



Religious Education as a Catalyst for peace and Societal Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Religious education has become an increasingly important aspect within the field of sociology and education in recent years. This study examines the role that religious education plays as a panacea for peace and the development of students' beliefs and attitudes towards maintaining harmony in society. The paper is timely and relevant in the context of religious education among various major religious groups and how these groups influence their adherents, either aiding or hindering the development of Nigerian society. It was discovered that certain aspects of religious teachings have a great positive impact on societal cohesion, which leads to development. Recommendations include: religious education should consider the virtue of justice, it should adhere to the demands of rationality, it is expected to be universal, flexible and not myopic, it should be dynamic, and be morally sound and honest so that it will lead to a right conscience rather than a sick conscience.

Keywords: Education, Catalyst, Development, Religious, Peace.

Introduction

Religion is a set of organized beliefs, practices, and systems that most often relate to the belief and worship of a controlling force, such as a person believing in God or another supernatural being. Religion often involves cultural beliefs, worldviews, texts, prophecies, revelations, and morals that have spiritual meaning to members of a particular faith, encompassing a range of practices, including sermons, rituals, prayers, meditations, visiting holy places, symbols, trances, and feasts. While this is a basic idea of religion, there are many different understandings of religion. Not all religions are centred on beliefs in God or supernatural forces. The famed psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud described religion as a form of fulfilment. However, modern psychology recognizes that religion can play an important role in an individual's life and experiences and can even improve health and well-being. Studies have shown that religion can help people develop healthy habits, regulate their behaviours, and understanding their emotions, all factors that can affect their health.

Like other concepts, religion has various definitions. In agreement with Adua (2012), religious education is here defined as a system whereby there is recognition of the existence of a supernatural controller of the universe, God, who is the object of worship, obedience, and love, which ultimately results in practical piety and morality. There are many religions in the world, with varying religious traditions. On the other hand, according to Okeke (2001), education is a



society's contrivance for transmitting to its younger generation the totality of the way of life of that society. This study construes this as the transmission of culture. However, education is both a process and a product. The procedure of inculcating ideas, theories, facts, beliefs, customs, practices, etc., of a given society to its younger ones is society's process of education. The end result of the process, that is, what has been imbibed or learned through education, is the product of education. Religious education is the focus of this study, therefore, is the instruction on the teachings of a particular religion or group of religions, as distinct from moral education, which is broader in scope and is not confined to a particular religion and whose parameter of assessment is consonance with morality. According to Agunwa (2017), "Through religious education, we can inculcate in individuals virtues like obedience, humility, meekness, love for one's neighbor, and forgiveness of injuries." Obedience, love for one's neighbor, and forgiveness are viewed by this paper as especially important for peace, social integration, and, hence, societal development.

For Onah (2017), "Man learns through his religion that certain actions are good or bad, and this directs him toward living a virtuous life. This is needed for good relationships among individuals and for national development." For Ezeanya (2008), religious education is mainly concerned with instilling a sense of the sacred in man and reminding him that human life has a terminus a quo (point of departure) and a terminus ad quem (point of arrival). This helps in an ordered and guided outlook on life, which instigates development.

The three major religions in Nigeria are Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion is another force to be reckoned with, as there seems to be an upsurge in adherence to this religion among many Nigerians today, especially the youth. The effective implantation and spread of the Christian faith in Nigeria took place in the 19th century after Portuguese Roman Catholic Missions had tried but failed in the 14th and 15th centuries. For Okpalike and Nwadiakor (2015), during the spread of Christianity in Nigeria in the said 19th century, the resolution of the British colonial government was that the only way to redeem and regenerate Africans was to teach them to be industrious while giving them the gospel of Christ. This has developmental implications. The Islamic religion and education are said to have reached Northern Nigeria as early as the 8th century and to have reached Nigeria, especially its lands, long before the Islamic Jihad of Uthman Dan Fodio of 1804 through the kingdom of Kanem-Borno. It is on record that Islam has been in Northern Nigeria long before the arrival of colonial masters. African Traditional Religion (ATR), for its part, was the indigenous religion of the people of Africa before they came into contact with the Western world. It is still extant and has made developmental contributions in various societies.

