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THE ROLE OF RELIGION (CHRISTIANITY) IN SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN ABAK LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

By

UMANAHA, VICTOR SUNDAY (DIP. BA, MA, Ph.D IN VIEW)

ABSTRACT

Although Religion is presumably everyone’s area of expertise, it is yet one of the most powerful social institutions in the world and also an enigmatic phenomena in life. This work was carried out to show the extent in which Christianity as a religion is a unifying factor by bringing together culturally and socially discrete groups into one single unit and to recognize Christianity as a veritable tool for capacity building and human development in Abak Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. To achieve this purpose, the literary research method and the researchers experience as an indigene were employed in carrying out this work. Christian family, ecumenical factor, answers to fundamental questions, Christian doctrine on brotherhood, mission schools, humanitarian services and sports are some of the cohesive roles played by religion in Abak Local Government Area.

INTRODUCTION

There is no universally acceptable definition of religion. This is because it is a phenomenon that affects everybody and human life in general. In other words, every one is interested to say or more things when it comes to religion. It is found at various levels among all cultures and societies and throughout the history of the human race.

Etymologically, religion is derived from three Latin words, such as, ‘Ligare’ which could mean to bind, ‘Relegree’ which means to unite or to link and ‘Religio’ which means relationship.¹ Etymologically, religion is the unity or relationship between the human person and the divine person or being.

E. B. Idowu defines religion as “the means by which God as spirit and man’s essential self communicate”.² Idowu’s definition centers only on the means of communication.

For N. S. S. Iwe, religion becomes a sort of man’s psychological consciousness, an inclination towards the creator and to worship the creator accordingly.³ This shows man’s dependence on the supernatural being subjectively.

From the fore-going, it shows also that many religions have narratives, symbols, traditions and sacred histories that are intended to give meaning to, explain the origin of life or the universe. Consequently, they tend to derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle from their ideas the cosmos and human nature. Suffice it to say that, religions may have organized behaviours, clergy, holy places, and scriptures.

However, religion is and has always been one of the most sensitive issues in the life of man, community or nation. Thus from time immemorial, people have given up their lives and possessions for their religious beliefs, for instance: Montanus of Phrygia, Buddha, John Chrysostome and Jesus Christ.⁴

On the other hand, “Social integration is defined as a human society forming a blend and incorporating into a larger unit”.⁵ Therefore, religion and social integration are compatible especially from Christian perspective.

It is worthy of note that Christianity arose from Judaism. In other words, Christianity began as a sect of Judaism and Jesus Christ as the founder. Therefore, Christianity is acclaimed the largest religion in the world because about one billion people or roughly one-fifth of the world’s population identifies themselves as christians⁶. In Christendom, there are many divisions due to various differences like: the Roman Catholic, Protestants, Pentecostals and African Independent Churches.

The Christian concept of religion is dynamic because it implies a vertical relationship with God, in whom we live move and have our being and a horizontal relationship with fellow men. This dynamic concept of religion is also universal and a feature of all cultures. Hence, to experience God is not exclusive right or pre-rogative of Christians only, nor of church-goers. Again, that religion requires morality in order to gain acceptance, popularity and authenticity. In other words, religion tries to enforce morality. In the course of this paper, the church will stand for organised religion that is, Christianity and both would be used inter-changeably. In the first instance, one of the purposes of this work is to show the extent in which Christianity as a religion becomes a unifying factor by bringing together culturally and socially discrete groups into a single unit.

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PEOPLE OF ABAK

The people of Abak are generally called Annang. They migrated with their Ibibio brothers from Southern Sudan to Southern Cameroon and later to Ibom village in Arochukwu – Imo State⁷. And from Imo State, they further migrated to the different sub-culture areas of Annang which they have found themselves today⁸.

Abak was one of the Local Government Areas that formed Akwa Ibom State at its creation in 1987. It is located on the south western axis of Akwa Ibom State and shares boundaries with Ukanafun, Oruk Anam, Essien Udim, Uyo, Ikono and Etim Ekpo Local Government Areas⁹. The headquarters is Abak, 18km from the state capital city – uyo, with a landmass of 304sq.km with an estimated population of 139,090 from the 2006 population census¹⁰. It comprises of five (5) clans namely: Ediene, Abak, Midim, Otoro and Afaha-Obong and also has eleven (11) wards and ninety-one (91) villages¹¹.

