

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN BUILDING A MORALLY-CONSCIOUS SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

In the history of mankind, religion has played a vital role in shaping morally-conscious societies. Religion and Morality are inseparable, they complement each other in building a better society and if religion performs its work well, the world would be a better place. Moral consciousness on the other hand cannot properly stand without religious influence. Some people understood religion to mean morality, however, both work differently but have related and sometimes similar goal. Looking at our society today, one can deduce that the moral values of majority of the people are declining. Some people are abandoning the moral values they upheld before as a result of the influences from western cultures. This exposure will deal to some extent on the causes of moral decay in the society paying much attention on how laxity on religion principle has caused moral decay; those responsible for moral decay in the society, investigate if moral values are still relevant in the modern society and the roles religion must play to build the moral-consciousness. Since there are many religions in the world like Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Islam and Christianity among others, this research would focus mainly on Christian religion perspective of morality. To make an effective research of this study, the researcher made use of research questions and many people were of the opinion that the leaders of the Christian groups have failed the masses, suggestions on the role they must play to restore back moral-consciousness was spelt out and recommendation were made.

Keywords: Role, Religion, Moral Education, Moral-Consciousness, Society.

Introduction

The topic “The Role of Religion in Building a Morally-Conscious Society” is analyzed based on the following bible passages. God sets before us His commandments through religion which if we abide by it attract good reward. Our culture sets before us some of its norms and values which if we equally keep will create a moral society.

“See I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding your today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish;...” Deuteronomy 30:15-17

In understanding morality, it is vital also to understand religion. Some people posit that religion and morality has nothing in common, denying the interconnectedness existing between morality and religion. Judging an action good or bad is within the domain of religion. No human society can exist and successfully operate on its principles without the influence of religious dictates. Living a moral life today has great influence of religion. And one cannot appreciate what is considered praiseworthy actions independent of religion. Sometimes, people think that by ignoring religion in things that concern moral tantamount to social suicide. If religion and its role is properly understood and harnessed in building a moral-consciousness of the society we can understand our society certainly better. Yes, some people may ask what has religion done in combating the high rate of hatred, injustice, greed, kidnapping, killing suicide, sexual abuses that is threatening the core values of the society, notwithstanding, if religion is not in existence, the world/society would have been a thing of the past. In the society, religion is still needed to inculcate the moral consciousness in the mind of the people.

Religious instructions are the driving force of morality. In order to have a holistic understanding of the roles religion plays in building a morally conscious society, it would be important to first of all discuss the causes of moral decay in the society since we all are aware of the evil predominant in the society, those that are responsible, the effects of moral decay, the importance of moral value in the society.

Religion plays a great important role to instill moral consciousness to the minds of the people. Religion creates meaning, motivates and helps adherents to have the fear of a supreme being in carrying out their daily activities. No matter how some people may try to ignore religion in the world today, it is important to acknowledge that without religion, the society would be in a state of chaos, leading to annihilation.

So, religion is found to be an important factor that can play a major role in restoring morality to the society. Many scholarly works have been done on the role of religion in society but rarely could one find any scholarly work deliberately written on how religion must build moral-consciousness in society. How this moral-consciousness are to be built are yet to be understood. Mass media, peers influence, money and laxity on religious principles can be attributed to the major causes of moral decay in the society. However, these areas of influences causing moral decay should be influenced by religion. Sampled opinions indicate that the leaders of different Christian religious groups have really failed the masses, as a result of their inability to translate their pulpit talks into their own individual and collective lifestyles.

Religion and Morality

According to Smith (2017:22) "Religion is a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with the powers, in hopes of realizing human goods and avoiding bad things."

Often practitioners of religion hope to overcome misfortune and receive blessings from Supreme Being, as well as deliverance from any form of evil one. This conception is a reminder to the practitioners that all that are good must be included in their way of living, while the immoral act must be avoided or excluded from their lives.