Religious education is generally the cornerstone of all nations. It is a powerful tool for societal progress and development. Education is an instrument of excellence for development and investment in human capital. Essentially, education is conceived as the activities and experiences put together to assist in the all-round development of the learner as an individual and as a member of society. It assists the learner in thinking independently and clearly in fields of knowledge and experiences outside their narrow specialization and also helps them gain an understanding of the people and society in which they live.



Religious Education as a Means for Peace and Societal Development

Every religion aims to teach adherents (within the confines of its intellectual, moral, and practical-living repertoire) how to be good, responsible, and mature human beings equipped with skills and competencies to contribute positively to the all-round growth and development of self, one's family, and society in general. The Christian religion is a classic example of this matter. For Eluu (2017), Christian religious knowledge trains the students morally and instills in them the desire to do good and be virtuous. Islam has also been emphasizing the importance of good ethics in society. Allah praises Prophet Muhammad in the Glorious Qur'an, stating that he possesses excellent virtues, and He himself said he was sent by Allah to ensure people practice good behavior.

The aims and objectives of religious education in Nigeria, according to Obilom (2008), are to educate Nigerian children both morally and intellectually and instill in them the desire to be good citizens. The availability of good citizens is simply the most required factor for accelerating development in any society, and Nigeria in particular, for good citizens make good educators, merchants, politicians, churchmen, imams, scientists, etc., all of whom contribute to meaningful social development. According to Okoye (2014), the relative prosperity of different societies upon European contact was strongly dependent on missionary activity. It exercised greater influence than colonial governments and European traders, impacting human capital in modern Nigeria as well as influencing cultural values and institutions. It should be noted here that missionary activities are chiefly couched in religious education, and Islam, on the other hand, is centered on producing a positive society willing to live in peace and harmony. It is clear from the above position of the cited authors that these activities led to societal development in Nigeria.

Speaking on the curriculum for Christian Religious Education in Nigeria, Olugasa holds: The contents of the books are treated in a holistic manner to build spiritually, morally sound, and upright citizens who would ensure the promotion of the political and socioeconomic development of Nigeria. As Christianity is arguably the same everywhere, it is pertinent here to look into the contents of Christian education in Uganda and see how it compares with that of Nigeria with the hope that the adoption of the rich contents would mean a developmental boon for Nigeria. In Uganda, the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) clarified that one of the national aims of education is to transmit moral, ethical, and spiritual integrity, human fellowship, and tolerance. And for Ugandan NCDC (2009), It is in fulfillment of this national 'broad aim' that the Religious Education syllabus has been designed to assist the learner in developing morally and spiritually so as to grow into a balanced, responsible, and mature person in the community. The aims and objectives of Christian Religious Education in Uganda for NCDC include the following: (a) Development of the Christian virtues of love, joy, and peace, and building a personal Christian ideal to inspire development and growth to maturity; (b) Helping Christians appreciate the common elements in traditional and other religions and Christian beliefs; (c) Developing the Christian moral values of honesty, concern for others, sharing, tolerance, and justice; (d) Developing personal qualities of leadership to serve others in the community.



There is no society in the world, the Nigerian society inclusive, where children are taught how to love, be peaceful, accommodating, honest, altruistic, tolerant, and, very importantly, just and eager to serve (Matt. 20:28), as outlined in the Ugandan model, and that society will not leap into quantum development without peace. Corruption is rife in Nigeria today because of these outlined qualities of religious education, and that same corruption is one chief bane of Nigeria's all-round development and, in particular, social development.

With reference to Christian Religious Education and the Ten Commandments, the Ugandan NCDC responds that responsible, selfless living in society will lead to societal cohesion and peace initiatives. So for Ugandan NCDC (2009), "The learner gets guidance as to how to behave with the help of the Ten Commandments. It also teaches the learner not to mistreat and cheat the poor." However, mistreating and cheating the poor are major causes of underdevelopment in Nigeria and the Third World. On this, Ezeilo (2017) states: "Government's insensitivity to the yearnings and agitations of the marginalized poor communities keeps on rising, despite the resources or inputs being generated from some of these villages and communities." Thus, Religious Education, if imbibed, can change the situation for good. The Ugandan NCDC (2009) teaches: "The learner is expected to develop an understanding of the qualities Jesus had and how He served different people without discrimination. The learner further has to apply them in their lifestyle, and discrimination along ethnic and religious lines is a major bane of development and cohesion in Nigeria, which we must come together to address."

