

## INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND EDUCATION: PANACEA TO NATION BUILDING

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### **Abstract**

*The question of nation building in Nigeria is one that is beset by some challenges which include lack of synergy between the various major or ethnic groups in Nigeria; lack of a specific ideology for social engineering and above all the level of religious intolerance among two major religions in Nigeria, Christianity and Islam. But pluralism in its different manifestation is a characteristic of the modern nation-state. On this note, therefore, this topic 'Interfaith Dialogue and Education: Panacea to nation building has been conceived as intellectual exercise necessary at this moment of crisis, to explore credible avenues to ensure effective nation building in Nigeria. Two major sub-themes in this paper are: Interfaith dialogue; and its incorporation into the educational curriculum of Nigeria as ways to ensure that public enlightenment is attained and sustained. The paper in its methodology is expository and analytical. It targets essential understanding of the positive dimensions to interfaith education and appreciation. The paper contends that if Nigerian citizens engage in healthy dialogue about religious issues at national level and at school level, what seems like irresolvable controversies between the stands of Christianity and Islam, would give way to mutual understanding, and thus enable cooperation and peaceful co-existence that are necessary for effective nation-building in Nigeria.*

### **Introduction**

One may want to ask: "what connection has interfaith dialogue and education with the task of nation building?" or put in another way: "How is religion tied to social and political engineering?" When we look into recent occurrences in national and global politics, we will see that a good number of crises situations prevail at both national and international levels. These revolve around the discord in the various religious world

views, beliefs and practices in the world today. There is high rate of religious intolerance these days, with each sect claiming superiority and dominion over the others. The gross refusal and lack of synergy at reaching a compromise as to possible peaceful co-existence of human beings in a secular world threatens national and global peace. This problem is presently spelt out when we consider the increasing bipolar tension between Christians and Muslims in the world today.

The extreme case of religious fanaticism has fuelled the discord among the various religious sects to violent situations to involve the use of arms and other dangerous weapons of war to perpetrate atrocities. Even after the monumental wounds caused by the first and second world wars; the aims and objectives of the United Nations and peace seeking international bodies are increasingly being challenged as the tension between the major world religious sects tends to initiate another major global war if not checked.

In Nigeria as in other countries in West Africa, the issue of terrorist attacks, suicide bombing, destruction of lives and properties belonging to rival sects, reprisal attacks are now the order of the day. This trend is indicative of a problem that has not only enshrined insecurity in these countries, but is equally threatening national unity. There are fears that if not checked, it would lead to outburst of violence that would escalate to uncontrollable degree.

Historically, there have been Jihads in the past which led to conquest of communities and forceful conversion to Islam. Presently the terrorist moves by the Boko Haram sect has left in its wake, loss of lives, wanton destruction of properties including churches and other structures and increasing tension among the communities affected. Today the activities of the Fulani herdsmen are looked upon suspiciously as a calculated strategy to Islamize Nigerians forcefully. The alarming rate of assault and murder of unsuspecting and innocent victims including women and children has created tension among Nigerians and raised questions as to the continued existence of a united Nigeria if the trend continues. One imagines the level of wickedness perpetrated in the recent slaughter of about two hundred people in Plateau state over alleged reports that the Fulani herdsmen had lost about three hundred cows in a few months to the communities they attacked. Even if the allegations were true, why

would this inhumane revenge be carried out when other peaceful means of resolving issues abound?

What exactly is the problem of the Boko Haram fundamentalists? Why would religious killings now be the order of the day? It is to these problems that the following questions become relevant: In the wake of the apparent discontentment among human beings given religious grounds, how can peaceful coexistence be attained? If there is no peace, how can development be achieved. What are the chances of credible efforts at nation building when religious intolerance, insecurity and the culture of violence are now the order of the day.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to appraise the rich potentials in interfaith dialogue and education to restoring peace and harmony among citizens consequently create conducive atmosphere necessary for nation building.

## **Explication of Terms**

### ***Interfaith dialogue***

This refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions and/or spiritual or humanistic beliefs at both the individual and institutional levels.<sup>1</sup> Interreligious dialogue also referred to as interfaith dialogue is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term refers to cooperate and positive interaction between people of different traditions. (that is, Faith) at both the individual and institutional levels. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice their faith freely.

Interfaith or inter-religious dialogue is different from Ecumenism as Ecumenism is principle or effort that aims at promoting unity among the world's Christian Churches.

### ***Education***

Education has various definitions. Education is defined as the process or means by which the individual is acclimatized to the culture or environment in which he is born in order to advance it.<sup>2</sup> So, education here is believed to be process and an instrument both for social and economic development. Again, Education has been defined as a deliberate

systematic and sustained effort to transmit, evoke or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills and sensibilities.<sup>3</sup> Here education is seen from the universal sense of its formal and informal contents. All aspects of learning that enables the individual interact fully with his environment is emphasized. Is the process of facilitating learning or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, beliefs and habits.<sup>4</sup> Educational methods includes: storytelling, discussion, teaching, training and directed research. Education is the primary vehicle through which children and even adults use to learn the norms, values and skills they needed to function in society.