The land is generally flat with high grounds and valleys at Ibagwa. Its vegetation is the green foliage of trees and shrubs with a concentration of wild palm trees while the usual rainy and dry/harmattan seasons are also experienced. The inhabitants are predominantly farmers, traders, craftsmen and hunters. According to the publication of the Ministry of Information and Culture, Uyo concerning Abak Local Government Area, it states that:

Abak as at the Nigerian Independence, was reputed for harbouring the greatest concentration of palm tree stands per mile and because of the dominant feature of the palm trees, it informed the establishment of the palm oil processing mill, palm industries limited in 1972.¹²

The area is sometimes referred to as Abak "Ikot Anwan" (Land of warriors) because they gave the stiffest resistance to European or White conquest of their land¹³.

The people of Abak have a common ancestral antecedence having an unparalleled impact on the people through traditional songs, dances and beliefs. They are reputed also for their resourcefulness and highly mobilized for economic development and political integration with and outside the state. Majority of the people of Abak are Christians, despite this fact, some traditionalist are still in practice of Ekpo, Utu-Ekpe, Idiong and Nnabo. Also produced in abundance are: Local gin (akai-kai), piassava (idut), hoes (udok), climbing ropes (ikpo), garri, foo-foo, palm kernel oil, sand and gravels.

THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN ABAK

Social integration begins from socialization of a child into his society from birth till his adulthood¹⁴. The positive roles of Christianity in this process of socialization and integration of a person into his larger society will be treated. If social integration implies ensuring that a human being is fully incorporated and blended into his society then the role of religion which is part of culture of man into which he is incorporated cannot be overlooked.

A. Christian Family

When children are given birth to, they are born into the smallest society of a family. No child can live in isolation because human beings are gregarious animals. Therefore, every Christian family has a role to play in integrating a new-born baby into Christian society before such a child joins the larger society. In the book of proverbs, parents are charged with the responsibilities of training their children in the way of the Lord so that they can grow to be matured Christians. It contains a father's instruction to his son in building the son morally and in the ways of the Lord and admonishes and narrates the qualities of a good Christian wife. This could be seen in the passage as thus:

My son, hear the instruction of thy father...
My son, if thou wilt receive my words...
My son, forget not my law....Hear, ye children,
the instruction of a father, and attend to
know understanding....My son, attend
unto my wisdom... My son, if thou be

surety for thy friend... (Proverbs 1-7 KJV)

Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her... she will do him good and not evil...(Proverbs 31:1-31 KJV).

A new born baby into a Christian family is supposed to be socialized in Christian ideals such as having respect for elders, being courteous, he or she should be taught the Christian virtues of holiness, honesty, respect, hard work, integrity, having faith in God, being sympathetic, merciful and prayerful. Parents of such a new born baby is expected to be a shining example to the child in all they do, what they say and instill in the child's moral behaviour that conforms with the norms of Christian society.

These are effectively done by ensuring that morning and evening prayers together with Bible study are observed in such a Christian family daily. In this respect, Christianity through Christian parents and family integrates the child in society and this is extant in Abak as a community.

B. Ecumenical Factor

Our age is that of ecumenism. It is the age of serious search for unity among all believers in Christ and of common understanding and peaceful accommodation among other faith in Abak. The modern ecumenical age requires of us all Christians to strive for mutual understanding, reciprocal edification and joint Christian endeavours¹⁵. The goal of the ecumenical movement is to establish commonality within Christianity, identifying areas of agreement in doctrine and practice. One of the leading organizations in the ecumenical movement is the World Council of Churches (WCC), which endeavours to establish a "common expression of the Christian faith today"¹⁶.

The desire for commonality among Christian groups has been extended into a desire for establishing common ground between other religions.

Institutions like the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN), Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) and other theological institutions are dedicated to the promotion of intra and inter-religious contacts and dialogue¹⁷.

These institutions are Christian based and through them Christianity as a religion has done a lot to promote social integration in Abak. Programmes and teachings of these institutions through seminars, lectures, and workshops contributed immensely to the socialization and integration processes of the people of Abak.

