

Spirituality and Development in Contemporary Nigerian Society

Professor
Vincent G. Nyoyoko
vincentnyoyoko@aksu.edu.ng
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies
Akwa Ibom State University

Abstract

The paper discusses the extent to which spirituality can enhance development processes. Reasons for an inclusive approach are advanced to explain the extent to which spirituality can induce effective and sustainable development policies. The paper opines that development processes will only be successful – even in material terms – if they take into consideration the spiritual dimensions of people’s lives. Prominence is creatively placed on the importance of creating measures to assess development progress through the perspective of spiritual principles. This is achieved by the use of contemporary spiritually based indicators for development with the hope that a consultative process might be launched in which the difficult, yet deeply rewarding work of conceptualizing and developing such indicators would begin. This leads naturally to propose a religiously based dialogue on spirituality and development among people from the different faiths of Africa which rests on the fact that religion has had a very eminent place in the development of African villages and institutions. Examples include the beliefs that were closely related to agriculture, commerce and life cycle (including the practice of making sacrificial offerings and co-operatives).

Key Words: Spirituality, Development, Society, Religious

Introduction

This paper proposes a discussion on ways in which culture and spirituality can be employed in developmental processes. To initiate this discussion I want to propose reasons for an inclusive approach to this proposal and to what degree it can enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of developmental policies in general and of anti-poverty programmes in particular. This work will surely not present an exhaustive work, but intends to provoke initial stimulating discussion.

My focus is on development processes promoted by some specialized agencies of the various tiers of governments and non-governmental organizations of our evolving democracy. Let me observe here that the approach of these non-governmental organizations to “co-operation” with the various organs and agencies of government has by no means been a uniform one. Nevertheless, their combined influence has been and continues to be decisive for millions of people in our society.

Many of the concepts or terms employed in this discussion are difficult to define. Wherever possible, I have tried to provide examples to give a sharper edge to what could ordinarily be misunderstood. But a more tasking issue is how to systematically assemble case studies which show how culture and spirituality can influence efforts to support people in moving out of poverty in its multiple forms, towards a situation of self-fulfillment and contentment.

This discussion puts forward the point of view that development processes will only be successful – even in material terms – if they take into consideration the cultural and spiritual dimensions of people’s lives. With the help of examples from different cultural areas and religious persuasions, I intend to discuss some aspects of what this means in practice and suggest some ways in which it may be done. The presentation may be ambitious, but I will make no pretense at coming up with some answers. My aim is to open up a debate about these issues which have often been ignored in the past by various cultural bodies and religions, because of their intangible and sometimes sensitive nature.

I am proposing here a dialogue on spirituality and development among people from the different religious persuasions and between them and the official development institutions of governments and non-governmental organizations. Let me, for obvious reasons, explain certain terms we hope to engage in this paper.

Spirituality

Spirituality is a process of personal transformation, either in accordance with traditional religious ideals, or, increasingly, oriented on subjective experience and psychological growth independently of any specific religious context. In a more general sense, it may refer to almost any kind of [meaningful](#) activity or blissful experience. There is actually no single, widely-agreed definition of spirituality ([Koenig, 2012](#): 36; Cobb, 2012). Surveys of the definition of the term, as used in scholarly research, show a broad range of definitions, with very limited similitude ([McCarroll, 2005](#): 44). According to [Waaajman \(2000](#): 460), the traditional meaning of spirituality is a process of re-formation which aims to recover the original shape of man, the image of God. To accomplish this, the re-formation is oriented at a mould, which represents the original shape: in [Judaism](#) it is the [Torah](#); in [Christianity](#) it is [Christ](#); in [Buddhism](#) it is [Buddha](#); and in [Islam](#) it is [Muhammad](#). In modern times the emphasis is on subjective experience ([Saucier, 2006](#): 1259). It may denote almost any kind of meaningful activity ([Snyder, 2007](#): 261),

or [blissful experience](#) (Sharf, 2000). It still denotes a process of [transformation](#), but in a context separate from organized religious institutions, termed "[spiritual but not religious](#)" (Wong, 2008). Houtman (2007) suggests that modern spirituality is a blend of humanistic psychology, mystical and esoteric traditions and eastern religions. [Waaajman \(2002: 315\)](#), on the other hand, points out that "spirituality" is only one term of a range of words which denotes the praxis of spirituality. Some other terms are: "Hasidism, contemplation, kabbala, asceticism, mysticism, perfection, devotion and piety".

