Religion and Societal Development: A Philosophical Appraisal of African Situation

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Abstract

Religion can serve as a strong force in boosting societal development and can as well retard it. This, for me, is as a result of man's inability to discover his place and role in existence as a being with responsibility and sequel to this, he always fails to contribute his own quota in solving a myriad of problems surrounded him and the society at large rather, 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 the Africans. This work will employ the philosophical methods of hermeneutics and analysis in proffering answer to questions like: how can religion help in fostering societal development? What are the limitations of this help? How does man come in the issue of societal development? What are his roles in this regard? This work is an effort to stress that extreme religiousness of Africans is among the factors retarding development in Africa but that does not mean that the work condemns the practice of religion among Africans for it is also part of its aims to establish some of the roles religion can play to facilitate progress in Africa.

Introduction

The quest for societal development has been the major reoccurring issue in the world particularly in Africa where many societies are far from being developed. Among the factors responsible for this in Africa is religion which could serve as a good instrument for societal development but when not properly managed and conditioned, can as well retard this societal development.

This research work decides to beam its light on religion because of its enormous value among the Africans. An African is described by J. S. Mbiti as being 'notoriously religious' as religion plays great roles in everything he does. He conceives water not as it washes but as it purifies, he sees the dryness of a tree as a symbol of life and death, stepping his foot on a stone while walking, has a spiritual interpretation etc. This paper will examine the implications for this religiosity of Africans to societal development. In her article: *What is the correlation between religion and development in African?* Sarah C. (2009) observes:

> … Africans are as religious as is the continent underdeveloped. In looking at the 2008 human development index, Sierra Leone, Congo and Malawi which top the world's religiosity list are among the world's 20 least developed countries. At the same, Norway, Sweden, Japan, France and Denmark are among the world's so most developed countries, yet feature in the 11 least religious countries. It is not my intent to sound blasphemous, but I question the relationship between religion and development in Africa. It's more like a chicken and egg question: Are Africans more religious because as a way to cope with the hardship associated with underdevelopment or is Africa more underdeveloped because of religions?

Religion has to do with people's beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of a deity or deities and divine involvement in the universe and human life. Societal development, on the other, involves the process of changing and becoming larger, stronger, or more impressive, successful, or advanced i.e. ''the capacity of a

given society, increasingly, to use its own resources of land, minerals and man-power to feed its own people even in a situation of population growth". A close examination of the two concepts (religion and societal development) will reveal that they are centered on man i.e. they are being carried out by man and for man. But the problem lies on the fact that the extreme practice of one will negatively affect the being of the other i.e. extremism in religion e.g. killing in the name of religion, *manna from heaven syndrome* among Africans who believe that God will do everything and therefore, one should be lazy and wait for divine interventions etc will mar societal development while extremism in societal development can also make people go against the religious teachings. This paper will do justice to questions like: what are the negative impacts of religion on African development? What roles can religion play in societal development?

In order to facilitate more clarity and understanding of the topic of this paper, some key concepts need to be analyzed. Hence, we will briefly analyze the concepts of religion and societal development. In its etymology, Haring (1964) traced the term 'religion' to three Latin words as its roots, namely: *Ligare* (meaning to bind), *Relegere* (meaning to unite, or to link), and *Religio* (meaning relationship). In his analysis of this etymology of religion, Omoregbe (1993) holds that

> …the etymology of the word 'religion' shows that it is essentially a relationship, a link established between two persons, namely, the *human person* and the *divine person* believed to exist. It is something that links or unites man with a transcendent being, a deity, believed to exist and worshipped by man.

According to Merriam (1980), religion is

> The outward existence of God … to whom obedience, service and honour are due, the feeling or expression of human love, fear or awe of some superhuman and over-ruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observance of rites and ceremonies or by the conduct of life.

In his words, Bouquet (1941) sees religion as "a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply, God." Feuerbach (1957) conceives religion as "… not indeed on the surface, but fundamentally, not in intention or according to its own suppositions, but in its heart, in its essence, believes in nothing else than the truth and divinity of human nature." Thus, according to Feuerbach, when man thinks he is worshiping God he is only worshipping himself, that is, his own nature which he projects outside himself as God.

Having gone this far, we can rightly decipher that religion has no universally accepted meaning this is because religion is conceived and defined differently by different people. It means one thing to theologians, another thing to the anthropologist, sociologist, psychologist, Marxist etc. Religion as we have seen presupposes activities of man in reverence to a being outside himself.

Development on the other hand has been defined variously by scholars, some view development as a process of industrialization and modernization while some view it as purely an economic phenomenon and as such development is just aggregate economic growth. Modernization theory of development was captured by Nwanegbo and Obi (2006):

> The main plank of the modernization theory is that the present stage of the less developed

countries (LDCs) is an original state, through which the developed countries passed through. Therefore, for them to develop means they must move away from their traditional society and follow the path of modernity. Simply translated, this means they should struggle to imitate and look like the West. Development in this instance is equated with Westernization. As they move away from the traditional society, they develop purely Western features of a modern society …

Torado and Smith (2003) captured a pure economic conception of development:

Traditionally, development meant the capacity of a national economy, whose initial economic condition has been more or less static for a long time, to generate and sustain an annual increase in its gross national product (GNP) at rates perhaps 5% to 7% or more.

