

Christian Religious Education and National Development in the Post-Pandemic Era in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the roles of Christian Religious Education and national development in the post-pandemic era. The COVID-19 that started in China in December 2019 has caused untold suffering and death globally, hitting hard on developed countries such as; China, Italy, Britain, Spain, and the United States. The global spread of coronavirus has proved to the world that there is no superpower and no man-made technological advancement can replace God's supernatural power and the virus spares no one. From a biblical perspective, human trust in political and economic power, technology, nations embracing homosexuality/lesbianism as normal, human arrogance and pride, oppression of the poor, and religious hypocrisy in church and mosque all have the potential to ignite God's wrath. The coronavirus shut down cities, public transport and businesses and created an economic, social and political crisis at a global level. Due to the negative effects of the virus, nothing else in life seems to be very important. The paper used library and oral sources as methods in a qualitative and themes analysis. Major research findings show that Christian Religious Education has had a large positive impact on the history and development of Nigeria. The study of Christian Religious Education facilitates the political, social and moral development of the Nigerian people. Among recommendations is the obvious fact that greater religious engagement

in political and economic institutions should be encouraged to ensure that there is equitable development, and religious leaders should warn people from believing in those people who call Coronavirus a hoax and political game to keep people in power.

Keywords: Education, Religious Education, Development, National Development, Pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria occupies an area of about 923,768, with a population of about 145 million people in 2016¹. The territory is occupied by more than 350 ethnic nationalities that are found in a fairly well-defined location with divergent religious and other beliefs. Religion can serve as a strong force in boosting societal development and can as well retard it. This is a result of man's inability to discover his place and role in existence as a being with responsibility, and sequel to that, he always fails to contribute his quota in sowing a myriad of problems that have surrounded him and the society at large; rather he usually waits for divine intervention believing that 'Manna' will fall from heaven with little or no effort of his own. This is more prevalent among Nigerians. Christian Religious Education has had a tremendous impact on the Nigerian nation over the years; this is evident in the growth and development of the Nigerian civil service, political system, technological growth, communication, industrial growth, and increase in agricultural production as well as medicine and engineering.

Globally, the world has experienced a series of pandemics in human history the most well-known the past among others was the Spanish flu of 1918-1928 which left 500 million people infected about a third of the world's population of 17-50 million people, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in human history². Furthermore, a similar pandemic of the 21st century was reported on 31st December 2019 by health officials in China in the Wuhan market where cases of serious respiratory sickness in people were identified. The severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV2) outbreak was

linked to a novel Coronavirus which was later given the innocuous name COVID-19³. On 11th March 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a global public health emergency due to how the deadly virus was spreading and causing death to the majority of populations in affected areas of the world. COVID-19 has impacted religion in various ways including the lockdown of places of worship, and the celebrations of religious festivals.

COVID-19 treats its victims like lepers as mentioned in the book of Leviticus Chapter 13 which says "a person who has a dreaded skin disease must wear torn clothes, leave his hair uncombed, cover the lower part of his face and call out unclean. He remains unclean as long as he has the disease and he must live outside away from others"⁴. COVID-19 victims are usually isolated for treatment and quarantined for 14 days as a measure to contain the spread of the virus. In the past, people who had leprosy were quarantined and isolated from their communities.

In the late 1800s when leprosy was sweeping across the USA, people of Asian origin were usually treated and stigmatized as though they were the cause of leprosy. Lepers were a threat to the communities in which they were treated as an outcast and sometimes believed to be sinners who were serving a punishment that the disease inflicted on them. Stigmatization led victims of leprosy to avoid going for treatment in hospitals for fear of being isolated. The delay in accessing treatment leads to serious lifelong disabilities, loss of limbs and even death. Like leprosy victims, COVID-19 suspects are isolated and stigmatized. Some victims of the pandemic quarantine themselves in their houses, leading to their deaths without accessing treatment.

The major concern of this paper is to examine the ways through which religion as one of the agents of change could contribute to Nigerians' development in the post-pandemic era. This discussion has become necessary because the functions of Christian religious education (CRE) in national development cannot be overemphasized. The importance of religion in national development has generally been recognized and variously mentioned in the past. However, little attention has been given to it in national development by the

government. The title of this paper is yet another recognition that religion, especially Christian religious education has a role to play in national development, especially in the post-pandemic era.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

To discuss this paper, there is a need to define some key words.

