

**UNITY IN DIVERSITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL EXEGESIS OF GALATIANS 3:28.**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Christian Religion has a significant role to play in sustainable development process of a nation like Nigeria. Several works in the past have centralized the theme of sustainable development at the stage of local, national and international discourses with little attention paid to sociological exegesis of a given biblical text. The issue of ethnicity in Nigeria has become a serious threat to national unity in recent times. It is so terrible that people are killing other tribes regularly especially in the Northern part of Nigeria. At the moment when sober reflections on the political happenings and the progress of electioneering campaigns by various political parties in this country are more than urgent, a crucial text such as Galatians 3:28 deserves closer consideration. It expresses a commitment on the part of all Christians in Nigeria to do away with class, tribe, party and state divisions that is crippling our national unity.*

**Keywords:** Unity in diversity, Ethnicity, Sustainable Development, Nigeria, Sociological Exegesis, Galatians 3:28.

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of sustainable development in Nigeria is apt for a case study for some reasons. Nigeria is endowed with great physical and human resource. In Africa, Nigeria has almost unrivalled record of leadership changes and ethno-religious crises. The Analysts of Nigerian situation so often find it difficult to explain why the country has made a very slow progress in her development programme since independence. Even before the establishment of the colonial rule, the geographical area now known as Nigeria was indebted by diverse ethno-nationalities with different languages, social, political and religious institutions. These diverse ethno-nationalities thought of themselves as distinct peoples. A search for Nigerian nationhood was based on a practical attempt made by the colonial masters in 1914 to weld these diverse ethno-nationalities into a governable whole. Unfortunately, there were no unifying symbols that could induce the desire integration, and the task was left to the post-independent leaders. It is therefore difficult in dealing effectively with the crisis of sustainable development confronting the nation through disunity.

Unity in diversity in all spheres of national life is very necessary in order to attain sustainable development in the country. Paul's declaration in Gal. 3:28 is doubtless the hallmark of his theology of unity and freedom which reads: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*. The basis of Paul's argument is the need for abolition of all discrimination among ethnic groups, economic exploitation of the poor by the rich and sexism. There is no doubt that there are some ambiguities raised in Paul's plea. Besides, the term diversity or ethnicity is interchangeably used with the word tribalism in this paper. We agreed that ethnicity in Nigeria as it is conceived elsewhere brings about the problems of socio-political instability and diversity. Seen in this instability and diversity laden, ethnicity according to Abner Cohen (1974:36 – 45) "refers to strife between ethnic groups in the course of which people stress their identity and exclusiveness."<sup>1</sup> Its major attributes are ethnocentrism, common consciousness exclusiveness and conflict. According to Badmus cited by Asamu (2005), it refers to specific power relations at the same time as it refers to cultural relations.<sup>2</sup> However, tribalism refers to a set of observable patterned responses of the masses to political, economic and socio-cultural innovations in the newly formed societies of Africa. Thus, while some tribal groups are more organized, some are unorganized.

Having examined the concept of ethnicity, is Paul advocating a situation in which the diversity between Jew and Greek, slave and freeman would be totally abolished in Gal. 3:28? What is he really suggesting in the case of man and woman, a suppression of the difference or a cultivation of equal treatment of the sexes? What does the text suggest to us concerning Paul's attitude to political and social diversities in a country where the majority of people are highly unprivileged? It looks as if Paul was expressly aware of the ugly discriminations and unhealthy rivalries in our nation resulting from overt diversity and ethnicity. (Manus, 1982:18).<sup>3</sup> The Pauline plea, "*No Jew nor Greek*" is to our mind, a radical and revolutionary challenge indispensable

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<sup>1</sup> A. Cohen. 1974. *Urban Ethnicity*. London: Tavistock Publications, Pp.36 – 45.

<sup>2</sup> F.F.Asamu. 2005. *Ethnic Militias and their Threat to Nigeria's Democratic Order*. In Alanamu (ed.) *Issues in Political Violence in Nigeria*. Ilorin: Hamson Printing Communications.

