

MGDS: WITH GOD, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE

Text of the Address Delivered by the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ilorin, Professor Is-haq O. Oloyede on the occasion of the Formal Opening Ceremony of the 29th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (NASR) at the University of Ilorin on Wednesday, September 3, 2008

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A Hearty Welcome

It is my singular honour to heartily welcome you, gentlemen and women of religion, to the University of Ilorin on behalf of the University management, staff and students. I consider it positively coincidental that you are converging in this unique University to brainstorm and chart a way forward for the teeming world population in the ninth month of Ramadan, a month in which the 1.6 billion Muslim population in the world is engaged in fasting with a view to attaining greater heights of religious consciousness and spiritual attainments. As anyone living without a sense of religion is like a leaf blown off from its parent tree, despite its fluttering and gyration, its eventual fall is imminent, I feel proud to be identified with this noble association and I once again welcome you to our citadel of learning.

The Topical Theme

The theme of this conference is apt and topical, “The Relevance of Religion in the Contemporary Society”. As a matter of fact, the relationship between religion and society is symbiotic: without one there is no other. In other words, every religion has its own ‘catchment area’ and every society has a form of religion. This inter-dependence is compelling such that the ultimate search for truth, the ultimate truth, in every society usually is bound to lead to God, the focus of religious quest.

This conference is coming at a critical time in human history when people are at a crossroads: there is a growing litany and intolerance for religion on the one hand and there is increasing interest in it on the other. The reality of today’s life is that there is no escape from religion and there is no doubt about its relevance. One must pass through it at a stage in life, at one time or the other: at birth, at marriage and at death. One aspect of this contemporary society that religion is relevant to is the Millenium Devevelopment Goals.

Two Attractions

It is attractive that it was in the month of September in 2000 that the foundation of the Millennium Development Goals was laid and this is another September. In Accra, Ghana, as we are here, ministers from over 100 countries, heads of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, donor organizations and civil society organizations from around the globe are meeting in Accra, Ghana, for the Third High-Level Forum on issues pertaining to the achievement of MDGs. And by September 22, the UN General Assembly will hold a high-level meeting that will bring together world leaders, including civil society organizations, intergovernmental organizations, UN agencies, funds and programmes, as well as the Bretton Woods institutions, the World Trade Organization, etc., to renew their commitments to Africa's development and focus attention on how to address the African MDGs challenges in New York.

Interestingly, that MDGs comprise eight cardinal targets and this is the eighth year of its launch is another attraction. I therefore elect, based on these two coincidences to briefly highlight MDGs as a contemporary phenomenon and the role of religion in guaranteeing and sustaining it. I am aware that MDGs may appear to be a tall dream to us in Nigeria, I am of the opinion that having a positive mental attitude is good and it is essential to always believe that *with God, all things are possible*.

MDGs: What Are They About?

The MDGs arose as a result of the Millennium Summit in September, 2000 at the UN Headquarters, New York, attended by the largest gathering of world leaders in human history. In this important pivotal year, representatives from 189 Member States of the United Nations met in New York to reflect on their common destiny. Though the nations were interconnected in a way they had never been before as a result of globalization and its accompanying information technology, a gulf, as deep and wide as it could be, separated their standards of living. While there were countries that looked at a brighter future with their healthy and robust economies, many countries had nothing to look forward to than a world of misery, poverty, disease, war and environmental degradation. By 2001, the consensus reached had developed into a set of time-bound and measurable targets of confronting global problems in major eight areas by 2015, viz:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

The MDGs now constitute the nerve centre or focus of global development agenda. One or more targets have been set for each of the eight goals and all major international and regional organization are collaborating with a view to making the goals, with their respective targets, achievable. With 1990 as a benchmark, indicators have been formulated to measure the progress made against all targets as each country is expected to adjust each goal, with its targets and indicators, based on the peculiarity of its own situation.

Focusing on Religion...

The history of the world is the history of religion and man is not just a political animal as Aristotle said but also a religious being. This is because right from the beginning of the creation, human beings have been shaped and their destiny determined by religion. And religion will continue to be a powerful force in influencing and determining the future of mankind, especially in our world of guided missiles and misguided men. In other words, we have to either allow religion to shape us or we shape religion to achieve our purposes. But there is no question of 'keeping out of religion' because it is our essence.