Donald Broom (2003:4) "A religion is a system of beliefs and rules which individual revere and respond to in their lives and which is seen as emanating directly or indirectly from some intangible power". These beliefs and precepts constitute the basis for individual to conform to what they regard as right or good.

In defining morality, Gert (1988) in *Evolution of Morality and Religion* (2003:3) states: "Morality is a public system applying to all rational persons governing behavior which affects others and which has the minimization of evil as its end, and which includes what are commonly known as the moral rules at its core."

According to Gert, "Moral values are guiding principles or standards of behavior which are regarded as desirable and important, and held in high esteem by a particular society in which a person lives." It is "belief about what is right or wrong and what is important in life".

"Moral values" are therefore, essential common tenets that form human relationships in each society as found in the Christian holy book, these tenets, as in what is contained in the Ten Commandments have, what is popularly called a religious base. In our society, moral values refers to good virtues such as respect for elders, general hospitality, respect for constituted authorities and obedience to law of the land, honesty, integrity, justice to fellow human beings, dedication to service and duty, honesty and love. .

So, morality pertains to what is right rather than wrong. To behave morally right is to judge rightly and not wrongly. To behave morally right needs a good action to be carried out. So, moral actions form part of moral systems within societies. This is why Alexander (1987) in *Evolution of Morality and Religion* writes: Moral societies are societies with rules. Rules as it were are agreements or understandings about what is permitted and what is not, about what is right or wrong. Some of these rules forbid killing, depriving people of their rights and freedom, personal pleasures etc.

In every given moral society, "the individual respects the norms not only in order to avoid being punished and to seek the reward of acceptance, but to weigh the degree of his way of life with that of his culture" (Kummer 1978:42).

Religious systems and values have rules of conduct however invisible they may be. Religious system with its rules is the fate of humans that is the first concern of religious traditions. "Religion without rules" is a contradiction because "rule" indicates orderly way of doing things, a way to be followed, and that is what reminds the human beings whether they are straying from the narrow path or following the good way of life.

Religion is collectively seen as the main source of human ethics and morality, as most religion are concerned with ideas and practices which indicates which action is regarded as good or bad, right or wrong.

Timothy Dwight, in arguing for the continuity of religion declared that "morality, as every sober man who knows anything of the subject discerns with a glance, is merely a branch of religion. "Consequently, where religion is found wanting, morality is found wanting too, where God is not worshipped, the moral virtue of kindness, justice, truth, the great hinges

which determine the morality of the society will not be practiced because the motivating force which resist the passions of men or pushed them to do good would be found wanting..

Some scholars would argue that religion no matter how corrupt it may seem, is better than having no religion at all, and virtues that are not rooted in the love of God are no more than “splendid vices”. People usually say that religion is a helpful companion to morality as it causes people to be afraid of punishment and hope that they will be rewarded for their good deeds. Again, whenever the word “religion” is mentioned, it draws our attention to the dogma of the church, reminding us that this is where the foundation of morality lies, and this keeps us in check of the way we live our lives.

In the society today, we have customs and laws. The law is often seen as custom but a custom becomes a law only if it is recognized and defined. So, everything a society expects from individual is bound to take on a religious character, if it is true that observation of custom attaches man to man and detaches man from himself. Originally, we note that the whole of morality is custom and as religion forbids any departure from custom, morality co-exist with religion. Quoting Loyal Rue (2005:1) who said that “religion is not about God, it is about us, it is about manipulating our mind so that we can think, feel and act in ways that are good and right for us and the society at large.”

Some causes of moral decay in the society

Popular opinions suggest that mass media, peer pressure, money and laxity on religious principle are some of the major causes of moral decay in the society.

1. Media Influences: Though social media has positive impact on the youths, but the negative influences cannot be overlooked. What the youths acquire on social media can negatively influence the development of moral behavior; violence, kidnapping, rape greedy and other vices hugely attracts the moral development of youths. The end result of these influences is enormous paving way for the youths to joining some deadly cultic groups thereby escalating the vices. Some use this means to create life threatening situations.