The Christian non-discrimination tenet was the remedy for this contest. Regarding selflessness and service, Jesus is presented by the Ugandan NCDC as a Christian model. Thus, for NCDC (2009), "Jesus spent His life serving others in several ways. Jesus wanted to be a living example of service for others. Jesus made it clear that his mission on Earth was to serve and not be served and to give his life as a ransom for many (See Matt. 20:28). Again, after Mary and Joseph found him in the temple where he remained without their knowledge after the annual pilgrimage, he returned with them and remained under their authority, irrespective of what he was (See Luke 2). When Christians learn through their religious education that service is honorable, they will serve/work without seeking personal gains and thus instigate social development. The Prophet Muhammad lived throughout his life calling for peace, honesty, love, and justice. Allah mentions in the Glorious Qur'an that Prophet Muhammad was sent by Allah to bring peace and harmony to mankind. and that he is a messenger of all mankind. The Prophet Muhammad's life style is a clear example to Muslims on how they should live in harmony, peace and good behavior with others.

On peace, the Ugandan NCDC (2009) teaches: "Peace is God-given (John 14:27). This is beyond the scope of human understanding. Peace is valuable and kept by praying, observing God's commandments, as well as keeping national laws" (p. 23). In Isaiah 9:7, the coming Messiah [Jesus] is called the Prince of Peace. Nigerian Muslims and Christians should continue to pray, endure, and sue for peace, as their religious education demands (but not without conciliatory moves) to foster Nigerian development. Joseph opines that religious leaders and preachers of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria are responsible for fostering peace by cultivating a sincere willingness to engage and work with each other as peace intermediaries. For example, the simple



act of finding out who is the local priest, pastor, or imam within one's vicinity and then reaching out in friendship with these leaders goes a long way to establish channels of communication. Religious leaders should encourage their communities towards peacebuilding by recalling and emphasizing the virtues and principles of tolerance and non-violence taught by their faith.

Generally, Christians and Muslims faithfully listen to their leaders and preachers with respect and reverence. It is imperative that leaders be proactive in setting a good example of inclusivity and openness, reaching out in dialogue, speaking out publicly against violence, injustice, and discrimination, and avoiding arousing negative religious sentiments. Some examples are worthy of note: Pastors and Imams (whose peacebuilding activities are both national and international) have mediated conflict in Nigeria and promoted peace and development through religious education. Religion has all of these benefits and qualities if we really embrace and practice it the right way. However, according to conflict theory, it can also reinforce and promote social inequality and social conflict. This view is partly inspired by the work of Karl Marx, who stated that religion was the opiate of the masses (Marx, 1964). By this, he meant that religion, like a drug, makes people happy with their existing conditions. Marx repeatedly stressed that workers needed to rise and overthrow their bourgeoisie. To do so, he said, they needed first to recognize that their poverty stemmed from their oppression by the bourgeoisie. However, religious people tend to view their poverty in religious terms.

They think it is God's will that they are poor, either because they are testing their faith in Him or because they have violated His rules. Many people believe that if they endure their suffering, they will be rewarded. Their religious views lead them not to blame the capitalist class for their poverty, and thus, not to revolt. For these reasons, Marx said that religion leads the poor to accept their fate and helps to maintain the existing system of social inequality.

Religious Education and its Impact on Peace and Societal Development in Nigeria

According to Ikechi-Ekpendu, Audu, and Ekpendu (2016), religious education can bring about sustainable political development through the inculcation of a high sense of duty, morality, selfless service, respect for human lives, public accountability, love of one's neighbor, sense of humanity, and abhorrence of violence. This is particularly relevant given the Boko Haram crisis, which has taken on a religious-political dimension dating back to the Biafra war. The religious groups in Nigeria are supposed to teach these values to their members in their religious education programs. Onovughe and Mordi (2017) assert that ideal religious education builds a spirit of contentment and faith, fostering a discerning encounter with surrounding cultures and seeking to transform them. Religious education is foundational to all subjects. Nigerian culture is characterized by corruption, indiscipline, impunity, misguided religiosity, and ethnicism. Proper religious education, emanating from the rich cultures and tenets of dominant religions, has the potential to address these challenges.

