

Christian Religion and the Task of Nation Building

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Abstract

The task of nation building in Nigeria has been a problematic one indeed. Many people now see the government as the sole provider of social amenities and solution to the problems of the citizens. The church that was engaged in social action and social concern in the time past has of recent lost this sense of care for the society and is on a daily basis becoming worldlier, while the world is becoming more religious. It is therefore my intention in this article, to highlight the areas where the church once played a very remarkable and important role in sustaining the society, where it has derailed and also let the different religious leaders know what the society expects of them in the task of nation building. This nation is not to be left at the mercy of the government and the government alone. It is hereby recommended, that both non governmental and faith based organizations should put their hands on the desk to see our nation resuscitated. It is often said that religion is the conscience of the society and so it should give a direction to the said society. We shall also frown at the rate at which some church denominations now sit on the fence, when it has to do with the affairs of the nation. When the church ventures into social actions like the provision of quality education, social amenities and other developmental strategies, the society which is at the receiving end gets better. Morality which is the watchword of the different religious organizations, especially the Christian religion, is expected to be inculcated into the society. This paper finally concludes that the churches which spring up almost everyday should not only think of heaven and heaven alone, but that they should be

earthly useful, for without religion in the society,
there will be chaos and anarchy in the society.

Introduction

The Christian religion is world affirming and not world denying, it is a religion that is relevant both in this world and in the world to come. The world today is decaying greatly as a result of utter neglect and lack of commitment to it. It is seen to be the sole responsibility of the government to care for the society and the inhabitants. The different religious leaders in the past, were becoming heavenly conscious to the extent that they were becoming earthly useless. The great Thales of Miletus in Greece was once mocked by a slave girl, for being so focussed and concerned about the composition of the earth and the other heavenly bodies, that he Thales could not see an ordinary pit around him, which lead to his falling into the pit.

The society is demanding a lot, that the government cannot provide alone, the church as the conscience of the society should be greatly involved in the process of nation building and not to sit down and look at the world as a dilapidating house that needed not to be maintained, since there is a better house awaiting the Christians in the hereafter (heaven). The impact of the Christian religion will be felt much in areas such as education, agricultural development, poverty eradication, gender discrimination, unemployment, political unrest, godfatherism, moral decadence, social discrimination (slavery), racism, religious intolerance tribalism, justice and human right. According to Sartorius (1875 :9) "the churches are often well placed to play a part in huge task of social development". By playing a lead and remarkable role in nation building, the church would have succeeded in exhibiting her social action, in this world of ethnic wars, social insecurity, political underdevelopment, prostitution, drug abuse environmental degradation and the like. A good Christian like the prophets of old, should see himself or herself as a social engineer who should assume the duty constructing and reconstructing the society. We should be more proactive in issues that affect the nation and the society in general, not the kind of quietist of Christians that we have today.

It is my intention therefore in this article, to present a skeletal solution to this ravenous social neglect on the side of the Christian religionist or adherents of today. I will attempt awakening the consciousness of this problem in the mind of those who read this paper making reference to how the Christians in the past were instrumental to social development. I shall also suggest some possible solutions to the problem so created by Christians

today in neglecting their duty to the society. But before I do that, it necessary to explain some concepts or define some operational terms will feature in the course of this work.

What is a Role?

The duty or work of a person or group of people in a particular scene, role. Role is also defined as the responsibility of a person or persons to for instance, the role of a father in the family which means his works, and responsibilities in the family, so is that of mother and children all upkeep of the said family.

Christianity

From every layman's point of view, a Christian is a person who is an adherent to the religion founded by and named after Christ.

Christianity is a type of religion that preaches Christ Jesus as the savior of the world and the only mediator between God and man. The disciples of Christ, were first called Christians in Antioch (acts 11:26), these Christians were not known to be Christians at the initial time. They knew themselves as brethren, because they were believers in the same master. But the Jews, when they saw them act like Christ, talk like him, run after peace and justice like Christ did, they decided to give them this mockery name 'Christian'.

Religion

There is no clear cut definition of the term religion; every field study has its own way of defining it. According to (Hornby 1995:988) it is the "belief in the existence of a gods", especially the belief that they created the universe and gave human beings a spiritual nature. A particular system of faith and worship based on religious belief. A controlling influence on one's life, "a thing that one feels very strongly about"

Nation Building

By nation building, we mean development, of the nation to wear a new face, this building is wholistic, both physically, socially, economically, morally and otherwise. It means to put the nation in a better condition, to civilize the citizens and to move the nation a step further among the underdeveloped nations and to launch it into the sphere of the developed nations. It is achieved through a revolution in the mind of both the leaders and the citizens. When the nation is built, the citizens will be happy, due to the fact that the amenities and infrastructural development will begin to take shape.

people will be educated, across board, men and women alike.