Religious Education

The term religious education accurately describes the general investigation of the religious dimension of life and the common human quest for a transcendent ground of being. But if a religious community uses its specific tradition to sponsor people in their transcendent quest, if a certain relationship with a transcendent ground of being is advocated and a particular symbol system offered for expressing that relationship in the community, then that educational activity should be specifically identified with that tradition. For this reason when religious education is done by and from within a Christian community, the most descriptive term to name it is Christian religious education⁵.

Religious education is therefore a term given to education concerning the teaching of religion in schools, colleges and institutions of higher learning. Religious education is the teaching of a particular religion and its varied beliefs, doctrines, customs, rites and personal roles. It is a subject offered in universities mostly by students offering education, while those who do not pursue education offer religious studies. It is the instruction of faith, spiritual growth and teaching of morals in schools and colleges. In the context of this study, Religious Education focuses on imparting societal values and spiritual growth aimed at ensuring tolerance and harmonious living. Religious Education as a subject of study aims at ensuring the incorporation of multi-religious and cultural understanding thereby promoting spiritual growth and finding out solutions to world challenges of peace, harmonious living, respect for life, development and human rights. Religious Education, classroom teachings and learning environments uphold the principles of other key learning areas where the quality of learning is supported by appropriate pedagogical practices.

Education

Lawrence Cremin defines education as the deliberate systematic and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills or sensibilities as well as any outcomes of that effort.⁶

Also, education is seen as the process by which the society, that is parent, the community, and the home moulds the individual by subjecting him to a selected and controlled environment for his attaining social competencies and optimum individual development⁷. This definition emphasizes a change in behaviour that involves mode and style of thinking, feeling and acting.

Development

Development has been defined as a widely participatory process of social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom and other values) for the majority of the people through gaining greater control of their environment⁸. Development generally refers to improvement in social status and infrastructure. To Efevbokhan, development broadly means good growth and desirable access to health care and other services as well as a marked improvement in lifestyle and overall well-being. All these require massive application and utilisation of resources⁹.

National Development

National development can be described as the overall development or collective socio-economic political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation. This is best achieved through development planning which can be described as the country's collection of strategies mapped out by the government. National development is also seen as the ability of a country or countries to improve the social welfare of the people, for instance by providing social amenities like quality education, potable water, transportation infrastructure, medical care, etc to achieve an increase in per capita income as well as the reduction in inequality, poverty, illiteracy and disease.

Development is defined in terms of the quantitative changes taking place in society, with special attention given to statistical indices of economic growth such as Gross National Product (GNP) Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or per capita income becoming the yardsticks of development¹⁰. In other words, high scores on variables of economics necessitate a corresponding improvement in people's quality of life. A cursory glance will reveal that this is not always the case. Wealth may be restricted to only a fraction of a country's total population with the rest lacking the necessities of life. Most third-world countries are historically-attested cases.

Development is a process through which the material conditions of members of a given society progressively improve¹¹. It is only when poverty, unemployment, social inequality and cultural dependence in society are eradicated or at least reduced that one can talk of national development. According to Femi Adelakun;

Changes must be qualitative in the sense of positively affecting the quality of life index of the members of society for them to constitute a process of development. And the effects must be spread to the generality of members of the society for the process to be national¹².

For him, therefore, authentic national development refers to a process whereby a society increases its capability to manipulate and control the forces for the enhancement of the quality of life of its members.

THE GOALS OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

It is only by recognizing the goals of national development that we can positively determine the functions of Christian religious education within the context of these goals. The goals of all national development are to improve the lives of the citizens in question within the context of a growing economy and an emphasis on the good of the community as a whole. Measurement of improvement may be material, such as an increase in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or social services such as literacy rates and the availability of health.