Alao (1991) sees development as:

A multi-objective process designed to achieve among others, the eradication of poverty and disease, the liberation of the individual, increased productivity within a balanced ecosystem, justice and equity, individual freedom and social security, cultural buoyancy, and the stable society.

Pius Okigbo (1987), in one of his public essays posited the meaning of societal development as:

Economic growth relates mostly to things where as development relates to man. But there is a common bond between them; you will need to multiply the things, in sufficient number (growth) for man to be himself at his best (development). All the things required for his being; its many dimensions, have to be available for him to fulfill himself as a member of society, as homo economics, as a politician, as a religious man, at work and at play etc. it is these dimensions that give the "things" additional meaning and make development possible.

According to UCF Himmelstrand (1985):

A property or attribute which in my view is a basic prerequisite and criterion of 'development' is the capability of a given society, increasingly, to use its own resources of land, minerals and man-power to feed its own people even in a situation of population growth.

Having seen the meanings of religion and societal development, we will now consider the relationship between them.

The Negative Impact of Religion on African Development
Religion no doubt contributes immensely both in harmonious existence of society and also in its development; but extreme adherence to and reliance on religious beliefs at the expense of one's active involvement and contributions to matters of existence is among the factors that retard societal development in Africa. This is exactly the case with Africans in their relationship with supernatural.

A comment posted by a Ghanaian in response to an online poser that questions the correlation between religion and development in Africa states that:

> Africans cope and relate with hardship in a more spiritual way than countries such as Japan. Many Ghanaians adamantly believe in the creator's will and thus tend to fall back on the reasoning that everything is in the creator's hands including the answer to our plight. In Japan, where I was educated and lived for over twenty-five years they foster and excel in a collective group mentality similar to Ghanaians …. But where they do differ is when it comes to taking group action to solve a challenge or pursue an opportunity. Let's Say on simple terms, if the roof leaks, Ghanaians would prayer for God's intervention while the Japanese pool their resources together and fix the leaky roof without depending on divine intervention. After the roof is fixed may be they would give homage to the Gods but the key point is that they would act first.

A critical examination of the above comment will reveal that an average African believes more than he acts. He spends more time in the church praying than committing himself to pragmatic actions that can lead to development. Most times, the aftermath of such acts are the complaints about God not answering his prayers. He fails to recognize the fact that man never is, rather he is always in the state of becoming and by extension 'a society never is, rather it is always in the state of becoming'. The actualization of this 'becoming' can only be achieved by the active involvement of man in the

existential challenges (No doubt of the Divine providence). This extremism among the African religious adherents has been utilized by inefficient and bad political leaders in dubiously finding their ways to the mantle of leadership by applying Machiavellian advice of one appearing in the disguise of religion even when such is not the case in order to win the people's confidence. A statistical look at Nigerian religious activities reveals that the majority of women (apart from the ones that are highly engaged with their jobs) spend almost their days in different prayer houses while their male counterparts will also be busy seeking answers to their existential problem in different miracle houses believing that evil people are behind or responsible for their plights.

While they are busy with these extreme religious practices, their roles as members of society are dearly missed with its dangerous consequences such as: unwanted pregnancies among their daughters and emergence of miscreants from such families, thereby making society pay dearly for this. This is because children from such families will not have the opportunity to appreciate the importance of education as a major key towards societal development.

This paper is not trying to condemn religious practice rather it is a clarion call on all Africans to avoid extremism in religion and start participating actively in solving their existential problems. Extremism is used in this paper to mean the process of one losing his individuality as a being existing in this world in the course of religious activities thereby believing that God will come down to solve his existential problems. Sequel to this, he attributes all his existential problems to spiritual causes and goes on seeking for spiritual remedies. Let us create a scenario to buttress the aforementioned points: An African who encountered the falling of electric bulb on his head will give such incident a spiritual interpretation i.e. that his enemies are at work, while a European will research on the mechanical causes of the

fallen bulb from where further discovery and invention will take place.

Moreover, this paper does not want to venture into the series of religious killings and homicide among Africans. Boko-Haram, an Islamic extremist sect, is still fresh in the mind of Nigerians. As we stated at the beginning of this paper, religion, if properly managed, can facilitate a rapid societal development. We will now turn our attention to the roles religion can play in the societal development.