Some religious traditions define spirituality as that which pertains to the self or [soul](#). Certain forms of spirituality are more of [philosophy](#), as we find in [metaphysics](#) generally. Thus, Ursula King writes: "... spirituality is now understood [anthropologically](#) as an exploration into what is involved in becoming fully human" (Paris Talks, London, 1995: 9). Due to the broad scope and personal nature of spirituality as a term in various usages, however, one can perhaps gain an overview of the field by focusing on what may likely arise when people describe what spirituality means to them.

Spirituality and Development

The theme of spirituality and development has proved to be a very thought-provoking interplay of concepts that will lead us to much discussion and reflection. This approach will provide the chance to think about what we mean when we talk about the concepts of religion, spirituality and development. Some may wish to venture to define these illusive words and put forth ideas that religion is externally defined while spirituality is internally defined but still able to be collective. Let me observe here that among the many possible meanings of development, there is the idea that true development would increase a person's ability to choose. For example, in fighting poverty, options are created for a person who receives suitable health care and now has the ability to work and sustain his family. Then, looking at spirituality and development together has led us to question what type of development religion normally represents. If religion helps to form our values and development implies a strong value statement, then this relation must be a very deep one.

In the various regions of Nigeria, it is apparent that religion has had a very direct place in the development of towns and villages and in how its customs and traditions have changed over time. This may include the pre-Christian or Islamic beliefs that were closely related to agriculture and life cycle of the town or village (including the practice of making cave offerings) or the arrival of the Catholic Church and subsequent syncretism or mixing of religions practices. In looking at the religious history of Nigeria, there are many significant events and factors that are key to its development. For example, in the late 1960's, there was an ecclesiastically based community in the village working with various anti-colonialist movements. Incidentally, the principal promoter of this movement in Nigeria had been the Portuguese, Irish and a host of other European missionaries.

A Religious Perspective on Development

Development, in the religious view, is an organic process in which "the spiritual is expressed and carried out in the material" ("[Spiritual](#)", [Etymonline.com](#), 2014). Meaningful development requires that the seemingly antithetical processes of individual progress and social advancement, of globalization and decentralization, and of promoting universal standards and fostering cultural diversity, be harmonized. In our increasingly interdependent world, development efforts must be guided by a vision of the type of world community we wish to create and be animated by a set of universal values. Just institutions, from the local to the

planetary level, and systems of governance in which people can assume responsibility for the institutions and processes that affect their lives, are also essential.

Authentic religion teaches that recognition of the fundamental spiritual principle, namely, the oneness of humanity, must be at the heart of contemporary civilization. Universal acceptance of this principle will both necessitate and make possible major restructuring of the world's educational, social, agricultural, industrial, economic, legal and political systems. This restructuring, which must be ordered by an ongoing and intensive dialogue between the two systems of knowledge available to humankind, science and religion, will facilitate the emergence of peace and justice throughout the world.

Communities that intend prosperity will do so because they acknowledge the spiritual dimension of human nature and make the moral, emotional, physical and intellectual development of the individual a central priority. Such communities will guarantee freedom of religion and encourage the free establishment of places of worship without let or hindrance. Their centers of learning will seek to cultivate the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness and will pursue as a major goal the participation of all peoples in generating and applying knowledge. Remembering at all times that the interests of the individual and of society are inseparable, these communities will promote respect for both rights and responsibilities, will foster the equality and partnership of women and men, the young and the aged, and will protect and nurture families. They will promote beauty, natural and man-made, and will incorporate into their design, principles of environmental preservation and rehabilitation of the eco-system. Guided by the concept of unity in diversity, they will support widespread participation in the affairs of society, and will increasingly turn to leaders who are motivated by the desire to serve irrespective of tribe and religious affiliation. In these communities the fruits of science and technology will benefit the whole society, work and municipal facilities will be available for all.

