Deborah Samuel did so out of the religious convictions taught them by their religious leaders. In the incident, it was gathered that argument over religious superiority and which name should be called for salvation - Jesus or God. In the words of Achike (2022), "the students were zealous for their God who could not defend himself from the 'insult' of Deborah Samuel. Allah is most omniscient, most powerful, and mighty, we have been told."

Nigerian Politics

The damage politicians have used religion to cause in Nigerian society seems not to be over yet, considering such to be mission impossible for the party to win the elections while some did not. "In Nigeria, religious differentiation in the political circle is spearheaded by religious bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria and the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs such that the choice of a candidate is about Christian/Muslim or Muslim/Christian ticket" (Ayantayo, 2018:15). The Nigerian general elections in 2023 been chaotic because of religious sentiment: a debate on Muslim-Muslim tickets instead of competence and derivative goals. Religious actors and their followers should not put their religion above societal goals. There seems to be a recurrence of the division and religious affinity in Nigeria's socioeconomic and political process. People place religious affinity above national interest. Most Nigerians are operating on the wrong foundation of what religion has created in the past, where those in the realm of affairs in the course allow their religion to influence their decisions in governmental policies. We must think of what benefits our society as a whole instead of our religion.

Religious Fundamentalism and Extremism

Believing that one's religion is superior to the extent of disrespecting and attacking people of other faiths can result in conflict in a multi-religious society. Yoruba land has been known for religious tolerance because the three notable religions could be found in most families. Some families and communities still give recognition to traditional religion and make open practices of it. Some of those who claim to be Christians or Muslims often seek spiritual help from religious traditionalists, most often in secret. Also in some cases, religion is not a barrier to marriage and house rents. Even in employment, there are houses and organisations owned by Christians where they have Muslims and Traditionalists as workers. It was shocking news to hear that the Muslims were throwing stones into the Palace of Oni of Ife, their king in retaliation for the traditional worshipers' attacks against them. In the report given by Adesiyan (2023), it was alleged the Oro worshipers who processed in the daylight attacked the Muslims while praying inside Mosque. The Imam and other Muslims were injured and admitted to the Obafemi Awolowo University Teaching Hospital, Ile-Ife for treatment.

The Sole Claims of Salvation by Some Religions

One of the divergent views that pose a problem to the unity among all religions is the issue of "Salvation" especially Christianity and Islam which preach about their religion as the only religion acceptable to God or Allah. Adherents of various religions need to understand that as heaven is important so also is this earth. The salvation of this earth, and the world we presently occupy also matter. Whatever will ensure our safety in this world and our immediate environment should be taken seriously.

Promoting Interfaith Relations for Sustainable Development

Sustainable development put into consideration the human environment and various institutions that man interacts with. It attempts to address the challenges faced by man with efforts to provide solutions. These challenges include hunger, war, terrorism, gender inequality, unemployment, education and climate change. One of the desires of the United Nations by 2030 is "a call to action to protect the planet and guarantee the global well-being of people"(Wikipedia)

An interfaith relation is an important factor in promoting sustainable development and reducing conflict. For centuries, religious beliefs have been used to create divisions and even to fuel conflicts. Yet, interfaith relationships must be encouraged to promote understanding, tolerance, and cooperation. Religious leaders have a responsibility to ensure that respect for all faiths is promoted in their communities. It is essential that all individuals, regardless of religious affiliation, are included in conversations on current events and issues. This can prove beneficial in understanding how different faiths view the same issue and can lead to constructive solutions

The problems arising from climate change are a concern for all regardless of religious affiliation. The world peace is not negotiable. The on-going war between Russia and Ukraine amidst the threat of Nuclear weapons, and the tension between the United States of America and China over Taiwan are among the challenges facing the world at the moment. Religion has roles to play in mediating and advocating peace. We must strive together to make the world a safe and better place for everyone to live.