Therefore, according to Onovughe and Mordi, "The influence of religion and religious education on cultural, economic, socio-political, and spiritual activities in Nigerian society is both pervasive and powerful." Religious education has built the conscience of Nigerians, guiding decisions on social, economic, cultural, political, and spiritual matters. For example, the content



of religious education, in line with cherished African and Nigerian moral norms, has guided the Senate and the Presidency in refusing to accede to the pressure of allowing same-sex relationships in Nigeria, as both Islamic, Christian, and ATR doctrines see it as abominable and counterproductive to sound Nigerian/African human relationships, which are essential for social development.

On the other hand, Uchem (2013) states, □The Nigerian society is not 'woman-friendly,' nor girl-child-friendly. On the contrary, it is 'anti-woman' and 'anti-girl-child,' like some societies across the world. □ Uchem further argues that in the past, women in Nigeria were discriminated against in political appointments and elections, irrespective of their academic and moral qualifications. However, they were not considered due to cultural biases. It is a male-supremacist society that hinders the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by excluding women from decision-making and governance. This tendency discourages women from seeking leadership positions. In this context, the contents of religious education become crucial in schools. Teaching the moral philosophy of religion at various academic levels will help produce good citizens in Nigeria who are not interested in conflict and division. They must be educated according to biblical principles and Islamic teachings.

There is no distinction between males and females, slaves and freeborn, Jews and Gentiles. Rather, we are all in Christ. Thus, the Bible states: □There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female □ for you are all one in Christ Jesus □ (Gal. 3:28). Christianity, Islam, and ATR all teach discipline, hard work, love, patience, peace, respect for constituted authority, justice, truth, honesty, etc.

According to the CIA World Factbook (2013), Nigeria has the largest Christian population as well as the largest Muslim population in Sub-Saharan Africa. A 2011 report showed that more than half of Nigeria □s total population (51.6%) is Christian, while Islam, ATR, and other minor religions share the remaining 48.4%. However, the faulty ideologies of some Muslims and Christians who seek to dominate others have led to incessant violent activities in some parts of the country.

The Purpose of Religious Education as a Panacea for Peace and Societal Development

Religious education can be used in a wide range of applications. It can provide comfort and guidance, serve as a basis for moral beliefs and behaviors, and foster a sense of community and connection to tradition. Some studies have even suggested that it may affect health. The impact of religion on health and life expectancy is a challenging area of research. Some studies suggest that religious people □defined as those who regularly attend religious services and mosques □tend to be healthier than those who do not attend.

This has led to research examining the impact of religion on health to determine any potential benefits to life expectancy. However, this research is complicated due to factors such as: □ People who attend religious services may simply be healthier than those who do not. □ The benefits may stem more from social contact than from religion itself. □ Certain religions may encourage healthy behaviors.



As researchers explore this topic, all these factors must be considered alongside the possibility that religion itself influences health. Religion can foster a sense of community, provide support, and offer guidance. It has also been shown to affect both physical and mental health.

Religion and Physical Health

One series of studies found that participants who were either religious or spiritual had a decreased risk of coronary heart disease (CHD), lower blood pressure, better immune function, and longer lifespans compared to non-religious individuals. Researchers found that religious or spiritual participants tended to eat more nutritious diets, engage in more physical exercise, and have better cognitive function compared to non-religious individuals. In these studies, religious people were also less likely to smoke, reducing their risk of smoking-related illnesses such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, and lung disease. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is linked to better quality of life and longevity.