Communities such as these will prove to be the pillars of our national civilization, a civilization that will be the logical culmination of people's development efforts over vast stretches of time, religious and cultural divides. Religious statement that all people are created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization (Genesis 2) implies that every person has both the right and the responsibility to contribute to this historic and far-reaching, collective national enterprise, whose goal is nothing less than the peace, the prosperity and the unity of the entire Nigerian family.

True religionists (Christian, Muslim, Traditionalist) are optimistic that such a future is inevitable and, indeed, already beginning to emerge. They are also realistic, understanding that progress toward this future will require of peoples of whatever tribe an enormous amount of perseverance, sacrifice and change. The precise speed and cost of this progress will be determined largely by the actions, in the next few years, of governments, multilateral organizations, the private sector, organizations of civil society, the NGO's and key individuals. In striving toward this future, all concerned must clearly understand what they are working for and must be ever vigilant through self-reflection and self-evaluation if they are to become constructive participants in this national process. Therefore, clear goals, meaningful policies and standards, identified programs, and agreed upon indicators of progress are necessary if advancement toward people's common future is to be charted and regular corrections to that course determined and carried out.

While each of the issues I have tried to raise is critical to efforts to institute such a future, this paper focuses on the importance of creating spiritually based indicators to assess and, ultimately, to help guide development progress.

Spiritually Based Indicators for Development

The idea of developing spiritually based indicators for development is of contemporary importance. The preliminary issues have been developed by a large number of efforts to incorporate spiritual values and principles in development issues. This rests on the fact that the concept of spirituality and spiritual values, hitherto considered taboo in development related deliberations, is now being articulated for discussion.

Spiritually based indicators consider development progress as a function of the application of spiritual principles. These indicators are derived from universal principles which

are core to the development of the human spirit and, therefore, to individual and collective progress. These measures derive from a conception of development in which material progress serves as a tool for spiritual and cultural advancement.

Spiritually based indicators engender the establishment, clarification and prioritization of goals, policies and programs. Central to their conceptualization is the view that human nature is foundationally spiritual and that spiritual principles, which operate with the human soul, provide a great range of power for sacrifice and change. Based on the spiritual tendencies of Nigerians, people will be more willing to support policies and programs that derive from the development of indicators based on spiritual principles than they would be to those of purely material conception of life. We can observe that these measures could help to transform not only the intent but the actual practice of development.

The components of a spiritually based indicator include a vision of a peaceful and united future; the selected principle(s) crucial to the realization of that future; the policy area addressed by the principle(s); and the goal toward which the measure assesses progress. The indicator is quantitatively or qualitatively measurable and verifiable, and it is adaptable within a wide diversity of contexts without violating the integrity of the principle(s) involved. The next section discusses briefly three principles that might be used in constructing spiritually based indicators of development.

Developing Spiritually Based Indicators

This section offers three brief examples of how spiritually based indicators might be constructed. Such indicators will, ultimately, be needed at all levels, be it local, national and global. The first example of a spiritually based indicator explores the application of the principle of unity in diversity to educational policy. Beginning with a vision of development that accepts both the possibility and the necessity of a united and peaceful society, unity in diversity is identified as a spiritual principle essential to the realization of that future. A policy area is then chosen: in this case, education. By considering the principle of unity in diversity in education, numerous possibilities for policies, goals and programs emerge, several of which might be pursued. In this exercise, however, consideration will be limited to just one goal, namely, to foster in students a global consciousness, a consciousness inherent in the principle of unity in diversity.

An educational program to promote such a consciousness might include, but not be limited to, cultivating an appreciation for the richness and importance of the national diverse cultural, religious and social systems, and nurturing the feeling of belonging to and responsibility towards the nation state as a community. It might also include study of the significant contributions that the various states of the country are making to citizens collective progress through participation in national fora through such agreements as the numerous human rights indices and other action plans that protect freedom of worship.