The Church as a Social Remedy

When people can no longer get help or assistance from the government or from the society, their next resort then becomes religion, where they believe that help will flow from since every religion preaches charity. It is indeed a pity that today, most of the churches are business minded and no longer think of what to do for the society, but what the society will do for them.

According to Obuba (1996:84)

When the missionaries came to Nigeria, their method of evangelism was that Laid down by our lord Jesus Christ. They took care of the social, spiritual, physical and intellectual needs of people. Each of these denominations established churches, schools, farms, clinics and hospitals to cater for these needs. It was usual to see a small church standing between rows of classroom blocks, a dispensary in one of the classrooms and a garden at the back of the building.

Stott (1992:222) on his own asserted that, "unless we listen attentively to the voices of secular society, struggle to understand them, and feel with people in their frustration anger, bewilderment and despair, weeping with those who weep, we will lack authenticity as the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.

According to Onwu (1996:11) the church is not living up to her expectation in the society, in the provision of the basic needs of the people. He said that,

The church in Nigeria has not participated fully in the use of power to create peace, provide basic needs of her people promote human rights, and check the rise of secular power of dictatorial government.

The Church and Education

In Nigeria as a nation, there could not have been education as we have it, apart from the efforts of the missionaries, who came to Nigeria both with western education and the Christian religion. While the Muslim missionaries rejected anything western or European as we call it, the Christian missionaries were accepted down have in the southern part of the country

with their western education. They came and brought us churches served as both schools and churches, while the Muslims in the North busy building mosques and Arabic schools. Surface it to say that Christ was the bed rock western education in Nigeria, especially in the southern hemisphere, right from the colonial era until the year Nineteen seventy (1972) when the schools were handed over to the government and academic standards began to depreciate, school children began to indulge in examination malpractice of different types and styles. Sorting came in the educational system. In the higher institution, what we all know as a ravenous wolf in the citadels of learning began to feature, that is cultism.

The question is, are we educating the children or corrupting them? The popular slang that education is light is being reduced in value and understanding. The church which embarked on massive literacy campaigns while they still owned and managed schools, did a lot of work in the world of academics, they got our front lined educationists to be educated with a missionary tint. Those people did not know corruption as they were not skilled and equipped for the nation to use, not now that certificates are obtained left, right and centre but they are more often than not in deference to their holders. Onwubiko (1985:214) noted that:

Evangelical work and long monopoly of education played a crucial role in the rise of nationalism and the consequent emergence of the modern states of West Africa. By their promotion of education, they helped to produce the western African elites who became the leaders of modern West African nationalism.... Without the missionary enterprise both the timing and nature of the awakening of social and national consciousness would have been different. The introduction of Christianity is the factor in building West African states.

The Church and Development

The Bible which is the holy book of the Christians does not in any way neglect the sustenance and maintenance of the nation, right from the beginning of the universe, according to the creation story. God had social development in mind. He said to the first man and the first woman, that they should go and be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion

over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. (Gen. 1:28) RSV

The word dominion here means to control and to direct and to rule and also look after. It means that the world was handed over to man to take care of. This implies that the wellbeing of man or the human being was and is still the will of God, having known that neither the fish of the sea, nor the birds of the air, nor any other created thing on earth can take care of the universe, without confusion and even the damnation of the handwork of God, the universe. Man is trusted among all the living things by God as the one who can build the earth to His taste.

It therefore confuses one who reads in between lines, as man who is supposed to a religious being, and religion the conscious of the society, now derails from the status quo of providing the basic developmental amenities to the society, the Christian world view is world affirming and not world denying, but this is ironical, as we now see pastors and priests of different denominational backgrounds, live exorbitant ostentations and luxurious lives, they now ride on the best of cars, build the best of houses, at the expense of their congregations and parishioners, miracles are now for sale, the more money you bring the more your miracles and blessings. Almost every church now emphasizes tithing and sowing of the seed of faith. The prosperity preachers are now on the increase, whose language is that of money, money and money they will readily pronounce that their God is not a poor God. The masses are grossly being deceived and misled. A times one wonder whether there is any difference between these sole proprietor churches and the money doublers, who ask you for money that they may double it for you. The real thing would have been that if anybody knows how to double money, he should not ask anybody to pay him for doubling money, since he or she would have doubled more than enough for himself and even the people around him.

These new generational churches are in the habit of promising Heavens on earth, some of them promise you academic breakthrough, when they cannot make any comprehensive statement or speak good English. They ask you to sow the seed of faith and have as many children as you want, especially when you have an infertility problem, but they themselves go on adopting children due to one infertility problem or another.