<sup>3</sup> C.U. Manus. 1982. *Gal. 3:28 – A study on Paul's Attitude Towards Ethnicity: Its Relevance for Contemporary Nigeria in Ife Journal of Religions*, December, 11: 18 – 26.

for our contemporary Nigeria in order to ignore the obviously inevitable tribal differences if we have to build a strong, stable and united country for sustainable development. Then, what was the context of Pauline writing?

### **THE CONTEXT OF PAULINE WRITING**

There is no doubt that what brought about the writing of the epistle to the Galatians was the Judaizing controversy.<sup>4</sup> The Christian community at Galatia was composed mostly of non-Jews who had been harassed with a Judeo-Christian propaganda. This tried to impede their faith in the gospel of freedom preached by Paul and to win them over to Jewish Law and practices through circumcision. Moreover, this obviously affected the future of the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ multi-dimensionally. Paul was of the opinion that this requirement was ordinary externalization of religion which would hinder Christian freedom (Galatians 3:2). Thus, Galatians 3:28 support a realistic commitment to the de-tribalization of our institutions and national outlook. It is also a pious appeal not to stay passive to problems of discrimination, oppression, alienation, corrupt politics, imperialism and evils of exploitation in our society.

The true position of the Christian condition according to Galatians 3:2 was that in Christ, the faithful at Galatia had received the spirit without having to submit to the requirements of the Law. Based on the explanation of the Galatians 5:13-16, the spirit in question is a spirit of freedom which supersede the dictates of the Law with the emergence of grace and faith in Christ Jesus.

Besides, some theologians and commentators agree that Gal. 3:28 is out of place in the contemporary situation. However, Manus (1982:19) argues that the context would have naturally followed immediately the first part of the statement: for those who are in Christ there is no more difference between Jew and Greek.<sup>5</sup> To him, this was the bone of contention between the Judeo-Christians and the faithful at Galatia when Paul wrote. Thus, if there was any distinction between slave and freeman, man and woman that was not the matter at issue and it did not constitute the crux in the Galatian controversy. It is in this theological context that Paul structures the text in question.<sup>6</sup> Unity therefore is the bedrock of sustainable national development.

### **DIVERSITY AND ETHNIC SITUATION IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

With slightly over 180million people, Nigeria is Black Africa's most populous nation and the tenth largest in the world. The population of Nigeria is composed of over 370 ethnic groups. Three of them, the Hausa in the North, the Igbo in the Southeast, and the Yoruba in the Southwest. These are the major group that makes up over 40% of the population.<sup>7</sup> The country is equally

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<sup>4</sup> J.O. Oyewole. 2012. Gal.3:28 – 'Equality of Mankind regardless of Gender, Nationality and Status: Pauline Judgement against Patriarchal Hegemony in O.A. Adewale (ed.), *Biblical Studies and Feminism in the African Context*. A Publication of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), Western Zone, Ibadan: Samprints and Graphics Co., 202 – 211.

<sup>5</sup> C.U. Manus. 1982. *Gal. 3:28 – A study on Paul's Attitude Towards Ethnicity: Its Relevance for Contemporary Nigeria in Ife Journal of Religions*, December, 11: 19.

<sup>6</sup> J.O. Oyewole. 2012. Gal.3:28 – 'Equality of Mankind regardless of Gender, Nationality and Status: Pauline Judgement against Patriarchal Hegemony in O.A. Adewale (ed.), *Biblical Studies and Feminism in the African Context*. A Publication of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), Western Zone, Ibadan: Samprints and Graphics Co., 205.

<sup>7</sup> O. Ikime. 1988. "Religion and Ethnicity as a Means of Maintaining the Status Quo in Nigeria Politics". *In*

*Mala, S.B (ed.) Religion and National Unity*, Ibadan: Orita Publications.

a nation of diverse religious beliefs; Muslims account for 50% of the population, Christians 40% and those holding indigenous beliefs 10% (Manus, 2006).<sup>8</sup> These divergent scenarios indicate different dynamics in peoples' interpersonal relationships. Such dynamics are equally exacerbated to a large extent by non-religious factors such as national diversities, ethnically inherited struggle for political leadership, resource control, power sharing, inter-ethnic and sub-ethnic rivalries arising from border disputes when either side remains unwilling to give up its ancestral land. Thus, the problem of welding a nation out of these disparate ethnic numbers and religious pluralism dispose the country to instability.