Etymologically education is derived from the Latin word “educare” which means to lead forth, drag out or to pull out ideas which are believed to be innate from childhood. So, education implies to lead out of darkness, a bringing forth into light. It is an enlightenment.

The goal or purpose of education prior to 1960 (in Nigeria) was simple to lead into light the new generation of civil servants and public servants who would take over from the colonial masters from all facets of the society.

### *Nation-building*

Nation building is constructing or structuring a national identity using the power of the state. Nation building aims at the unification of people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run.<sup>5</sup> Nation building is narrower than nation formation which is the broad process through which nations come into being.<sup>5</sup> Nation building refers to national identity while state building refers to infrastructure and institutions of the state. State building is typically characterized by massive investment, military occupation, traditional government and use of propaganda to communicate government policy. Nation building can equally involve the use of propaganda or major infrastructure development to foster social harmony and economic growth,

### **Synergy and peaceful environment as important requirement for nation building**

Nation building as a concept has varying meanings to different people. In fact, several theories of national building abound. However, two major stand points to understand nation building is from the ‘evolutionary

stand point' which refers that building a nation is a gradual process from inside and takes a long time. While from the revolutionary point of view, it is something that can be brought about by proactive measures by the agents that be.<sup>6</sup> However, whatever be the case, it requires a coordinated and intentional efforts by the people involved.

In a narrower but early conception of the notion of nation, it referred to a group or race of people who shared history, traditions, culture, language and sometimes religion.<sup>7</sup>

However, today the ideas of nation are tied to the notion of state, that is, the political entity that serves as state with its territorial integrity and a common government which spearheads the civil life of all the citizens and people that lives and acts within its confines irrespective of tribe, ethnic group, language or culture. In this case then we can distinguish between ethnic nationalities who share common culture or ancestry; and the nation as state with attendant political and social institutions that work for the welfare of her citizens irrespective of ethnic or cultural background. It is to this latter conception of nation that this paper looks into.

Thus when one talks about nation building, one refers to the coordinated efforts and institutional platforms put in place to setup a *state* and *government* that will have the charge to protect the interest of all contracting parties, groups and individuals with the unity of purpose to attain the common good. There are various theories of nation building. These include: democratization, modernization, political development, post conflict reconstruction and peace building.<sup>8</sup>

While it is important to note here that these models of nation building are intertwined in as much as they are fairly employed in the task of nation building; the democratic and peace building ideals stand out as theoretical support for the claims of this paper. Peace building can be said to consist of "a wide range of activities as associated with capacity building, reconciliation and societal transformation"<sup>9</sup>

The idea of peace can be said to remain central to sustainable efforts at nation building by the citizens' co existing in harmony, not minding their diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. This is because it is only in a peaceful environment and atmosphere of security that the ingredients of nation building will produce a peace-loving people and provide constitutional and legitimate apparatus to ensure that peace and security

are sustained in the state. The case for synergy is the basic requirement for democracy and democratization.

### **Extolling the rich potentials in interfaith dialogue in ensuring positive and harmonious path in nation building**

Having asserted the important requirement of peace building and synergy towards effective nation building; how then can these virtues be facilitated and engendered by interfaith dialogue as positive collective force to pursue the peace building and synergic tasks of nation building? Why resort to interfaith dialogue as the way forward in this context? This is because in its absence, lies a major obstacle to effective nation building. Pantaleon captured this squarely in his statement that:

In the African continent, there is a wanton displacement of religious energy. There is a concentration by the religions of Islam and by the Christian sect on what we shall better describe as religious cannibalism. These religions, instead of working towards a better living of the faith they profess in more moral uprightness and exemplary creedal commitment, spend their days in attacking the religions of other people.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, religion has been a positive energy and the religious virtues and values have had significant impact on individual moral life and societal organization in the history of Africans. Citing Holloway, Elizabeth Ezenweke emphasizes that religion was and remains a vital point on African life. Religion was not just a faith or worship system among most African ethnic groups, but a way of life- a system of social control, provider of medicine and an organizing mechanism.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, it follows that instead of continued conflicts, disagreements and discontentment among Nigerian and African citizens from diverse religious backgrounds, they should strive to enter into dialogue with themselves to seek understanding of each other's beliefs. This will in turn engender appreciation for the other's values and religious virtues and enable tolerance even when they don't agree on doctrinal or other faith-based principles.

Compulsion and violence had caused more harm than good in the past as routes to conversion and or evangelization. The best means is through dialogue and conviction. If the other accepts, fine, if not, then we both will have to learn to co-exist peacefully and tolerate each other with mutual

respect and understanding. This is the area where the gains of committed dialogue stand out as panacea to curbing the excesses of religion intolerance in Nigeria and in Africa.

