RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF PEACE AND UNITY IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract
The low level of religious education in Nigeria has reached an embarrassing level and should therefore attract the attention of government, religious leaders, parents, and even members of the society. The resultant effects of this is that people who belong to different religious groups and who are also stakeholders in the education sector cannot work together to achieve educational goals. It is on the basis of the above exposition that the paper examines the concept of religion, peace and unity. The paper also examines how religion can be used to promote peace and unity in order to enhance the collaborative efforts of the family and the society for the achievement of national development in Nigeria in the 21st century.

Introduction
The degree of melancholy perpetuated by religious crises in the Nigerian society should attract the attention of well meaning Nigerians, governments, parents, religious leaders as well as all the stakeholders in the education sector. Religious crises have often manifested in various ways and dimensions in the Nigerian society. Kunle (2000) asserted that the various ethnic clashes, civil disturbances and rivalry are all residual of religious aggression.

Furthermore, religious crises have also found its way into the various educational institutions in the Nigerian society. For example, Faniku (2000) remarked that most religious crises which have been experienced in the various educational institutions in the Nigerian society were as a result of religious intolerance.

This negative behavior of people in the society according to Bala (2003) is as a result of lack of religious education by members of the Nigerian society. In most cases, the resultant effects of religious crises are usually drastic. In the process, innocent lives are lost, property worth of millions of Naira are destroyed and the well organized and the peaceful atmosphere in the society is breached. Lack of religious education has also manifested in the moral behavior of students and members of the society in the aspects of living and dressing. Good conduct, respect for elders, patriotism and above all, the fear of God are no longer seen as virtues.

Above all, religious education if properly inculcated in the hearts of members of the society through formal and
informal institutions, will undoubtedly, promote peace and unity in the society which will inturn, foster and facilitate the necessary collaborative efforts of the family and members of the society in achieving educational objectives in Nigeria.

**Conceptual Clarification**

In order to do justice to the examination of religious education as instrument of peace and unity in Nigerian society, academic responsibility demands that certain key operational terms as used in the paper be briefly explained for proper assimilation and elucidation of the subject matter. Such terms include religion, education, peace, unity and collaborative efforts.

Religion is a concept that is very sensitive and difficult to define. This is because, religion means different thing to different people. In the context of this paper, religion is viewed as what people consider as ultimate reality to their lives and which should also be respected by other people. The problem of religious intolerance in the Nigerian society according to Faniku (2000) is lack of respect and recognition for the religion of other people living in the same society.

The concept of education as used in the paper is viewed as a process which enables an individual to distinguish between what is good and evil, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable. Davies (2005) opined that people are involved in religious disturbances because of illiteracy and inability to distinguish from what is right and wrong.

The concept of peace as used in this paper connotes absence of war and cooperation. Davies (2005) rightly observed that religious education if properly inculcated, can promote peace in the Nigerian society.

Furthermore, the concept of unity as used in the paper means living together peacefully without any hindrances or animosity. Ardenson (2001) asserted that religious crises are capable of obstructing the peaceful co-existence of the Nigerian society. Nigeria is heterogeneous in nature and hence, religious education is very necessary towards welding the society together.

The term society as used in the context of this paper means a group of people living in the same environment with similar culture, norms and values. Collaborative effort is the ability and the willingness of a group of people to work together to achieve common goals.

**National Objectives of Religious Education in Nigeria**

The national objectives of Religious Education in Nigeria as summarized by Malogun (2005) are as follows:

1. To promote religious consciousness
2. To inculcate respect for other peoples religions
3. To promote religious tolerance
4. To promote peace, unity and stability through religion
5. To promote peaceful coexistence in the Nigerian society

The realization of the above national objectives can be hindered by certain factors. These include teacher factor, Government factor, parent factor, and societal factor.
Factors Hindering the Realization of the Objectives of Religious Education in the Nigerian Society for Collaborative Efforts

Teacher Factor

Inadequate supply of Religious Education teachers is a serious factor militating against the teaching of Religious Education in the school system. The resultant effect is that non-specialists who are not trained to teach the subject are often drafted to teach it. Worse still, the few available religious education teachers who teach the subjects do not live by examples and this in turn, makes the students not to develop interest in the lessons that can be learnt through it.

Government Factor

The government of Nigeria has not given the religious education the priority it deserves. Despite the fact that the Nigerian Constitution of 1999 promotes freedom of religion, the implementation of that aspect of the constitution leaves much to be desired. The various religious parastatals set up by the government such as the National Council of Religious Associations have not been very effective in the prevention of religious crises in the country. Similarly, the government has not been able to check the activities of some powerful people in government who sometimes fuel religious crises to achieve their inordinate political ambitions. Similarly, governmental efforts on religious education outside the formal education system is very minimal. This has affected collaborative efforts of the family and society in various ways.