The problem of diversity and ethnicity feature prominently in Nigerian society. This is seen in the neglect of areas that are in need, acrimonious hegemony, imbalance revenue allocation, under-development or differential level of development, inability of our government to bring culprits to book, distraction of government and crisis of confidence.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the diversity and ethnic situation in Nigeria has resulted in inter-ethnic competition for scarce resources, regionalization of political parties, mutual or ethnic hostilities, fraud of different kinds, social disorder, economic woes, and instability in the political system and so on.

### **THE BACKGROUND OF PAUL'S TEACHING**

The writing of Paul is directly relevant to the contemporary Nigeria because the sociological realities of the world in which Paul was raised did not escape him at all. According to Gal. 3:28, the focus verse of our discussion, Paul classified the society into three. These triple classifications correspond to a tripartite division of society in the Graeco-Roman world in the following order:

- i. Ethno-Religious (i.e. Jews/Gentiles)
- ii. Socio-Political (i.e. Freeman/Slave)
- iii. Sexist (i.e. Male/Female).<sup>10</sup>

Paul emphasis on this stratification of society corresponds to structures in our contemporary Nigerian society. It was in this context of ancient human society that Paul called our attention to a sound theology of social justice. This Pauline view of society is comparable with the idea expressed in the benediction which a pious Jew pronounced daily in the Synagogue when he thanked God for not having been created a Gentile, a slave and a woman.<sup>11</sup> With this divisive background of Jewish tradition,

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<sup>8</sup> C.U. Manus. 2006. *Religion and Politics in a Multi-Ethnic Society, Nigeria: Reflection of a Christian Theologian*, Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, June and December, xxxviii: 1 – 26.

<sup>9</sup> M.H. Kukah. 2003. *Democracy and Civil Society in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.

<sup>10</sup> C.U. Manus. 1982. *Gal. 3:28 – A study on Paul's Attitude Towards Ethnicity: Its Relevance for Contemporary Nigeria in Ife Journal of Religions*, December, 11: 21.

<sup>11</sup> S.O. Abogunrin. 2003. *Biblical Studies and the gender problem in Biblical Studies and Women Issues in Africa*, Phillarem Corporate Printer, Ibadan: NABIS, P. 7.

Paul emphasized profoundly the importance of unity in diversity and oneness of the body of Christ without any ethnicity and discrimination.

Furthermore, Judaism and Graeco-Roman world of his time knew the problem of a divided and oppressive society. In his contribution on a debate on freedom, Paul proclaims that the new Christian vocation cuts at the roots of those divisive forces. In other words, Paul was interested the social and ethical dimension in which various relationships and pattern of interactions within the society were to be maintained. Paul confronts the reality of his times by following the set pattern of Jewish analysis of the principles of inequality in human society, namely: race, social status and sex. Whereas his fellow Jews were contended that the dichotomies in society were divinely arranged, Paul questioned the authenticity of these distinctions and their bearing on the believer in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Besides, Paul's challenge to the societal structures of his day is comparable also to the stoic view freedom. Zeno of Citium, the Stoic founder was opposed to the politics of Aristotle which taught the public the need for a tripartite form of government. These are:

- i. The ruling class
- ii. The artisans
- iii. The auxiliaries (military)

On his own part, zeno envisaged a city in which men and women, slaves and masters would be equal and press in a similar fashion. Stoicism, for its appeal to equality for all persons become a popular philosophy of the Mediterranean world in the New Testament times. It is not impossible that Paul, the man of Tarsus a philosophic centre of the time, had been deeply influenced by such currents of egalitarian principles. (Manus, 1982:22).<sup>13</sup> Thus, Aristotelian Politics created unequal and unbalanced structures in the name of nature. With nature as its weapon, Stoicism castigated Aristotelianism. Paul's thought broke the canons of the time because for him, this imbalance was to be restored in Christ Jesus. This is why Paul's teaching has stood the test of time, and still has relevance for us in Africa and especially in Nigeria society where social disparity manifests itself in all respects (Ilesanmi, 2000).<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, our investigation into Paul's background reveal that Paul's attitude towards social injustice and inequalities is not based on ontological speculations on human nature but that his attitude is anchored on Christ. In Christ, Paul discovered an image of oneness and boundless gift of God for all mankind irrespective of tribes, religion or sex. To him, no segregation,

