

CURBING RELIGIOUS CONFLICT THROUGH EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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Abstract

The level of insecurity in Nigeria today is easily attributable to political instability. Insecurity has led to a spiral of killings and wanton destruction of life and property in both the public and private sectors in the country. However, this situation is a result of the utilization of religion for political gains. *Boko Haram* insurgency, with its agenda of enthronement of an Islamic rule based on the Sharia law, has added another ugly feather to the already bad blood between the religions in Nigeria. The concentration of religious violence in the areas predominated by apathy to Western Education during the formative years of Nigeria as a nation shows the connection between lack of education and the tendency to conflict. This paper discusses the importance of a thorough-going religious education of the youth in addressing this issue.

Keywords: Education, Instability, Nigeria, Political Conflict, Religious Conflict, Religious Dialogue

Introduction

Even a cursory observer of the Nigerian project readily perceives that religious conflict has been a serious setback to the realization of genuine development in every sector of the country. And it seems that this would continue to be the state of affairs in the near future. Statistics show that conflict between Christians and Muslims has claimed many lives and rendered many people homeless while so many others have been maimed for life. Even when the issues at stake are purely political issues, politicians have utilized religion to foment trouble and score some heavy political points. This is despite the fact that both Islam and Christianity, the two major religions in the country, claim a lot in the realm of the promotion of peace and peaceful coexistence.

Even though the major dividing issue in Nigeria is not the issue of religion, per se, it is evident that many of the conflicts which could be traced to ethnic differences, civil strife and minority nervousness have been given a religious garb because of the tremendous emotional attachment people naturally have to their religious beliefs. This has made Nigeria to rank high on the list of the most unstable nations in the world. The main reason why this is so is because, religious education in Nigeria has not been given an adequate consideration. A situation whereby religious education is relegated to the recitation of creeds and the learning of religious books by rote can only breed religious fundamentalism. This is the Nigerian situation.

This paper, then, tries to see inter-religious education and dialogue between Christianity and Islam as a veritable tool to forestall constant conflict in Nigeria. It

argues that if religion is properly understood and the core tenets of Islam and Christianity rationally applied, there would be a lot of good will among members of these two religions. This, in turn, will affect the political sphere in a positive light and help in the transformation of the country from a theater of religious conflict to a haven of peace and development. It is a project that is possible and urgent.

Understanding Religion

We must first acknowledge the difficulty in defining the concept of religion. Many authors (For example Pollack, 1995, Porzelt, 2009, Ziebertz et al, 2012) have come to the conclusion that the difficulty in defining religion comes from the fact that religion has become common in usage and application. In his influential *The Sociology of Religion*, Weber(1993; 1) asserts that “to define ‘religion’ to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study.” At the end of his presentation, Weber fails to give a precise definition of religion. The fact that Weber did not return to the definition of religion at the end of his book shows that he must have seen the task as an impossible one.

Perhaps the etymology of the word can help in its explanation. The term religion seems to come from three different Latin roots. The first root is *relegere*. It means the desire or diligence to live according to the demands of the gods. This seems to be the sense in which Cicero (106-43 B.C.) understood the term in his *De naturadeorum*. He uses it together with other terms such as *pietas*, *sanctitas*, *fides*, *cultusdeorum*, *societas* and *iustitia* (Hildebrandt & Bocker; 2008, 12). On the other hand, Lactantius (ca. 250-325 A.D.) derived religion from *religare* which implies tying oneself back to God. Finally, Aquinas (1225-1274 A.D.) derived the term from *reeligere* as a form of reelecting or rechoosing God. These considerations led Ziebertz (2003; 69) to conclude that whether we derive religion from *religere*, *religare* or *reeligere* “all three meanings refer to humankind specifically turning to something very special.” This turning to something very special means that it involves the ultimate desires of the human person. Hence, Long (1986; 7) concludes that “religion will mean orientation-orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world.” This could mean that religion is the object of one’s orientation to reality. It is the “thing” that determines the way an individual sees and interprets nature. It deals with what concerns the individual ultimately more than any other things. This is another way of expressing the conclusion of Tillich (1959) that religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern.

Since religion is related to the ultimate concerns of the human person, it is then easy to appreciate the situation when religious people apply all their emotions to propagate their religious beliefs. Sometimes this application neglects the rational angle of the human person and feeds the emotional aspect. The fact that religion relates to the ultimate concern of the human person means that many people who

identify with one religion or the other would stop at nothing in propagating their religious beliefs. In most cases, this has led to conflict of various dimensions. The history of Nigeria bears ample evidence of this.

Nigeria and the History of Religious Conflict

The fact that an average Nigerian is very religious is observed by many sources (for instance Olubayo, 2010; Ekundayo, 2013). Religion plays a critical role in the Nigerian society and has expressed itself as a potent force in the political development of the country. This force which could have been used to unite Nigerians is the same force that has led to numerous conflicts in the country. Nigeria has been engulfed in numerous religious crises or conflicts since its birth as a nation. Some of these religious conflicts normally dovetail into ethnic conflicts. Due to their tendency to spread into other areas after an early stage in one area, ethno-religious conflicts have gained notoriety as the most violent crises in Nigeria. Initially, most of these conflicts occur in the middle-belt and along the culturally borderline states of the predominantly Muslim North, and also take place between Hausa-Fulani groups and non-Muslim ethnic groups in the South (Osaghae & Suberu, 2005). In conflicts of this nature occurring along the convergence of ethnic and religious lines, it is often very difficult to tell the differences between religious and ethnic crises because the dividing line between them is always very thin. However, in recent times, there is hardly any part of the country that does not bear the mark of the injuries of ethno-religious conflict.