C. Answers to Fundamental Questions

Every mature human person is confronted at one stage of life or another by those same fundamental issues of human existence which are the fundamental questions in religion and religious experience. Some of the questions are: what is the purpose and ultimate meaning of human life? Does God exist? Is death the final end of man? Is there life after death? Why am I

blind, deaf and cripple?¹⁸ All these and their likes are fundamental questions of human existence which have agitated the mind of man in all generations and cultures. These questions naturally engage the minds of every sane human being though the response to them may be as different there are many human beings and cultures.

Therefore, the consideration of these fundamental issues and the search for their answers are the source of man's religiosity. Thus, religious institutions have emerged in human society for the satisfaction of the religious yearning of the human spirit. Programmes like crusades, open air preaching, Bible study, workshop, lectures and seminars helps a lot in digging deep into the "Word of God" in a bid to proffering answers to such questions¹⁹. It also helps in socialization and integrating the people into acceptable norms of the society because most of these programmes are regularly carried out by various Christian Churches and associations present in Abak. For instance during Bible classes, questions are entertained and answered based on the "Word of God" and enough time is given to dwell on each question raised.

D. Christian Doctrine on Brotherhood

A deep bond of love and closeness exist among Christians, and this esteem for the brethren extends from one Christian fold to the other and even beyond. There is frequent visiting among the various Christian Churches across the land of Abak. The bond of love and fellowship in Christ that is experienced by Christians is unique and striking. To buttress this fact, Jesus Christ taught that:

A new commandment I give unto you, that
Ye love one another; as I have loved you,
that ye also love one another. By this shall
all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye
have love one another. (John 13:34-35 KJV)

Individualism, so prominent in society, is in conflict with the truths of unified brotherhood taught by the "Word". Thus, much like a physical body (which has many parts or members), the church is a spiritual body with many members. This spiritual body is united, not divided. Brothers and sisters in the church are to love one another as Christ loved us. They are to submit to one another in the fear of God. They are to respect each other's conscience. This is all done in love and gentleness with the intent of strengthening the individual member and the entire body. Likewise, believers are to be perfectly joined together in a tightly knit church family. Following this biblical pattern of godly order nurtures a great measure of love and unity.

The organization of both dancing and singing competitions among churches, show the extent of an expression of a brotherhood. Again, Christian youth organizations like: boys and girls brigade, young men and women Christian associations to mention a few, through their religious oriented programmes help to socialize and integrate the people of Abak in the acceptable norms of the society.

E. Mission Schools

Mission Schools have really helped in the generation of people in the society and Abak is not an exception. Teachers on the mission schools both at the primary and secondary schools level

discharge their duties to their students effectively. Mission schools emphasis moral instructions and good Christian behaviour among their students. Acts of moral indiscipline are frowned at and erring students are punished to build them up and not to destroy them. Though this forum, Christianity as a religion through Christian teachers and teaching socially integrate the students into the society. Such institutions include: Holy Family College – Abak, Palm Grove Christian Seminary – Utu Abak, Goodnews Community Primary/Secondary School – Midim, Queen of the Apostles Seminary – Afaha Obong, Loreto Girls Juniorate – Afaha Obong, Comprehensive Secondary School- Atai Otoro and Apostolic Nursery/Primary School- Abak.

F. Humanitarian Services

A greater number of Christian Churches are involved in helping and providing for the needy and less-privileged in Abak. Some of them cater for children and then train the youths in schools and skills acquisition. Others are seen as rehabilitation centers for the lunatic fringes and those with psychological trauma. For example, Hutterian Brethren-Utu Abak, Goodnews Community International Inc. (aka Gospel Village)- Abak, Christ Faith Church- Abak.

G. Sports

Christian Churches in Abak Local Government Area contribute enormously in the area of sports development to humanity. This has gone a long way in promoting peace and tranquility in Abak. Recently, youths of Living Faith Church (aka Winners' Chapel) and church of God Mission all in Abak organised a five aside football competition as part of their yearly youth programme at Bishop Clerks Central School – Abak on the 10th -17th December, 2007. The turn out was impressive. It also improved the spirit of sportsmanship and helped in integrating the youths positively in Abak.