The Roles of Religion in Societal Development

The roles religion can play in ensuring societal development can never be relegated. Every religion whether Christianity, Islam, African traditional religion, etc has moral values which regulate and harmonize human life. In line with this, Benjamin Franklin stated that "religion will be a powerful regulator of our actions, gives us peace and tranquility within our minds, and render us benevolent, useful and beneficial to other," (Isaacson: 87-88).

Going by the premise that all religions preach against evil, one may possibly conclude that religion embodies basic attributes that can be utilized in ensuring societal development. This is because, for a sustainable societal development to be there must be justice, equity harmony, honesty etc. All these attributes are what different religious groups inculcate in the minds of their faithful. In his confirmation of the role plays by religion in promoting justice, Nzomiwu (1999) confirms that, "Justice is of urgent concern to all mankind. Animists, Marxists confusionists, humanists, Christians are all interested in justice and clamour against injustice. The problem most times is the extension of religious teachings to the practical daily activities of man. This is why Omoregbe (1998) admonishes that there is a need to live a moral life because it is commanded by God. Failure to do this will be

counterproductive in the matter of national development. Johnstone (2001) corroborates this by stressing that:

> What one believes, with respect to that which is good, true, and desirable as well as what God intends for people and society could be expected to influence the choice one makes in the political arena.

In their article entitled "Religion and Development: A new Perspective, on Africa'', Ellis and Haar (2007) advised that:

> Development practitioners therefore need to pay attention to religion, the emerging language of community in African. The role of religion in public life should be considered not only by religious believers, but also by anyone who is thinking hard about development. … Religion, whatever form it takes constitutes a social and political reality.

Whatever else it may be, religion is a way of thinking about the world and about reality in the broadest sense. It is for that reason that religion has a role to play in development, a process that must be assimilated into people's ideas. Development planners and theorists are finally giving thought to the role of religion as a potential agent of development. The World Bank under James wolfensohn duly recognized the roles of religion as a potential agent of development and this view is currently receiving attention from some leading European donor institutions. It seems most useful   to consider the future of development in Africa within the scope of a wider shift away from narrowly economic paradigm of development and in favour of a broader concept that includes a religious or spiritual dimension. Seriously embracing society development

implies taking people's world views seriously and following an integral approach in the development process. Religion provides powerful motivation for many people to act the way they do. It equips many of the world's peoples not only with moral guidance but also with the will to improve their lives and as such remains an integral part of societal development if properly managed.

Given the record of religious fanaticism, it is understandable that the United Nations has been hesitant to invite religion into its negotiations. However, the UN can no longer afford to ignore the immeasurable good that religions have done and continue to do in the world, or the salubrious, far-reaching contributions that they can make to the establishment of a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable global order. Indeed, the United Nations will only succeed in establishing such a global order to the extent that it taps into the power and vision of religion. To do so will require accepting religion not merely as a vehicle for the delivery and execution of development initiatives, but as an active partner in the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of global policies and programs. The historically justified wall separating the United Nations and religions must fall to the imperatives of a world struggling toward unity and justice.

The real onus, however, is on the religions themselves. Religious followers and, more important, religious leaders must show that they are worthy partners in the great mission of building a sustainable world civilization. To do so will require that religious leaders work conscientiously and untiringly to exorcise religious bigotry and extremism from within their faith traditions. It will necessitate that they embrace freedom of conscience for all people, including their own followers, and renounce claims to religious exclusivity and finality. The followers on their own side should deviate from the lazy

thought of waiting for the Divine to solve all their problems with little or no effort of their own.

Conclusion

From the journey so far, one can decipher that both religion and matters of societal development are all activities of man and by implication, the onus is on him to decide how they should be managed. Existentialism as a school of thought in philosophy emphasizes the importance of one's commitment to solving his existential problems; hence, the distinction between two kinds of being by Jean Paul Sartre namely, *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself; being-in-itself* is that being that is reposeful, inactive and does not commit himself to solving his problems while *being-for-itself* is that being that commits himself, chooses in between alternatives, makes choices and strives to solve his existential problems. According to Sartre, though these two beings could be said to exist but the one that has authentic existence is the latter being (*being-for-itself*). The existence of the *being-in-itself* could be likened to the existence of a stone. Drawing from the existentialist school of thought, Africans should exist not as *being-in-itself* but as *being-for-itself*, this is because our lack of development could be partly attributed to our existence as *being-in-itself*. It is very challenging to us Africans today to take our underdevelopment and poverty as having a strong link with our extreme religiosity. The question ask by the world concerning our lagging behind to bringing development in Africa should be answered by ourselves as regard the way we take things for granted believing that manna will fall from heaven. Our assumption that God will do everything for us without striving to contribute our own quota to solving our existential challenges is not a pragmatic one. What if we all die of hunger and disease that we could prevent? Shall that Mighty One not ask us for accountability?

This is a clarion call on Africans to wake up and start a new introspection and rightfully put religion in the faculty of moderation of our behaviours and social relationships and start taking active evolvement in solving our myriad existential problems which are threats to the achievement of societal development.

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