One annoying part of this money consciousness on the side of the churches today is that these monies when accrued are not utilized to benefit the society, not even the people that contribute them, instead they build empires universities and other economic institutions, which will only be for the pastors and their families only. They will gain more patronage and more

membership if and only if their money quests are society driven, if they spend some amount on the development of the society, such as building roads and maintaining the old ones, provision of scholarship to some indigent members of the society. Provision of portable water and electricity for the populace, across boards, irrespective of ones denominational bias.

The Church and Morality

The will of God for the society is to enthrone righteousness and eschew evil and injustice, this desire of God is applicable both to the past the present and the future, it is categorically stated in Bible, proverbs 14:34, "righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people". Because when one nation is morally conscious and the people are righteous in living their lives the Lord will be their God, and they, his people, and possession, he will fight for them their battles against any aggressor from their worldly and spiritual enemies. But whenever a nation is wicked against God, it cannot stand, irrespective of who their king is, and the number of soldiers they have. The rising and falling of Israel the elected people of God is as a result of the fact that to know God is to know peace and no one can know peace without knowing the prince of peace.

Morality is supposed to be the watchword of every religion, and all are called ethical religions, Christianity inclusive. It by right should point in direction to the society in matters of holiness, righteousness, and neighborliness.

Before the advent of the social contract which brought about the rule of law and constitutionalism, there has been religion, which is as old as the world. These religions were playing the watch dogs for the society to ensure morality.

In traditional Igbo setting, before the coming of the missionaries who in turn brought to us the laws, the people were guarded and guided by their shrines, that meant everything to them. They went to the shrines for oath taking, and concentration of all types. With that, they enthroned their deities and retained moral decorum in the society.

The Churches Social Action to the Less Privileged

The New Testament church did not in any way neglect her role to the rich and to the people. A good example is the incidence that took place in Acts, the Apostles chapter six, verse one.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenist murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body

disciples and said, 'it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Thereafter, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

Down the memory lane, the church has been of immense help to the less privileged in the society, they took good care of the widows and the orphans. What the early Christians did portrays a kind of division of labour, between those who would serve the word of God for the spiritual wellbeing and those whose responsibility it was to manage the food, for the physical need of the people.

Man by nature is a psychosomatic being, he is spirit, soul and body, this is why the church of today should be redirected, and a new orientation given to them. They are now more or less preoccupied with soul and soul, heaven and heaven only do they preach. Little attention is being given to the physical needs of the people. The early Christians were both heavenly conscious and earthly minded, what we have today is a band of people who have been made to be so heavenly minded that they have become earthly useless. The primary ministry of the church is to make disciples of all nations, these disciples are not in heaven already, they are called saints militant and not triumphant, and they should by any means be encouraged in their doggedness to succeed. The society should not be seen as a dilapidating house that needed no attention since ours is a world affirming religion.

Youth Unemployment in Nigeria, Christianity a Solution

According to (Bennell, 2000, Mkandwire, 1996; Momoh, 1998), In this socio-political context of declining growth and economic reform and restructuring, youth unemployment situation in Nigeria has become critical because it has made labour absorption problematic.

In spite of government pronouncements, several analysts argue that the state's attempt to address the problem of youth unemployment has largely been guided by a vision that neither addresses the livelihoods needs nor meets the real expectations of young people. This is to say that the government has not squarely addressed the issue of unemployment and its ravaging problems on the teeming young people in the country. It could at most be said that the government is only paying a lip service to the problems of unemployment. The political status of the nation to a very large extent, depends on their economic status. The government having failed the youths who constitute the greater percentage of the labour force in the country. The hope is now built on the non-governmental and faith based organizations.

The church plays and should play more remarkable roles in the economic empowerment of the youths for any meaningful development to take place. This is due to the fact that when they are not gainfully employed, they tend to channel their strength, resourcefulness, industry and creative ingenuity towards some activities that will be negative and inimical to the progress of the society, such as cultism, rape, burglary armed robbery to mention but a few. The youths need a sense of belonging in the affairs of the nation; they need to showcase their intellectual and moral development in governance. But these are always hampered by unemployment.

The term unemployment is caused by a number of factors among which are, increase in labour supply over and above its demand. The major factor is the population growth of the country, and over emphasis on oil revenue and peoples deemphasis on agriculture and entrepreneurial undertaking. Unemployment is also an issue that where there are jobs, the job seekers are not employed as they do not possess the needed skills for these employments. For McGowan and Kings (1995) and Hollister and Gold Stein (1994) "The skill that job seekers possess do not match the needed demand of employers in Nigeria". This is as a result of the emphasis on paper qualification in Nigeria over practical skills and technical know how.

A very large number of the Nigeria youths, most of whom are graduates, are now roaming the streets looking for jobs that do not exist. They are getting frustrated, depressed day by day, while some are becoming restless and criminals, who are now safe havens for the politicians who want to loot. On the effect of youth unemployment on the nation, (Adebayo; 1999; Egbuna; 2001) opined that, "They now constitute a depleting agent; a heavy economic burden and liability instead of a resource because they are not constructively engaged in productive labour".