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<sup>12</sup> O. Olajubu. 2007. 'Women and the Politics of Church Leadership' in M.A. Oduyoye (ed.), *Women in Religion and Culture*, Ibadan: Sefer Books Ltd., 131.

<sup>13</sup> C.U. Manus. 1982. *Gal. 3:28 – A study on Paul's Attitude Towards Ethnicity: Its Relevance for Contemporary Nigeria in Ife Journal of Religions*, December, 11: 22.

<sup>14</sup> T.M. Ilesanmi. 2000. *Oath-Taking as the Psychology of Mutual Mistrust in Nigeria*, Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies, Vol. xxxvi/1-2.

tribalism, alienation or unreasonable ethnicity nor inequality can be justified before this amazing grace of God. This according to Paul, he considered as having unity in diversity.

### **SOCIOLOGICAL EXEGESIS OF GAL. 3:28 AND ITS RELEVANCE TO NIGERIA**

The experience and expression of Nigerian presently as a result of diversity and ethnicity in our society urgently calls for immediate action. There is inter-ethnic competition for scarce resources, mutual or ethnic hostilities (especially in the Northern part of Nigeria), fraud such as inflation of census figure, electoral fraud in favour of regional parties, and instability in the political system, unhealthy rivalries and so on. This is why Gal. 3:28 is of paramount importance at this point in time. In this new life all ethnic, caste and other old distinctions are destroyed, in favour of complete equality within union with Christ. Thus, Gal. 3:28 reads:

There is neither Jew nor Greek

*ouk eni Iudaios oude Hellen,*

there is neither slave nor free

*ouk eni doulos oude eleutheros,*

there is neither male nor female

*ouk eni arsen kai thelu,*

for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

*Pantes gar humeis heis este en Christo Iesou.*

Sociologically, the exegesis of this verse is, by no means, easy. For a better and holistic understanding of the text, each clause will be critically examined independently. However, references will be made at random to related passages in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The triple repetition of the denial-speech formula *ouk eni*, “*there is no*” is a crux interpretation. Does Paul by it deny the existence of a Jew and a Greek, a slave and a freeman, and in our own world, a Hausa and a Fulani, a Yoruba and an Ibo or an Ibibio and an Efik when one is ‘in Christ’? Or does Paul ignore the social relationship between a Jew and a Greek, and those existing between various ethnic peoples in a country? In other words, is the statement to be taken literally or unitarily? Is he suggesting an abolition of the distinction between sexes, classes and tribes? Perhaps Paul is thinking about why the discrimination between Jew and Greek, the oppression of the slave by the freeman, the sexist power display of man versus woman should not disappear among the so called Christians.

Besides, the difference between man and woman is certainly obvious to Paul. Elsewhere in his writings, he argues strongly about it (1 Cor. 11:2-6). According to Gen. 1:27, *So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.* What is stressed in the narrative is not the physical difference between man and woman but their equality as created in the ‘image and likeness of God’. It can therefore be said that Paul is dependent on the creation story

for the construction of the clause. Thus, when Paul says there is neither male nor female, he does not encourage the suppression of the natural difference but that 'in Christ' the difference is immaterial and intangible.

The story of Philemon and Onesimus, his teaching on the respective duties of slaves and masters, and the tacit admonition of 1 Cor.7:21 point clearly to the fact that Paul did not envisage a society without masters and slaves. The Jew and non-Jew dichotomy seems to point to the fact that in the case of opposition between them Paul strove to efface any difference. The catch-word, '*Neither Jew nor Greek*' does not mean that Paul was teaching that the disparity between the two nations had been obliterated. Thus, for Paul, '*there is no*' does not imply that the real meaning is at the level of the relationship. Gal. 3:28 is emphasizing person-to-person, people-to-people relationships rather than a Unitarian view of the heterogeneous structures of human society.