To assess progress toward this goal, one might measure the percentage of time, both in-class and after school programs, dedicated to subject matter or activities which foster national consciousness. Another measure might be a content analysis of textbooks to determine the percentage of space dedicated to the same. Still another measure might be the prevalence of such subject matters in the curricula of teacher training institutes. Yet another might involve the attitudes and knowledge of students (and teachers) related to these matters, as gauged by surveys. This exercise could be taken further: several of these measures might be combined into a

composite index, or they might be assembled as a set of indicators related to the goal of fostering a national consciousness in students.

A second example of spiritually based indicator explores the application of the principles of equity and justice to economic development policy. By following the same process as in the first example, the guiding principles are identified as equity and justice; economic development is selected as the policy area; and the goal that is chosen is to eliminate poverty within and among the states of the nation. Obviously, this is a multi-faceted goal. For the purpose of this example, only the gap among states will be considered, although distribution of wealth within states must also be dealt with if world poverty is to be eliminated. Moreover, only poverty as it relates to income will be addressed. A premise of this goal is that there exist sufficient resources in the country to meet everyone's needs, but that eliminating poverty will require moderating consumption and accumulation, establishing just and equitable trade relations, and lifting the burden of excessive national debt.

There are available numerous income-gap measures which show where individual states lie along a continuum. Most or any of these could be used as measures, if taken over time, to determine if the gap between the most and the least economically prosperous state is being reduced. A baseline of what constitutes economic poverty vis-à-vis national per capita income will have to be established in order to determine progress toward eliminating poverty. Another measure might weigh the economic benefits that accrue from trading opportunities that favour economically poorer states. Still another measure might calculate, in terms of per capita income, the effects of steps taken by states, whether individually or collectively, to reduce, if not eliminate, outstanding bilateral and multilateral debts held by the economically deprived states.

A third example of spiritually based indicator explores the application of the principle of independent investigation of truth to policy in the area of governance and participation. In this case independent investigation of truth is identified as the basic principle; the policy area selected is governance and participation; and the goal is to foster the effective use of broad-based consultation in the formulation and implementation of development policies and programs. Consultation is understood as a process of collective decision-making that maximizes participation by all segments of the community and seeks to arrive at the truth of a given matter. Achieving this goal will require that mechanisms be established and avenues be opened for community members to participate meaningfully in the conceptualization, design, implementation and evaluation of the policies and programs that affect them.

Progress toward this goal will be much more difficult to assess than progress toward the goals in the previous examples. Measures might include surveys to determine the extent of individual participation in all phases of development, and the degree to which individuals see their contribution to community progress as meaningful and on-going. This measure would have to factor in the percentage of the community involved and the degree of participation by those community members typically excluded, including women, minorities and the elderly. Another measure might assess the existence of formal and informal structures and processes that facilitate collaborative initiatives, and the number and frequency of meetings held, or the percentage of the community involved with any of these mechanisms.

Obviously, the examples above do not go into the detail necessary to put into operation the proposed indicators. For instance, all measures would need to contain standards for weighing the information and data that are collected. This information and data would also have to be assessed over time to give a meaningful picture of progress being made. Furthermore, it would be necessary to specify fully, and in advance, what constitutes success.

Conclusion

As a form of conclusion, I wish to put forward possible collaborative steps towards the development of spiritually based indicators. Towards achieving this goal, this paper has presented a certain vision of the future and, based on that vision, has briefly examined spiritual principles that might be used in constructing indicators of progress toward this future. It has considered policy areas in which these principles might be applied in order to generate goals and, ultimately, indicators to measure progress toward these goals. Finally, it has given brief examples of how such spiritually based measures might be conceived and developed.

The approach taken in this paper does not follow the process normally associated with creating indicators. That is, indicator creation usually, though not always, follows the establishment of policies and goals. However, community, groups and others are, increasingly, approaching indicator development by first creating a vision, then identifying the principles that underlie that vision, then looking at policy areas in which to create goals based on those principles, and, finally, constructing indicators to measure progress toward these goals. This is the approach taken in this paper. Once spiritually based indicators become commonplace, any number of approaches will arrive at the same purpose: infusing spiritual principles into our understanding, practice and assessment of development. The actual identification of goals and the construction of spiritually based indicators for development might be undertaken as a collaborative process. In considering the following proposal, neither the steps, nor the principles, nor the policy areas suggested above would need to be taken as starting points.