2. Peers and Friends: Morality can be thwarted by the influence of peers and social closed friends who are immoral in their dealings with each other and society at large. “The development of romantic relationships and exposure to risk behaviour such as drug abuse, excessive alcohol intake” can enslave the young minds such that accepting immoral values become a way of living. This, along with increased freedom, begins to shape the value system the youths will go on with, throughout their life time. Peers may strongly determine preference in the way of dressing, speaking, using illicit substances, sexual behavior, adopting and accepting violence, adopting criminal and anti-social behaviours and in many other areas of the adolescent’s life (Padilia, Walker & Bean, 2009; Tome, Matos & Diniz, 2008).

3. Money: Money is the major factor that militates against moral values. In the scripture, we see the man who sold his master for thirty pieces of silver and elsewhere we hear about money related betrayals and other vices empowered by that ‘tinted thing’ call money. It has become the most notorious thing that harms the morals of the youths these days. Often some people abuse money, fight over money; greedy and dishonest when money is involved and ultimately live is lost for money. Excessive love of money can cause other vices to take root in

illegality. Money in so far as it has power of influence, breeds mistrust. It ends friendships. Money makes people to lie and cheat. As **Karl Marx**, the proponent of capitalism, noted, "Money then appears as the enemy of man and social bonds that pretend to self-subsistence."

4. Laxity on Religious principle: Leaders do not preach or teach about the principles of wealth creation or how to develop an investment mentality, their sermon is always "give" and you will receive by the Lord. The leaders of Christian faith seem to have failed in inculcating moral values on the society at large by their way of life. The people now live by what they witness the leaders do and not by what they hear. Many of the Christian leaders now drive the most costly jeep but distort every kobo from the religious adherents every service conducted, how can they now preach contentment? Some of these leaders even steal from the common purse to live a luxurious life. This has contributed massively on moral decadence as many of the leaders have lost their dignity before the masses. Not only living in luxury, there was a conclusion that some of the Christian leaders indulge in sexual immorality. This is no longer a hidden agenda as many leaders have been caught severally indulging in sexual intercourse with the members minors. This made the society to devalue many of them caught in this act and disregard their preaching as barbaric. With this happening incidence, some of the masses in the society have really thought and acted as if sexual immorality is people's way of life because some of the leaders live the same way of life. Stealing from the common purse seems to becoming a norm. Some leaders many often concurred with the financial administrator of the church on how to cover up the money he or she stole from the church purse. The financial administrator on his/her part will go on doing the same as the leader and the evil will escalate because the leader cannot correct the evil he does. He has reduced himself to their level.

Archbishop Valerian Okeke (2021:9) said to church leaders: "you can't inspire if you are not on fire with Divine love". According to him "the people of God are perishing and leaving faith due to the attitudes displayed by many of the church leaders. Some are pursuing money, wealth and politics and this makes the church to suffer. Today many people move away to idol worshipping because of the attitudes of the church leaders. Many today indulge in immoral act because of the conducts of the leaders of various churches. On his part, **Ezeonwumelu, JohnBosco** posited what can help each person to determine the role each plays in making or destroying morality in society and the church: We have to ask ourselves this question- why is it that the number of churches and religious adherents keep on increasing all over the world, yet, it has not made the society to be in a better shape? No! Things are continually becoming worst. Many of our leaders are more interested in showing off; to be addressed as Pastors, most Rev., Senior, Apostles and many others without bothering to live out those offices. Many live under the cover of virtues and their lives continue to exhibit immoral life among those living with them. Then if all these immoral acts are found among the leaders of the church, how can the same church instill morality to the society they have misled by the very thing they preach against? Yes, in as much as the leaders of the Christian sect have committed many crimes, but they have not failed woefully because no man is totally perfect, Christian religion still have what it takes to instill morality in the society.