The last clause '*You are all one in Christ Jesus*' also calls for an exegetical detail. It could also be understood in a Unitarian or essentialist sense, namely that Christians are one entity, that is, one and the same thing in Christ. The gender of *heis*, 'one' in Greek is masculine (Zerwick and Grosvenor, 1979).<sup>15</sup> Consequently, it can be rendered 'one person'. The corporate view of Christians in Paul's perspective brings the diversity of peoples, of sex, of tribal, of social and political persuasions to the common belonging to Christ. It is a belonging which affect an oneness with him and with each other as the classical mystical union between Christ and the believers (Romans 6:1-11). The perspective is the same as is expressed in 1 Cor. 12:12, namely that the variety of members makes one body, that is Christ. The point of the whole argument is precisely that unity in diversity remains a significant aspect of our contemporary society. The coming into being of this one family of our nation, Nigeria in which all barriers of tribe, culture and social status are broken down is the focus of this writing.

#### **UNITY IN DIVERSITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA**

Religion makes a huge contribution towards sustainable development of a nation. Through its preaching and teaching, religion fights the vices that antagonize development: Self, ethnic and regional sentiment, corruption, exploitation, dishonesty, imprudence, bribery, deceit, sycophancy, terrorism etc. and advocates non-violence and love. Religion develops human beings themselves who in turn develop and maintain national structures. Through assemblies, seminars, workshops, meetings, communique, circulars, etc. religious leaders have been in a position to show how religion has always been a part of the forces for development. Where the government remains transient on developmental setbacks, the religious bodies remain intransigent.

Nigeria is a country of many tribes, languages and religions. Despite this pluralistic feature of the Nigerian society, each tribe has a strong community life, in which all strive not only for their welfare but also for the welfare of others. This awareness and compassionate concern for each other in the traditional Nigerian life cannot be overlooked. It is not an exaggeration that the major religions in Nigeria are not united neither in their beliefs nor their practices. Perhaps, the other crucial issue is the claim of universality. Can Christianity and Islam, for example, present Christ or Mohammed without falling into the false religious

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<sup>15</sup> M. Zerwick and M. Grosvenor. 1979. *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*. Epistles – Apocalypse, Rome, Biblical Institutes Press, ii: 571.

universality which would encourage forms of intolerance and domination that generate tension within community? Besides, this awareness of the historical peculiarities of all religions and the cultural realities force us to re-examine the issue of universality more critically. For one thing, general experience tends to indicate that human beings take their culture and its ideals as the standard that determines themselves and others. Certainly such ideas and values are idiosyncratic.

The Bible affirms that God is the Father of all men. In spite of efforts by the Gospel writers to confine Jesus to his Jewish environment, we still find powerful traces of his liberating activities to people of other races (Luke 7: 1-10; Mk 7:24-30 etc.). The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) presents the behaviour of one who was despised in Israel as an example to follow. In the last judgement parable (Mt.25:31-46), Christian tradition took this universal element in the message of Jesus, that salvation can be found outside an explicit relationship to Christ and the Church; and gave it wider expression in a radical and impressive way that has never been surpassed. Godliness is also good neighbourliness.