PANDEMIC

The term ‘pandemic’ means a serious infectious disease that spreads rapidly between people and occurs at the same time not only in one country but around the world^{13 14}. As far as the factors that led to the pandemic outbreak are concerned, a new infectious viral lung disease began in Wuhan China at the end of 2019. It is probably a disease associated with the Coronavirus crossing the interspecies barrier. The pandemic is developing on a global scale. It has been quite successfully brought under control in Asian countries such as China, South Korea, Singapore, and Japan but it is rapidly developing in Europe, the USA and other parts of the world. The current outbreak of COVID-19 has similarities and differences with the previous acute respiratory syndrome (SARS; 2002-2003) and MERS respiratory syndrome (2012-present). Most of the secondary SARS and MERS transmissions took place in hospital settings while in the case of COVID-19, significant transmission occur between close contacts.

One of the fundamental methods of limiting the expansion of COVID-19 is social distancing. This means quarantine and a radical change in contact between people which goes towards virtualization and online contact. It is important that religions in general and Christian denominations, in particular, are based on religious communities which means that the pandemic is a particular challenge for the identity and life of these communities.

THE NEXUS BETWEEN EDUCATION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Education is the bedrock of development worldwide. The quality of education naturally determines the quality of development. Education appears to be a mystical word that wields answers to many of the challenges in the world today. The relationship between education and national development is a fact, such that education is now internationally accepted as a key development index. This explains why contemporary world attention has focused on education as an instrument of launching nations into the path of sustainable development. It is in

recognition of the importance of education that governments at all levels in Nigeria have committed to the country's educational policies for the citizens to have access to education. Education, therefore, in a broad sense improves the capabilities of individuals and the capacity of institutions and becomes a catalyst for the closely interrelated economic, social, cultural and demographic changes that become defined as national development.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

Education is the bedrock of development, but unfortunately, education in Nigeria is bisected with myriads of problems. These include poor funding, and thus poor education infrastructures, inadequate classrooms, teaching aids, projectors, computers, laboratories and libraries, paucity of quality teachers and poor/polluted learning environment. In addition to these inadequacies, our school system is plagued with numerous social vices, such as examination malpractices, cultism, hooliganism and corruption. The poor and declining educational performance of students in the Nigerian educational system owing to examination malpractices is becoming so alarming that the achievement of the set goals of teaching students to contribute positively to the sustainability of him and that of the nation is endangered.¹⁵

Moreover, examination malpractice constitutes one of the most debilitating problems facing the Nigerian education system today and has constantly manifested itself in both private and public primary and secondary schools as well as colleges and institutions of higher learning including the examination bodies in Nigeria.

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Religion can contribute to national integration, political mobilization, reformation of ethnic identity, nationalism, peaceful coexistence, and economic, social and political development. The role

of religious education in national development cannot be overemphasized. Ozizi and Ocho (33) noted that even though the Christian missionaries' major objectives in establishing schools were the propagation of Christianity, their greatest legacy was their educational work and the development of indigenous languages into writing. They summarized the contributions of religious education brought by western missionaries as follows:

- Preservation through translation and writing of major languages. Examples include Ibo, Yoruba, Efik, Nupe, Zaar, Hausa, etc thus creating linguistic homogeneity.
- Facilitation of political, social and moral development of the Nigerian people.
- The creation of law and order in place of inter-tribal wars and anarchy ensured the suppression of abominable crimes repugnant to Christian morality.
- Contribution to social and moral degeneration through churches, schools and health services as well as preventing the demoralization of society.

RELIGIOUS APPROACH TOWARDS PREVENTION OF PANDEMICS SUCH AS COVID-19

Many of the world's faithful have altered long-standing religious practices to avoid the spread of the new Coronavirus. The crisis of corona has prompted many religious leaders to appeal to their followers to not only take safety precautions but also to embrace their spirituality to help confront the health, social and economic challenges ahead. Robinson says, "Religious leaders have regularly offered prayers and words to support their communities. They have sent messages to empower the people of God"¹⁶. So, Corona is a storm which will end with a prayer to Jesus who saved his disciples. By listening to the words of religious leaders, people can imbibe what God is telling them. In Revelations 8:17-21, John says: "And in my vision, I saw the horses and their riders, they had breastplates, red as fire, blue as sapphire and yellow as Sulphur. The horse's heads were like lions' heads and from