Other factors causing moral decay can be as a result of: **family influences, personal conscience, desire for power and Religious beliefs**

Nevertheless, despite the above factors, we believe that religion can help build moral consciousness if we follow judiciously the tenets of religion in self preservation, as well as other important aspect of living.

Human moral values are closely intertwined with the day to day activities of humans. Not to have value is equally not to have a living. As Socrates rightly says that “unexamined life is not worth living” **Theodore Roosevelt says:** “To educate a person in mind and not morals is to educate a menace to society”

Who is to be blamed for moral decay in the society?

An Igbo proverb “*otu onye anaghi azu nwa, nwa bu nwa oha*” to train a child is a collective responsibility. Moral decay in the society cannot be attributed to an individual or groups of individuals. Everyone, young and old should share equal blame for moral decadence in the society. Each individual or groups of individual has role to play in restoring morality in the society. Immorality in the society is not a game of blame. Rather it is a vice that affects everyone that requires all hands on deck to eradicate.

Obviously the power of technology in the modern society has greatly influence the young minds, which also despite the positive impact, has equally influenced them negatively and advance immorality in the society. Families bear its burden effect of the negative influence and as such instead of breeding moral minds, becomes the source of immorality. These younger generations glory in pleasure principle. As a result, society at large has become materialistic. Moral values are no more valued in the society; the legitimate authority to impact morals to the young mind are found wanting because the mature minds prefer training their children using the code of western culture. A culture where everything a child requests must be provided, otherwise its failure could be termed or amount to child abuse. There should be limit to what is provided to the young minds.

While we acknowledge the fact the everyone should be blamed for the level of immorality in the society, the mature minds must wake up from their slumber in order to direct the younger minds by inculcating moral values in them for posterity reprimanding a child whether he or she misbehaves is an act of love not abuse. “*Otu onye anaghi azu nwa*” is a wonderful concept that can help to instill morality. Mature minds must wear their cap of discipline so as to help the younger minds grow in morals. Morality is very important and must never be neglected.

M.K. Gandhi rightly states:

“If wealth is lost, nothing is lost”

“If health is lost, something is lost”

“If character is lost, everything is lost.”

Moral values constitute the core of a civil and just society. Moral values are the yardstick in guiding building our relationship with each other at different ladder of existence. Moral values equip us with “life jacket” that enables us survive all the storms of life. It mode our actions and qualifies it.

Moral value education, therefore, is essential in the process of imbibing in people the sense of one human family. Remember the Chinese proverb that says:

“If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in character;
If there is beauty in character, there will be harmony in the home;
When there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation;
When there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.”

It will be appropriate to state that a person with proper values will not be afraid to face problems, for such person will not indulge in any form of crime like kidnapping, prostitution, arm-robbery, cultism etc.

Some benefits of Moral Values

- i. It directs the behaviour, attitudes and relationship of the people with others
 - ii. It controls the people's behaviour and helps give direction and purpose to their lives.
 - iii. It helps them in taking decision, and set personal standards for their behavior.
 - iv. It enhances self-esteem.
 - v. When strongly held, values give the people a sense of fulfillment and contentment.
 - vi. When the society behaves according to the values, they feel comfortable, happy and satisfied; on the other hand, they feel uncomfortable, guilty and unhappy when they do not behave according to the values.
 - vii. Moral values help in building good inter personal relationships as well as in professional lives of the society.
 - viii. Dishonesty, cheating, jealousy, envy, violence are thus eradicated from the life of individuals and the society at large.
- How do we impact morality in the society?

The Roles of Religion in Building a Morally-Conscious Society

We live our life based on the assistant of Almighty God through the teaching of the church. The Master gave the authority to the church when He told the Apostles in Luke 10:16 “whoever listens to you listens to me” the church leaders are to be guided by the Holy Spirit and so, they teach with authority when it deals with matters faith and morals. In the task of teaching of Christian morality, the church relies on the dedication of Pastors and People of good will (CCC no 2038)

This applies that the right to inculcate moral principles including other aspects of social order belongs to the church as this pertains to the salvation of all humanity.