There is no doubt that Jesus himself lived out this unrestricted brotherliness by caring particularly for those who were objects of religious and social discriminations. The parable of the Father who accepts and the brother who rejects (Luke 15:11-32), not only demonstrated that Jesus was opposed to the exclusive way in which the religious people in Israel understood salvation, with their rejection of sinners, but also indicates the new image of God that Jesus presents. The particularism of the Jewish view of salvation was called into question by the universal dimension of the Kingdom of God as it was proclaimed by Jesus who himself mediated God's saving rule to men without distinction. Moreover, admittedly Jesus was not a nationalist, but he shared the critical prophetic stance of John the Baptist who said to the self-righteous Jews: "Bear fruit that befit repentance .... do not begin to say ... we have Abraham as our father ..... (Luke 3: 8). It is not being a descendant of Abraham in a racial sense that guarantees entry into the Kingdom of God; what is decisive is the faith which produces the fruits of Metanoia. (cf Mt.5: 20). Religion is about human relationships both among themselves and with God.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, this is a form of existence that considers with humility and honesty, the pluralistic nature of our world. The unifying function of religion will only be credible if the various religions will generate such human interest and values that can lead to common goal, common involvement and common welfare, irrespective of petty religious differences which are historically conditioned and primarily man-made. Perhaps our major religions in Nigeria should rethink their various evangelical strategies within the context of divine intention and our historical realities. In the absence of this, religion cannot be looked upon as having any positive role to fulfil in societal unity. For one thing, universality of religions must be tied to the liberation of the poor and oppressed and the creation of humane society. All religions should be allowed to preach their messages as long as these are within the law and respect the rights of others. Hence, there will be unity in diversity in contemporary Nigeria as long as no religion is openly persecuted or supported. In other words, sustainable development must be aimed at the fulfilment of man's vocation, which ultimately leads to God.

Besides, in Islam, the issue of unity in diversity is of paramount importance to sustainable development in contemporary Nigeria. Most of the Muslims who act contrary to this could be regarded as fanatics. It is painful that in Nigerian society, theory is totally different from practice. This paper therefore encourage Islamic scholars and leaders to give orientation, training and

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<sup>16</sup> D.O. Akintunde. 2006. The Ministry of Women in Lucan Narratives in *Journal of African Association for the Study of Religion*, Phillarem Corporate Printer, P.1.

seminars to their followers like their Christian counterparts to be parts of unity necessary for the sustainable development of Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Many Scholars have continued to discuss the problem of religion in a manner that belittles the role and place of religion in sustainable development. What is it about religion that makes it so vital to the development of human culture and the national development? This is a question of definition of religion. According to Oladejo (1983), 'simply put, religion is the concern for the ultimate values which are ends-in-themselves and pertain to life as a whole.'<sup>17</sup> Religion is a symbol of unity. It deals with the development of human person. Thus, religion is the ever current machinery for sustainable development. Confronted with national unity and development, the leaders should allow their common concern with ultimate values to motivate them to carry out their revolutionary function. A text like Gal. 3:28 give us a revolutionary teaching on social ethics. It is indeed a radical challenge to Christians and in fact, our contemporary Nigerian society. The passage passes as an injunction to Christians to sink all differences in the name of Christ. Paul's faith in Christ makes him conscious of the distorted character of human relationships. For him, one cannot be 'in Christ' and yet partake in the divisive power game being played today by many of our nationals in the name of tribe and politics. It is pertinent that our leaders in this country should urgently take a clue from this. Therefore, for effective sustainable development in Nigeria, the words of our political leaders should be translated into actions and, efforts should be intensified in working on such factors that unite.

The Jew/Greek contrasts manifest both racial and political tensions similar and known in our times. As members of one nation, racial, socio-political and sex differences should have no place in our midst. Justice demands that no one group holds the power to exploit another. Thus, all men and all women in Nigeria irrespective of tribe, creed and party affiliations are entitled to an equal treatment. As a result of this biblical text, there be unity in diversity in contemporary Nigeria. To develop is one thing and to sustain is another thing entirely. Development without sustainability is no development, be it national, international or global. The most tasking challenge of any nation today, is the challenge of sustainability. How can we maintain or sustain the already developed or established segments of our society? Religion makes sacred, the norms and values of a nation and functions as an efficacious means of social control. It elicits confidence, assurance, prudence, trust and loyalty. Religious sanctions remedy many evils and restrain people. Religion performs critical function by providing values and ideals in sustaining development process. Thus, the above text under consideration has a dialectical relationship with sustainable development process, acting as an element of social control and stability.

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<sup>17</sup> F.J. Oladejo. 1983. The Role of Religion in the process of Development of a nation: A Paper Delivered at the Federal College of Education, Oyo.

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