Religion and Mental Health

Religion can influence mental health in both positive and negative ways. Religion can serve as a source of comfort and strength during times of stress. However, in some cases, religious beliefs can create stress or act as a barrier to treatment. Studies suggest that religion has both the potential to help and harm mental health and well-being. On the positive side, religion and spirituality can promote positive beliefs, foster community support, and provide effective coping skills. However, on the negative side, religious misinterpretations, miscommunication, and harmful negative beliefs can be detrimental to mental health.

Is Religious Education Good or Bad for People?

There is no doubt that religious education has a complex influence on individuals and societies. It can help bring people together but can also be a source of division and stress, particularly for those facing discrimination within religious communities due to different beliefs.

While studies suggest that religion may have health benefits, one does not need to subscribe to a set of organized religious beliefs to experience these benefits. Engaging in healthy behaviors, forming social connections, and strengthening coping skills are steps anyone can take to achieve these advantages.

Why Religious Education Has an Important Role in Society

Religious education is crucial for fostering understanding and knowledge about different religions in young minds. It provides insight into various religious practices, faiths, and beliefs, helping individuals familiarize themselves with diverse cultures worldwide. It builds tolerance among people from different backgrounds and religious beliefs, ultimately contributing to a better society, community, and culture.

Religious Education and Democracy



Religious beliefs and norms remain the moral backbone of society. Religious education not only teaches virtue but also catalyzes moral action. It enables individuals to consider the needs of others, respect the law voluntarily, and value human relationships. It teaches that money cannot buy love and peace.

Guidance for Life

Religious teachings, particularly for children in Sunday schools and Islamic schools, instruct individuals on peaceful coexistence. Religious education reinforces formal education by promoting integrity and law-abiding citizenship. Religious books provide guidance on making ethical life choices.

Religion as a Source of Purpose and Hope

Religion inspires individuals by giving them a purpose in life, whether through spreading the word of God, eradicating evil, or engaging in charity work. Religious teachings provide hope and courage, encouraging perseverance through hardships and achieving life goals.

Religious Education Unites Races and Genders

Religion is a good platform for fighting racism, which is a growing trend in the world today. Naturally, people tend to focus on their differences and classify themselves into races and socio-economic classes, which can lead to discrimination. Religious education is expected to teach followers that we are all created by the same God, irrespective of our differences in culture, race, or gender. Therefore, we should treat everyone equally and with respect. Religions encourage believers to accept and appreciate each other despite differences. In this way, religious education can help combat social vices and make the world a better place for everyone.

Religious Education Can Act as a Universal Language

Apart from love, which is a universally understood concept, religion also provides a common language that unites its followers. People from different races and linguistic backgrounds can communicate effectively through shared religious beliefs and practices. Religion provides a common ground and a language that can be spoken by all believers, fostering unity and creating a cohesive society.

Religious Education Promotes Morals and Values in Society

One of the core purposes of religion in society is to promote and uphold acceptable moral standards. In instances where society exhibits poor morals, it indicates a failure to uphold ethical teachings, and individuals must take responsibility for their actions. Religious education plays a crucial role in shaping moral values and ensuring societal decency. This is achieved through religious leaders setting good examples and organizing seminars to educate people on acceptable moral behaviours.



Empirical Data on Religioes Education as a Catalsty for Peace and Societal Development in Nigeria

Location	Parties	Nature of conflicts
Toroh, Nasarawa state 2003	Egbura, Gbaggi Bassa	Politics
Wuse, Plateau statev2002 to 2004	Taroh, Dukun, Hausa, Fulani	Religion and Politics
Yelwa-sheudan, plateau state 2002 to 2004	Jaruwa, Hausa, Gamai	Religions. Politics and land
Numan, Adamawa state 2004	Bachama, Hausa, Fulani	Religion, Land, Ownwership
Lamtang south LGA 2002 to 2004	Taroh, Hausa, Fulani	Religion & politics
Source compiled from conflict occurrence during the 2000-200 periods		
Zaria 2000	Christian/Muslims	Religions
Sango 2001		Politics, Religions
Zango kataf 2001		Religion
Zaria 2006		Religion
Zango 2011		Religion
Kaura 2011		
Kaura 2013		
Kaura 2014		
Scaugh 2014		
Kaduna zango kataf 2015		
Kaduna zaria 2016		
Kaduna Jama□a 2016		
Kaduna Jama□a 2017		