Notwithstanding the fact that religion is been driven by materialism, it still must stand up to its role of impacting and instilling the moral consciousness in the mind of the society. For a given society to make any headway in justice, health, stability truth and so on, religious tenets and practices are to be highly revered. Religion is the instrument that forms a good conscience in the mind of the people, promotes the practice of tolerance even to the point of shedding blood, patience in hardship, and dependent on God's time in time of trials and tribulations, justice in the midst of injustice and so on. A good religious who does all these sincerely can never be found wanting in morality.

The teaching on Christian morality which emphasizes love, tolerance, patience, compassion, forgiveness, hope, and perseverance can go a long way in promoting inner value. This does not mean that the adherents of the religion are perfect, there are imperfections found in them

but at the same time, stand the better chance to inculcate the right code of living especially on the teaching of same sex marriage, abortion, justice, honesty, tolerance, fortitude, human right and so on. Abortion is crime against humanity and against God. Life is sacred and thus must be treated as such.

Many are still found today living a life of moral integrity because of the religious believes. There are those who are philanthropist-helping the poor, those who abstain from committing abortion, stealing, collecting bribe committing fornication etc. just because of their religious affiliation and tenets. This shows that religion still impact socio-ethical behavior on its members

Religion upholds human dignity of every person before God, which is the basis of the dignity of man before other men, and this forms the foundation of promoting brotherhood among men, disregarding their colour, race, sex, class, culture etc.

Religion is the only perfect way of life that assists people to develop their intra-personal and inter-personal aspect of morality. The moral action of people does not depend only on the physical aspect of life but equally their feeling about it.

As already stated, religious instruction and belief remain today the life blood of society's moral ethos. Not only does religion teach moral virtues, but it wheels it into action. Religion teaches the society not to lie or kill and equally to respect the life and freedom of others as you would like yours to be respected, and this contribute to a more peaceful, stable and charitable society. We should always have this in mind that when a society discards the sense of the sacred which religion always promote, it will surely loose the moral decency.

Archbishop Okeke rightly said: "let leaders of the church lead the people by example, renewing their way of life". Today, people are inspired by what they see, and not by mere hearing. A good leader inspires followership and does not inform. The leaders of various churches should follow the footstep of their successors and this could help them to change their lifestyle of living in luxurious life and leaving the work of God undone. This will energize people to be contented with what they have. If the love of God is allowed to rule our religious sentiments, no matter what religion we belong to, the society will be a better place, and the face of God will shine upon us.

Recommendations

Having seen the challenges posed by social crimes to the society, which are not to the best interest of the society, some suggestions are made to curb these social vices in the society.

1. All religious leaders who are believed to be sole protectors of the souls of the masses should be cautioned when they deviate from preaching life-giving sermons to material sermons
2. The members of each religious group should be called from time to time to life giving seminar which will help to nurture their spiritual life.
3. Skill acquisition and financial empowerment programme should be organized especially for the youths by the religious leaders so as to impact in them the sense of job creation and thereby learn to be independent and responsible.

4. Religious leaders should live by example, by giving proper account of their year to year running of their churches which should be duly audited by external bodies. This will inculcate the sense of account keeping to the members and society at large.
5. Any religious group that fails to improve the moral standard of their members and society at large should be called to order and disciplined.

Conclusion

Religion really plays a vital role in establishing a sense of morality in the individuals and society at large. In as much as many of our leaders have failed to some extent in inculcating the moral value to the public as it supposed to by their way of life, and equally in pursuit of worldly pleasure neglecting the souls of the masses which is the core of their vocation, some are still trying their best in nurturing the spiritual life of the people. Though the good impact made by some leaders are invisible with regard to the social crimes prevalent in the society today like kidnapping, armed robbery, killing, fraud etc., but it is believed that if all leaders should come together and preach to the masses the danger of social crimes and immoral acts by their way of life and sound teaching, the society would be a glorious place to live here on earth.

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