Parental Factor

The insatiable family needs which now compel both parents to be actively involved in one economic activity or the other is now a bane to the teaching of Religious Education at home as collaborative efforts. The situation is worse in big cities and towns where parents leave home as early as 4:00am leaving the children in the hands of the nannies that have no adequate knowledge of Religious Education. Furthermore, some parents do not have time for religious activities in the family. Such parents neither go to the church nor mosque talk less of teaching the children what is religiously right or wrong. Above all, most parents do not have keen interest in developing their children academically and socially. All these affect the fulfillment of responsibility by stakeholders to education.

Societal Factor

The mentality of the Nigerian society is mostly focused on social development of the individuals in the society. Asafa (2000), a social scientist remarked that the interest of the Nigerian society is mostly focused on materialism and fashion rather than on religious activities. According to Asafa, society focuses attention on current social music, dresses and flamboyant life more than religious activities. Social scientist like Young (2001) views religious education as a baby gown not meant for adults. This means that only idle minds have places for religion in their hearts. Members of the society who hold this viewpoint often find it difficult to fulfill their responsibilities to education sector
because of their strong aversion for religion.

Religious Education as Instrument of Peace, Unity and Enhancing the Responsibility of the Family and Society in Nigeria Educational System

The role of religious education for peaceful co-existence between the followers of different religions in Nigeria is a very important one. This is due to the fact that Nigeria is a big country and a multi-religious society with Islam and Christianity having the largest followers. It should be noted that religious teachings have the greatest potentials that could be used effectively for the course of peace and unity in Nigeria. Alao (1989), maintained that "peaceful coexistence is necessary for the preservation of the centrality and integrity of the common interest of the society. Both Islam and Christianity educate people to do virtuous deeds and live a pious life. The two religions also condemn evil activities such as: hypocrisy, injustice, cruelty, selfishness, violence, hurtful speeches and lack of cooperation. Again, both religions also implore their followers to have faith and trust in God, exercise repentance, be truthful, righteous, ensure injustice, have sympathy, exercise self control, and mutual uprightness.

Based on these Aziz-us-samad (1970) remarked that:

The chief virtues enjoined by Islam and Christianity alike may be grouped under two headings. Firstly, those that prevent man from: injuring the life and property and honor of others such as chastity, honesty, peacefulness, politeness and cooperation. Secondly, those that prompt a man to do good to others such as: mercy, forgiveness, truthfulness, encourage, patience, kindness and love.

It should be noted that all religions teach peace, unity and cooperation. Therefore, the following steps can be taken by the government and all other stakeholders to promote peaceful co-existence through religious education and cooperation necessary to educational needs in Nigeria.

Teaching of Moral Education

Government and all other stakeholders should intensify efforts in the implementation of the teaching of moral education in educational institutions. It is obvious that moral education has been included in the curriculum of schools in Nigeria, efforts must be made to ensure that it is properly taught. The teaching of moral education should also be extended to those outside the school system at the informal level to educate them on the importance of Religious education for peace and unity in the society. There is also the need to train more religious education teachers for the various levels of the educational system in Nigeria.

Public Enlightenment

There is a need for the government to intensify efforts in the area of public enlightenment on the importance of religious tolerance for peaceful co-existence in the Nigerian society. To make this public enlightenment on religious education effective, the government should include in its campaign prominent members of the society such as the religious leaders, opinion leaders
and community leaders. This is so because people in the Nigerian society recognize and accept the opinions of such people on issues of fulfilling their responsibility to education sector.

**Mass Media**

The mass media has the potentials of disseminating information to members of the society at a very fast rate. Therefore government and private newspapers, television, houses, magazines, radio broadcasts should create special programmes on religious education to sensitize members of the public to the importance of religious education for the promotion of peace and unity and issues involving cooperative efforts by all and sundry on education matters.

**The Family**

The family should not allow economic and social activities to override religious education at home. Parents should introduce the children to the religion of the family and ensure that the children are taught how to live and abide by the religious injunctions of the family. At home, children should be taught how to respect the religions of other people through tolerance, humility, honesty, proper dressing, love, forgiveness, purity and commitment to the realization of education objectives.

**Living by Examples**

Nothing teaches people religious education more than exemplary behaviours. People in government, parents, teachers, religious leaders and community leaders should live exemplary life to encourage members of the public to embrace the tenets of religious education. It should be noted that children learn through imitation, therefore all the stakeholders in the society should show good examples in all ramifications and commitment to education objectives in aspects of funding and provision of educational facilities.

**Conclusion**

Religious education is necessary to promote the necessary peace, unity and cooperative efforts required to sensitize the family and members of the society to their role expectation in the realization of education objectives in Nigeria. It is therefore necessary to make religious education compulsory at all levels of our educational system including the informal education to sensitize the family and the society to their expected roles in the achievement of educational objectives for national development in Nigeria.

**References**