their mouths came out smoke and sulfur, third of humanity was killed by those three plagues; the fire, the smoke, and sulphur coming out of the horses' mouths. For the power of the horses was in their mouths and also their tails. Their tails are like snakes with heads and they use them to hurt people. But for the rest of humanity, all those who had not been killed by these plagues did not turn away from their sins". They did not stop worshipping demons or the idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood which cannot see, hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, magic, sexual immorality and stealing. From this account of revelations, a question that is raised is whether COVID-19 experiences have made people repent from their sins or not. In Nigeria, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the report indicates that there was an increase in sexual abuse, early marriages, pregnancies, self-immolation with petrol, domestic violence, abduction and killing of young children, and an indication that people have not repented and changed their evil ways.

In Nigeria, prophets, pastors, etc asked their followers to pray and plead to God to bring an end to this pandemic which they called a storm. Therefore, prayer is needed to end COVID-19. The Bible calls upon Christians not to panic amidst diseases such as COVID-19. They are encouraged to take reasonable steps to avoid exposure to diseases, and protect and provide for their families as they pray unceasingly.

LESSONS WHICH CHRISTIANS SHOULD LEARN FROM THE COVID-19 QUARANTINE AND LOCKDOWN

- The global crisis caused by COVID-19 indicates that humanity is weak. Money, materialism, technology, and science are not the answers to human problems. Oden quotes Psalms 103:15-16 which says; "As for us, our life is like grass. We grow and flourish like a wild flower, then wind (Coronavirus) blows on it and it is gone and no one sees it again". While Psalm 19:12 teaches us to number our days¹⁷.
- The coronavirus has shown that as human beings, we have limitations to control ourselves, destiny, money, property,

science and technology. Humanity could not control the virus that started in China and it eventually spread globally. Even when there were lockdowns and quarantines, the virus continued to spread.

- The coronavirus has shown that all humanity is equal, the infection from the virus cuts across all boundaries of race, language, culture, colour, economic, political and religious strata. Amidst the fear, isolation pain and death caused by COVID-19, the human race is equal which is the original intention of God.
- The psychological pain one experiences when isolated due to suspension of Coronavirus, is not different from being treated like a leper and is not an easy thing to contend with, yet many people infected and suspects of COVID-19 have to be isolated from the rest of the community. In Leviticus 13:45, persons with a dreadful disease were forced to wear torn clothes, leave their hair uncombed, cover the lower part of their face and call out “unclean, unclean” and had to live outside the camp as long as they had the disease. In the case of Coronavirus, if one is identified as a victim, the entire family is isolated and sometimes they are even mistreated by neighbours because they are seen as outcasts and dangerous people to society.
- The coronavirus has caused fear and panic at the individual, family, community, national, regional and global levels. But the good news is that God is in control and will guide His followers through the storm of COVID-19 and other related pandemics and as well as the challenges of life.
- COVID-19 has put humanity in a situation that calls for the need for infected individuals, families, homes, affected communities and medical personnel that risk their lives in treating those infected with the virus.
- The coronavirus pandemic confirms the teachings depicted in Ecclesiastes 12 that everything people cherish and cling to in this world is vanity. Chasing the things of the world is like chasing the wind.

- In times of pandemic and other challenging situations, God remains our hope. This is highlighted in John 11:25-26 in which Jesus says "I am the resurrection and life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die, they will have eternal life again. Therefore, there is a need for Christians to pray as they walk in the storm of Coronavirus, proclaim Jesus' love and meet the needs of the poor. Oxford (2020) acknowledges that days of Coronavirus are strange days filled with fear, hysteria, anxiety, and pain. The Old Testament speaks of people who are subjected to pandemics and these experiences are relevant to our country Nigeria experiencing the Coronavirus pandemic.