The proposal is this: those representatives of the nation's religions are brought together, perhaps under the aegis of national development programme, to begin consulting on spiritual principles and their bearing on individual and collective progress. The initial aim of this effort, which should be seen, from the outset, as substantive, time consuming and on-going, would be to reach understanding on a limited number of spiritual principles that are shared nationally or universally and a set of priority policy areas in which they would be applied. Based on these principles and priority areas, goals would be generated and indicators constructed to measure progress toward these goals. Other aims might be added as the consultations progress. To the degree that a common vision can be articulated, the endeavour will be strengthened. While the representatives would not have to be involved in technical aspects such as calculating quantitative measures, the development agency involved might assume this responsibility, they would need to review the indicators, once assembled, and be involved in any reworking called for after they have been tested.

Religious differences should not prove insurmountable to such an initiative, for there exists an underlying thread of unity connecting the great religious traditions. They each propound basic spiritual truths and standards of behaviour that constitute the very basis of social cohesion and collective purpose. The religions should, therefore, be able to collaborate on an effort that draws on and honours their deepest truths and holds such promise for humanity.

As this process advances, it might benefit by drawing on certain work that is already under way in the field of development, such as the various national action plans. In these action plans, the various tiers of government (be it civil or religious) have committed to social, economic and spiritual development and to achieving a society of greater stability and peace, built on ethical and spiritual vision. They have to acknowledge that their societies must respond more effectively to the material and spiritual needs of individuals, their families and the communities in which they live, not only as a matter of urgency but also as a matter of sustained

and unshakable commitment through the years ahead. Moreover, they have to affirm that development is inseparable from the cultural, ecological, economic, political and spiritual environment in which it takes place. These same governments have also to recognize that individuals should be allowed to develop to their full potential, including healthy physical, mental and spiritual development, and that religion, spirituality and belief play a central role in the lives of millions of women and men, in the way they live and in the aspirations they have for the future.

These commitments, along with the policies, goals and programs suggested in these action plans, carry the weight of national consensus. In this sense, they represent the highest common understanding of development priorities and approaches that the international community has been able to reach. On the other hand, beyond general statements about the fundamental role and importance of spirituality, spiritual vision and spiritual development, if these national agreements offer no coherent picture of what these terms mean, and current development measures, the determinants of "success", by and large, will fail to take spiritual factors into account. It must be acknowledged that these action plans have recognized that spirituality is part and parcel of development and they do attempt to articulate certain principles such as tolerance and solidarity, some in greater detail and with greater success than others. Therefore, the consultations of the religious representatives could be deeply enriched by a study of these proposals. Moreover, these consultations may very well generate policies and goals similar to those found in the national agreements and could, consequently, benefit from considering the prescriptions that the agreements contain. However, since the policies and goals developed by the religious representatives would be based on clearly identified spiritual principles, they would much more likely be supported by people than those based on predominantly material considerations.

By calling for the creation of development indicators in each of the national action plans, the country will set in motion processes at the state and national levels for establishing appropriate measures of progress. The work on spiritually based indicators will, eventually, tie into these initiatives.

As these spiritually based measures are developed and put into use, consultative processes might be established nationally and locally in which communities would be encouraged either to adapt these indicators to their particular conditions, or to develop similar measures independent of the national initiative. The process of adapting or creating such indicators would, in and of itself, be enlightening and empowering for those involved. Moreover, the programs and policies that would eventually emerge from these processes would, in all likelihood, win the support of many people and draw formal endorsements from religious institutions and communities.

The creation of spiritually based indicators would not be the ultimate purpose of this initiative. Rather, it would be to place spiritual principles at the center of development, to use them in setting standards, policies and programs, and to draw on them to motivate individual and collective action. However, by demonstrating that the application of spiritual principles is both practical and measurable, the acceptance of spirituality as the very soul of development can be significantly furthered. Creating spiritually based measures for development is, therefore, not only timely, but essential.

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