Since religion commands respect on opinion in the society, it is very important in the churches missions that they get involved actively in social concern and social change. The church should show a form of solidarity with the side of the unemployed and contribute her quota in getting them employed economically, for by so doing, the church will be curbing and reducing the social ills and delinquent behaviours that take place as a result of unemployment. It is also expected that the church should play an advocacy role against the youth exploitation and neglect by the powers that be in the nation, for by so doing, nation building is enhanced.

Christianity and Osu Caste System

In Igbo land, one is referred to as an 'osu' or 'ohu' which in English means slave, when he, either by choice or coercion is dedicated to an idol or a god.

The people, who willingly ran to dedicate themselves to these idols, did that to be safe from the menace and oppression of the society. It was in the era of human sacrifice and trading on human beings. But those who wanted to live made themselves human sacrifices to the gods of the land, which scared away the human oppressors, who became afraid of the gods that now possess these 'osus'. The 'osus' were brought to the gods, according to the religion on ground then, but instead of killing them as burnt sacrifices, their bodies were cut and blood sprinkled on the shrine of the god. Then the life of the people are spared as they become living sacrifices (osu). This social/religious status is transferred to their offsprings and even unborn generations to come. The other people who were not dedicated to the gods began to see them as outcasts, and as properties to the deity. They are easily detected by the names they bear, such as 'nwa osu', 'ohuocha', 'osuagwu', 'osuafor', 'osueke' 'osuegbu', to mention but a few.

In Igboland, those who are not among the class of the 'osu' people are referred to as 'Nwadiala', 'Nwaafor', or 'Amadi' as the case may be. They are the free born, who are not allowed to intermarry with the 'osu' people. The discrimination became tensed that the 'osu' people were not allowed to take traditional titles, when the white missionaries came, it were these 'osu' people that were sent to school as a litmus test of what the white men will do to them.

The story is different today. The society has become an egalitarian one, the 'osu' people now take titles, assume political offices, intermarry with the freeborn in some places. This is the work of the church, which preached unity and inclusion in the society. The issue of discrimination and segregation is minimized or even reduced to the barest minimum. Among the Christians today, every body is seen and addressed as a brother or a sister in Christ. Marriage among the Christians today is by the will of God or through the revelation of God; social status has little or no role to play here. In the church today, like in the Anglican Church, we all use one cup for the Holy Communion, none is sent out because he is an 'osu'. It is said that, 'we are one body because we take part in one body' that is the Holy Communion. According to (Stott 1996), church is a wonderfully inclusive fellowship, in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female. In other words, in Christ we have equality.

Worthy of note is the fact that African slave trade which was a flourishing business for the Europeans and the Americans was stopped by a Christian missionary called William Wilberforce. We also know that one of the major founders of Christianity in Nigeria is an ex-slave boy by name Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who later became a bishop.

The Church and Social Concern

In the church, the people are taken good care of, their development and empowerment is the order of the day, before the advent of Christianity, women did not have any say in the society. They were considered as property whenever they are delivered of twins or more children at a time. The social engineering and political enhancement are that of the church. The primary mission of the church is to change men for good, and this can be achieved through conversion to Christ. The church in the society stands for nothing more than peace making. That is why we have Ecumenism and religious dialogue. When we talk of poverty alleviation or eradication, justice and human right, we are talking of the basic role of the church. It is today highly encouraged that Christians should get actively involved in politics. This is because it is believed that they will give room for good governance, having the fear of God in them. Gender discrimination will be a natural death as the women will be included in governance. (Igboland 2000:18) noted that,

A Christian-politician would normally face two opposing choices: either to do his duties for which he is elected and receive the blessing of God and the praises of his people without enriching himself or her, or to grasp all the money that is meant for social development and enrich himself and face the wrath of God and the curses of the people and so earn a bad name.

Conclusion

Christianity has impacted on the society very positively, though not without some negative influences, on our culture as Africans. The fact still remains that Christianity is a social engineer and so, it must exist within a society. Christianity does not in any way isolate herself from the happenings and ongoing activities in the world. Though not of the world, we are still in the world, and must take care of the world, which is like a building on fire; it should be rescued before it becomes it gets consumed.

Christianity in her role of nation building has got some challenges which range from, religious intolerance among other religions, decadence and indiscipline among the citizens, tribalism illiteracy, poverty and religious fanaticism/bigotry. But we must remain resolute, dogged and undiscouraged in our struggle to rescue and salvage our nation. Let us keep Christianity from the affairs of the nation and imagine what the society would look like, morally and otherwise. Nation building is a task that must be accomplished by all, together we can make it.

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