Religion is a wide concept to define and it may not be relevant here to cite hundreds of intellectual curiosities at conceptualizing it. It is generally a way of life or belief based on a person's ultimate relation to the universe, God or gods. According to *Merriam Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, religion is "the personal commitment to and serving of God or a god with worshipful devotion, conduct in accord with divine commands especially as found in accepted sacred writings or declared by authoritative teachers; a way of life recognized as incumbent on true

believers, and typically the relating of oneself to an organized body of believers”. The same source goes further to describe religion as “a personal awareness or conviction of the existence of a supreme being or of supernatural powers or influences controlling one's own, humanity's, or all nature's destiny.

...In a Religious World

When Friedrich Schleiermacher in the late 18th century defined religion as a “feeling of absolute dependence”, he was lending credence to the fact that despite men’s pretences and pretensions, they are often weak and incapable of helping themselves. It is undeniable that everyone everywhere, either to his trepidation or consolation, has a sense of religion, “a system of personal practices related to communal faith and group rituals and communication stemming from shared conviction”.

There is the natural Religion of man and there are religions. We live in a religious world of 2.1 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, 14 million Jews (the Abrahamic religions), 900 million Hindus, 376 million Buddhists and 100 million African Traditional (and Diasporic) Religionists. Religions such as Sikhism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Caodism and Chinese Folk Religion also have hundreds of millions of adherents. Religion remains the most powerful force of bringing people together despite geographical barriers though it can also be exploited, as it is often so used, as an instrument of hewing people apart. When we remove people affiliated with one religion or the other from the world, perhaps those that will be left will fill this hall!

The Nexus between MDGs and Religion

Achieving MDGs is predicated on the religious values of compassion, kindness, selflessness, justice, discipline, etc. Beyond the myopia informing Karl Marx’s pejorative characterization of religion as ‘the opium of the people’ and Charles Darwin’s poisonous pontifications about God, the world has come to realize the essence of religion such that it is now a springboard of scientific inquiry and sustainable development. As George Orwell observed in 1946 that “our civilization is decadent” and the truth of that assertion is now more compelling now than ever, it goes without saying that we need religion to reform and transform our civilization, indeed our individual and social lives.

Religion, I am convinced, has a critical role to play in the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. It requires a sense of religion to appreciate hunger, and those who are fasting can attest to this, and thus work towards banishing it and its causative agent, poverty. Also, religion, and Islam is a case study here, encourages knowledge as an ignorant adherent of a religion is a bad and irresponsible follower. Religion also requires justice and this is where women empowerment and gender equality come in: we are all equal before God.

Human life is sacred and saving one life is akin to saving all mankind. Thus, a commitment to reducing child mortality and improving maternal and reproductive health is meritorious in religion, such as safeguarding public health from diseases and being morally upright are noble. Moral decadence is the principal cause and the powerful engine that drives the arrogant advance of HIV/AIDS in the world. And, the ultimate solution to the HIV/AIDS problem lies in taking a recourse to the religious value of chastity. On the last two goals of environmental sustainability and global partnership, it is apposite to say that religion, from the Islamic viewpoint, enjoins all that is good while it urges us to cooperate on good things and not to partner in sins and enmity.

Between Religion And Us

For us Nigeria, there is a culture of religion, yet we have not attained religious culture. Though in its study of “What The World Thinks of God” a couple of years ago, the BBC found that we are the ‘world’s most religious people’, we are still lagging behind in terms of the real religious culture. Most of us are hypocrites and we only pay lip service to God. Whatever inadequacies confronting us are borne out of our failure to uphold the rule of God’s law - even our own man-made law, because anything law is the true embodiment of everything that is excellent and religion is essentially law of conduct and behaviour.

Religion teaches love. Religion teaches hope. Religion teaches morals. Religion teaches restraint. Whatever the mind can conceive and believe, man can achieve. Let us believe that God is good. Let us believe that Nigeria will be better. Let us believe that MDGs can be achieved and let us work towards that direction by contributing our own quota and making that little difference that makes a big difference. Let us be faithful for our efforts to be fruitful. Let us believe that in this life, *with God all things are possible.*

Thank you all for listening and I wish you happy conference proceedings and a world of possibilities.