FUNCTIONS OF CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (CRE) IN THE SOCIETY

- Christian Religious Education by its value and moral teachings shape the ethical and moral life of the people, this in turn makes societies habitable and peaceful to a large extent.
- It integrates individuals into the larger society; giving them a sense of identity within the larger community.
- It implores individuals to live a life that is honourable and fitting with the ideas of one's faith and with the expectations of the community thereby facilitating an atmosphere for positive structural and infrastructural development.
- Religion especially Christian religious education has had a large positive impact on the history and development of Nigeria: Religion incentivizes action, change and hope. Often this is seen in the form of charities and support networks. However, I believe the largest positive impact of this is seen at the individual level. By providing a purpose in life, or by giving some form of social awareness, religion is often providing hope that makes people change to become better people. The establishment of mission schools made many people literate. This is evident in the level of literacy among Nigerians today. The acquired knowledge assisted in curbing wanton destruction

that could have risen from ignorance. The coming of Christianity into the Nigerian culture has ushered in Christian education which is a way of impacting the knowledge of God's word to man to influence or bring a change or transformation of his life to become useful to God and others.

- Economic freedom: While poverty has not been completely eradicated from Nigeria, most people are now economically free based on the influence of Christian religious education which has widened their horizons¹⁸.
- The study of Christian religious education (CRE) promotes national unity.
- We get to understand that God created all people regardless of gender, race, and religion. So there is no need for conflict or discrimination.
- Christian Religious Education (CRE) contributes to the national goals of education, for example, Patriotism, Nationalism.
- In Christian education, the truth of God is brought to bear upon every aspect of daily living.
- Christian education contributes to the church, its ministry of discipleship, and the life of the individual in society. As a consequence of this, the impact of religion cannot be ignored in national development.

Reed states that religion has reasserted her role in giving directives in the area of moving the country forward.¹⁹

Consequently, a faith-based view of development would necessarily emphasize an attitudinal change in projects of human development, be it at the individual or organizational level. It takes the gospel out of the skies to an experiential level; this could be done from the pulpit, classroom as well as the streets.

Bosede has given an insight into the immense impact of religion when he says there is no doubt that religion plays a vital role in the development, maintenance and management of every society. Religion being the bedrock of society covers every sphere of life of the individual in society. As a consequence of this, the impact of religion cannot be ignored in national development.²⁰

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATORS (CREs) AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

Christian Religious Educators (CREs) are also part of God's agents of change or development in Nigeria. These sets of people are public persons who act for the communities in the classroom. They are the priest in the classroom, the pastor in charge of the classroom and anybody acting in that capacity is expected to renew the relationship between God and man in society. Their actions must be towards human and society's well-being and must genuinely represent the spirit of the people.

Christian Religious Educators (CREs) must be proactive in teaching and paving ways for the pupils/students towards correcting the battered image of the country. They must be morally upright and teach by example for their students to emulate. The fear of the Lord must be inculcated in the minds of the students. When there is fear of God, nobody will think of corruption. Christian Religious Educators (CREs) must also preach against violence, kidnapping, terrorism and social vices to create a good impression about Nigeria among the international communities. Above all, Christian Religious Educators (CREs) must see themselves as agents of change or development who can be used to solve part of the country's problems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Religious bodies should collectively make bold steps to criticize structural injustices evident and noticeable in the administration and government's socio-economic policies.
- Greater religious engagement in political and economic institutions should be encouraged to ensure equitable development.
- The two dominant religious bodies in Nigeria must go beyond merely issuing communiqué on national issues to taking a practical and more active part in the political education of the people while pointing out their civic responsibility for development.

- Religious organizations should embark on the establishment of industrial training and skill acquisition centres for the training of the teeming population of unemployed youths.
- The Coronavirus pandemic has changed our world and our thinking. The things that were deemed important to us (wealth, power, prestige, soccer leagues worldwide, parades, parties, etc) are nothing in comparison to the pain Coronavirus inflicts on human life. God is perhaps using this calamity to draw humanity to Himself.
- For meaningful development to take place in the educational sector, the government needs to readdress the issue of funding.
- Religious leaders should warn people from believing in people who call Coronavirus hoaxes and political games to keep people in power.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to establish the potency of religion as a medium of change and the role it has played and can still play in national development efforts with particular reference to the Nigerian experience. In doing so, some conclusions were made concerning the role of Christian Religious Education in facilitating the attainment of national development objectives as well as in promoting genuine national goals and aspirations in the post-pandemic era; finally, recommendations were made.

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