Religious communities and religious leaders must continue to raise their voices in the context of economic injustice and rampant inequality, the abuse of political power, and the ugly face of religious extremism and fundamentalism. This is because there is a connection between religious values and social change. The moral principles of honesty, sincerity and integrity, which are rooted in different religions, must be embraced to eradicate corruption which has been a thorn in sustainable development. Religion should take care of political issues. We must base our selection of leaders on character and ability. Religious leaders should not allow politicians to use them as mere means of political gain, but rather hold them accountable and encourage them to ensure good governance. Leaders should not ignore governance or get the priorities wrong by spending money on useless projects to get rich.

Educational institutions should be religiously inclusive, regardless of the religious sect that owns them. Within the framework of sustainable development, religious institutions should consider the poor who are bright but have no financial strength. They must also consider the amount charged on tuition.

Food is one of the staples of human existence. Sustainable development includes the availability of food for humanity in order to fight against hunger. In recent times, Nigerians have witnessed soaring prices of agricultural commodities. One of the reasons for this is the problem of the herdsmen, nomadic cattle herding which has run amok killing farmers and destroying crops. The war

in Ukraine orchestrated by what Russian leader President Putin called a "military operation" has been widely acknowledged to have affected the price of wheat. African countries have been one of the beneficiaries of Ukraine's grain supply. The war affected the supply of this commodity. In addition to lives and property, the United Nations has also denounced the refugee crisis in neighboring countries. Religion should solve common problems not only through the call to prayer, but as a mediator. The Catholic Church has been more involved in not only engaging in intra- and inter-religious ecumenism, but also mediating in places where there is war. All religions under their leaders should be similarly responsive.

Every nation faces various development challenges. Religious leaders should use their positions to address and resolve issues that may arise. In Nigeria today, kidnapping for ransom has become the business of the day. Religious leaders, especially prosperity gospel preachers, should refrain from the false teaching that poverty is a curse and being rich is necessary. They should use their religious influence to redirect their followers to contribute to the development of society through hardwork and innovation rather than doing things that may go against it. Pope Francis, as reported by Windfield, in America Magazine (2023) and Hooper, in The Sun (2023), "urged Italians to have more babies instead of buying pets to save the nation economic collapse", an attempt to restore the country's low birth rate. Sustainable development requires a significant increase in births. The church leader is using his religious stance to call on Italians, regardless of their religious beliefs, to respond to the challenge facing their country. According to the report, Italy's population grew until 2014, when it began to decline due to the death of elderly people. It was a religious voice given in favor of a country that needed to solve the problem of population decline.

Conclusion

Given all that has been discussed, it is imperative that Nigeria addresses religious intolerance in order to ensure the peaceful coexistence of its people. The country can only develop further when religious freedom is respected by all and religious prejudices are eliminated. One way to do this is to promote inter-religious relations. The followers of this religion should see themselves as members of the same community, which should strive together to provide a better life for all. The values and teachings of religion should be used to positive effects that will bring about continuous progressive development, peaceful coexistence and cooperation between believers of different religions is crucial for sustainable development in a multi-religious society.

Recommendations

Religious positivism should be embraced by different religious believers in a multi-religious society for sustainable development. All societies face common problems that require joint efforts to solve. Religion should be a rallying point of unity, not discord, among other things, to solve common

problems and make the world a better place to live. Here, then, are the recommendations considered essential to promote sustainable development in a multi-religious society.

i.   The government should establish a body that regularly brings together diverse leaders from all religions in our society for regular interaction and dialogue to promote peace and unity.

ii. Religious leaders should direct their followers to the need to live in love among people of other faiths. Provocative messages on the pulpit should be discouraged.

iii. The constitution must be respected, which guarantees religious freedom and equality without particular preferences.

iv. Social exclusion should be discouraged

v.   The educational program should be designed to promote religious morality, not religious indoctrination, including religious dialogue.

vi. The government should do more to discourage corruption

vii. The electoral process should be based on competence and fairness rather than religious affiliation.

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