Sources: Report on the crisis in southern Kaduna development association Kaura, Sango & Zango kataf

Ondo state 21 July 2022

Abia state

Bauchi 2022

Borno



Katsina

Kano

Yobe

Sources: 2023 report on international religious freedom: Nigeria

Maiduguri Borno 2009

Maiduguri Borno 2010

Maiduguri Borno 2011

Maiduguri Borno 2012

Nangere Yobe state 2013

Kano 2007

Kano 2012

Pataskum Yobe state 2013

Fune, yobe state 2013

Zaria Kaduna 2014

These events were retrieved from the Nigerian Watch database. (Muslims, Christians, and Religious Violence in Nigeria: Patterns and Mappings (2006-2014) by Akinola Ejodeme Olojo). Naturally human beings have a common belief in God and enjoy worshiping God, which makes all humans members of one family. Christians, for instance, acknowledge the fatherhood of God and pray for the peaceful atmosphere that characterizes heaven to prevail on earth, as seen in the Lord's Prayer. Similarly, Muslims believe in only one God that Allah is the creator and guardian of all things (Quran 39:63, 8:64).



The Catholic Archbishop of Jos, Ignatius Kaigama, the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto, Matthew Hassan Kuka, the Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammad Saad Abubakar III, are noted for their tireless efforts and contributions to peaceful coexistence. These leaders are champions of conflict resolution, using dialogue for national development in Nigeria. They have visited various states in Nigeria to teach the values of peace, harmony, forgiveness, and reconciliation for national development. Religious educators must lead their communities toward peacebuilding by recalling and emphasizing the virtues and principles of tolerance and non-violence as taught by their faiths.

Religious education is another agent for peace and societal development in Nigeria, as taught in places of worship. The Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART) supported two mixed-faith schools in Kano and Bauchi states in 2019. Bari Schools in Kano State educated 250 children, over half of whom were girls, with 15 teachers. Ningi School in Bauchi State maintained 400 pupils in equal proportion from Muslim and Christian villages. This form of interfaith education leads to wider social integration and allows Christians and Muslims to form friendships, thus improving community relations.

Conclusion

The world could run out of control if not for religions laying principles for their followers to abide by. Interestingly, some people only do the right thing because they fear going to hell, which means if people were to wake up today and be told there is no hell or heaven, some surprise reactions and behaviors might follow. Religion acts as a control mechanism, preventing the world from falling into chaos. However, one of its greatest setbacks is the lack of evidence to back some teachings and inconsistencies that make many people give up and turn to atheism. Additionally, religious leaders sometimes fail to practice what they preach. Nevertheless, as long as religion remains, the world will be a better place for people to coexist peacefully.

Various religions teach their adherents to imbibe and live out sound moral and ethical values, which go a long way toward fostering harmony in human society—an essential factor for societal development. Religion and education go hand in hand in the enlightenment and proper formation of the human mind. It is, therefore, evident that religious education is vital for societal development since the proper formation of the human mind is a solid step toward achieving this goal. In light of this, Ajah (2015), citing Ajidagba (1996), notes that successive Nigerian governments, through varying educational policies, have demonstrated the importance of religious education for national development.

This highlights how religious education, in our context—Christian, Islamic, and traditional—has instilled qualities essential for societal development in its adherents. These include hard work, cooperation, forgiveness, love, truthfulness, and honesty. The problem, however, is that in certain circumstances, living out these values is limited rather than widespread. This has created discrimination, mutual suspicion, and, at times, violence, which has negated rather than promoted social development. Perseverance in right conscience, truth, honesty, and other virtues in religious teachings and practice can make a real difference. If Nigerians, irrespective of their faith affiliations, adhere to the sound religious education of their religions—without following the



selfish, extremist teachings of some radicals then the march toward societal development can become a possibility and reality in Nigeria.

Recommendations

- i. Every religious teaching must be rational and aimed at the well-being of humanity in general.
- ii. Conversion must not be a decision made under coercion, violence, or deception. In this way, it will be reasonable and voluntary.
- iii. Religious education must be both conscientious and dynamic.

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