HINDRANCES TO THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY IN SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN ABAK

Christianity as a religion has not failed in the promotion of social integration in our society because its principles and teachings remain constant, but Christians have failed in the proper application of these Christian teachings on society. The following factors hinder social integration in Abak.

A. Broken Home

When a Christian family fails to teach young girls and boys about what Christian marriage and vows are, and if the Church fails to give younger people counseling before and after marriage, then the ills of a broken home is experienced in such Christian family. This would lead to the parents living separately and their children scattered or shared between father and mother. Hence, the necessary ideal Christian teachings would not be given to the children and they may end up being delinquent in the society. The death of either parents or both could also cause a broken home thereby rendering a child helpless. Adultery, bareness, suspicion and hatred could also contribute to broken homes.

B. Lack of Moral and Religious Instructions in Schools

Wherever there is moral and religious instruction at home and this is lacking in the school, there could not be a follow-up of the teaching of Christian ideals to build up the family. Some of the reasons for this is moral laxity among the teachers and lack of qualified religious instructors. Government take-over of schools and unwillingness on the inexperienced teachers to Christian schools and unwillingness on the part of the students to learn and gross indiscipline contribute to this factor.

C. Christian Family and Inter-marriage

Supposing, a family is composed of a Christian husband and a Muslim wife or vice versa, such a family raises a lot of social problems because the demands of the two religions would conflict. For instance, marriage is described as a 'garment' (libas) worn by both husbands and wife²⁰. It could also be a contract between two parties that could continue as long as the two parties carry out the terms and conditions of the contract.

On the contrary, the contract could be broken and it is called Talag (divorce)²¹. There would be a lot of problems to be solved with this different ideologies on marriage ranging from the type of marriage that children of such family be joined, to the kind of funeral rites should they observe for the parents. The pursuit of this common goal between adherents of different religions has frequently resulted in distinctiveness being compromised to attain unity. This is being referred to as syncretism²².

According to Obong Friday Umanah, some Christians are seen at one point or the other seeking for traditional aid by consulting African Traditional Priest in a bid to solving their pressing problems²³. This syncretic practices show a dual affiliation by some professing Christians. Consequently, he or she lacks faith and would not be able to participate fully in the programmes and other activities of the church, thereby bringing about lack of integration.

D. Religious Fanaticism

Religious fanaticism could be descriptively said to be "an irrational attitude of religion which leads the religionist to the practice of religion beyond the bounds of reason and without moderation²⁴. There are many Christians who in moral character are so proud and would not regard the positions and views of others. Christians of this frame of mind and character can hardly practice their faith without spiritual arrogance. This arrogance make one unwilling to recognize, acknowledge and respect the authentic spiritual values and contributions of other religious denomination and institutions but would rather claim superiority over others.

This will lead to religious triumph where the fanatic believes that his denomination or Church is the only authentic tradition and spiritual way of God and the only gate to heaven. In that case he expect adherents of other Churches to be either converted to his own religious traditions and rituals or face the consequences of religious or spiritual defeat. This is why many religious

denominations go out to convert people forcefully to their fold through massive evangelism in Abak Local Government Area.

Summary and Conclusion

Christianity in its various institutional and social forms and manifestation is one of the strongest social forces to be reckoned with. As a religion, its claims are both human and divine. Its incarnate nature and foundations give it an inescapable and essential human dimension. In view of its human character, Christianity has, in the course of human history and in various nations, demonstrated itself as the custodian and promoter of human values. Therefore, there is still a strong need for Christianity to continue its traditional role as the agent of human values here in our society.

This paper began by looking at the general concept of religion and what some scholars perceive it to be. A brief historical background of the people of Abak was treated. That then gave way to the role that Christianity play in social integration in Abak. A look at some of the factors that militate against such roles were enumerated and possible recommendations made to forestall its spread.

Therefore, religion through Christianity and through well built up Christian families would have a more positive impact on social integration of people in our society. If every Christian family socializes and integrates themselves within the Christian ideals, such Christian ideals will in turn socialize and integrate our society.

In keeping with its traditional role, Christianity must step in to proclaim the dignity of the human person. It must preach the gospel of the fundamental dignity and equality of all human beings in rights and duties. In other words, they must preach and practice the gospel of justice and peace, so as to reign in modern Abak society for social harmony, progress and prosperity.

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