### **The role of interfaith education in imbibing the right values and commitment to dialogue in citizens**

“Since it is believed that youths of today are leaders of tomorrow, the role of education in solving our sickly moral values is of critical significance”.<sup>12</sup> Very crucial in the efforts to build the spirit of dialogue, tolerance, understanding and appreciation of other people’s world views and religious beliefs is education. At all levels, be it formal through schools or informal by way of creating awareness and sensitization of what should be the case and the rich promises of religious tolerance to nation building, education remains a very good tool in the hands of the government to strategically and institutionally build a culture of democratization and synergy in working together for the common good on the one hand, and the virtue of religious and cultural tolerance on the other hand as promoters of peace. Thus:

Institutions that encourage positive norms and a sense of personal responsibility should be promoted. We must focus on the roots of the problems- the beliefs, values and attitudes being adopted by the young. Schools should strengthen and expand those programs encouraging broad student participation.....successful involvement in meaningful activities, with clear and consistence reinforcement for positive behaviour, strengthens the bond which help prevent delinquent conduct.<sup>13</sup>

It is often said that an uneducated and untrained man can act more like a beast. Most of these people who are used to perpetrate crimes and cause violence are not educated and civilized. Most of them lack the capacity to reason properly, and so they are easily controlled by the passion. This is what education tackles. Ensuring a theory-praxis path to effective nation building is guaranteed through formal education. Our schools should teach our students to develop a sense of pride for our cherished values, bearing in mind the needs of the nation.

Thus Nnadozie rightly argue that it is the function of the school to contribute significantly to the solution of societal problems.<sup>14</sup> And so, it is not out of place to include a detailed syllabus for interfaith tolerance,

peace studies and dialogue in Nigeria school curriculum. The curriculum thus bears the responsibility to effect this social need.<sup>15</sup>

## **Critical Evaluation and Conclusion**

### *Critical Evaluation*

Having projected at length, the aim of this paper which is to portray how interfaith dialogue and education are panacea to nation buildings, we critically evaluate the work. Religiously motivated violence and rebellions in Nigeria which is Christian – Muslim strife in modern Nigeria has been in existence even since 1953, And it has dominated today by the Boko Haram insurgency which aims to impose Sharia on the northern part of the country. Also recent escalation is that of Christian farmers and Muslim cattle herders in which herdsmen are using weapons of total obliteration.

Inter-religious or interfaith dialogue in our country Nigeria, Africa and beyond we have seen is neither a forum for disproving the belief of other, nor a space for arguing and attacking one another. It is not aimed at concession for in such dialogue each party remains sincere to their own faith. It aims at unity, but this unity is one with diversity as far as religion or faith is concerned. Brushing aside differences in faith does not come in here as it does not aim at coming to a common faith belief. The main focus of the dialogue is to:

1. Build understanding and confidence to overcome or prevent tension.
2. Increase mutual understanding and good relations.
3. Identify causes of tension in Christian- Muslim relations. These are often economic, social or political rather than religious.
4. Breakdown the barriers and stereotypes which lead to distrust, suspension and bigotry.

When the above objectives are achieved, there will be peace and tranquillity in the country and these are vital ingredients to nation building. Moreover, apart from inter-faith and Education, nation building is also achieved through: globalization, modernization, democratization, entrepreneurial skill, political development, post-conflict reconstruction and peace-building.

Globalization – Is the process of interaction and integration between people, companies and governments worldwide.<sup>16</sup> Globalization has



grown due to advances in transportation and communication technology, with increased global interactions comes the growth of international trade, ideas and culture. Globalization is a process by which business or other organizations develop international influence or start operating on an international scale.

Nation building can be promoted through modernization, which is transformation from a traditional, rural, agrarian society to a secular, urban, industrial society.<sup>17</sup> To modernize a society is first of all to industrialize it. Modernization is an economic theory that is rooted in capitalism but it does transform traditional society to modern society. Modernization theory tells us that modern societies are more productive, children are better educated and the needy receive more welfare. Modernization is a Europeanization or Americanization process, tended towards convergence among societies. It is a progressive and transformative process that is irreversible.

However, without moving further into these other areas of nation building (democratization, entrepreneurial skill, peace building and the likes) one has to understand that interfaith dialogue and education play much role as far as nation building is concerned, this is because Religion and Education are noble or major ideologies of development and some nations have used them to subdue the other.

## **Conclusion**

Nation building is a collective exercise. It is the business of every member of the state, the government and the citizens as well. This is the reason why positive efforts should be geared towards creating an environment of peace and synergic action so that the various people, ethnic groups and factions that make up the state would work together in harmony to ensure that the goal is met.

Unfortunately, religious conflicts had been the order of the day in most African countries, and this has led to insecurity of lives and properties; suspicion and tension among citizens. It is therefore the contention of this paper that conscientious efforts be put in place to ensure religious tolerance thriving through dialogue to ensure that a peaceful atmosphere is attained. It is argued through critical education such that education serves as a tool and is enshrined in the national curriculum of education which should be adopted as measure to build the youths for mature and

peaceful co-existence tomorrow

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