It is easy to see how religion is an integral part of the identification of many Nigerians (Lewis & Bratton, 2000; Osaghae & Subery, 2005). In the findings of Ruby and Shah (2007), religion was a more binding force than ethnicity for many Nigerians. Osaghae and Subery (2005; 10) report that “in parts of the North commonly referred to as the ‘core’ or ‘Hausa-Fulani North’ - which is roughly coterminous with those states that adopted Sharia law in the Fourth Republic - religious identity is more critical than ethnic identity and in fact serves to activate ethnicity.” Therefore, ethno-religious formations are the most important identity markers in Nigeria (Nsongola-Ntalaja, 2004). Although Nigerian Muslims are more likely to manifest a religious affiliation than Christians or adherents of ATR (Lewis & Bratton, 2000), any religious conflict between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria is likely going to concern almost every Nigerian.

The central position of religion seems to be partly because of the religious nature of the Nigerians and partly because of the material gains that seem to accrue from belonging to some religious sects. One of the areas in which this material gain is most obvious is in the area of politics. In the Nigerian case, the words of Wellman (2007; 1) that “politics, power, coercion, and religion may be strange bedfellows but they are structurally linked,” make much sense. Religion has always played a very vital role, albeit a divisive one in the politics of Nigeria. And it is mainly due to the politicization of religion that religious conflicts have become rife in Nigeria. The use of religion as an instrument of politics has been acknowledged by Falola thus:

Since the mid-seventies, politicians have urged their followers to vote along religious lines- Muslims are told to vote Muslims, and Christians for Christians. In 1978, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) told its followers in one of its strong Islamic northern constituencies that the two-fingered V-for-victory sign of the United Party of Nigeria (UPN) was a covert symbol of polytheism, an idea counter to fundamental Islamic doctrine. The NPN adopted one raised finger as their symbol, turning the universal (and universally secular) V sign into a [politico] religious issue (Falola, 1998: 2).

In his *The Manipulation of Religion in Nigeria 1977-1987*, an Islamic scholar of note in Nigeria, Bala Usman, noted the manipulation of religion in Nigeria for political reasons in the ten years between 1977 and 1987. These manipulations are both blatant and insidious. Some of the cases of the use of religious violence to score political points that he analyzed in his book include the attempt to read religious meanings into the assassination of General Murtala Mohammed, the acrimony with which the Sharia debate was conducted in the run up to the second republic, the riots in Kaduna from Friday, 29th to Saturday, 30th October, 1982 and the Maitatsine uprising in Kano City from 18th to 29th December, 1980. The Maitatsine uprising alone led to the loss of 4,177 human lives, according to official records. There was also the Bulukuntu riot in Maiduguri from 28th to 30th October, 1982 leading to the killing of over 400 persons, as well as the violent demonstration in Sabon Gari, Kano by the Muslim Students Society on Saturday, 30th October, 1982. This shows that in the years between 1980 and 1982 Nigeria witnessed tremendous bloodbath because of religious differences. It is also instructive that this was the period of intense politicking for the second republic. The Nigerian politicians appealed to the religious sentiments of the populace which led to a breakdown of law and order and the loss of lives and property.

Usman's commentary on the incident in Sabon Gari is significant. In his words, "...Only two people were killed according to newspaper reports. But the great significance of this incident is that it involves for the first time, the calculated destruction and burning of Christian churches in what seems to be a violent assertion of the 'Islam Only' slogan painted all over the streets of Zaria in an aggressive demonstration by the Muslim Students Society in 1980" (Usman, 1987: 72). Usman's remarks are noteworthy. However, Usman missed out in acknowledging the importance of the enlisting of students in an institution of higher learning into the callous killing of human beings based on the whims of the politicians. This underscores the importance of religious education, especially on the need for religious tolerance.

A clear index that religious conflict is linked to politics in Nigeria is that since the return to democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 there seems to be a rise in ethno-

religious conflicts as each ethnic or religious group tries to exert her dominance in the amorphous Nigerian society. We know of the Kaduna Sharia riots of 2000, and the Jos riots of 2001. These two crises did not just lead to the loss of life and property; they also generated ripple effects beyond Kaduna and Jos. The Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2003) estimated the death of about 2000 people from the Kaduna crisis. It is unimaginable, but true, that because of the apprehension of some Muslim students over the possible emergence of a Christian student as the president of the students union of the Federal College of Education, Zaria, the female hostel of this college was invaded and “the Christian female students were raped, murdered and dumped into pits by hoodlums hired by some evil-minded Moslem (sic) students” (Udeze, 2017: 217f). Perhaps the Boko Haram insurgency and the rise of the menace of Herdsmen serve as two clear cases of this dangerous convergence between ethnicity and religion. I will discuss the Boko Haram menace only.

The Boko Haram Sub-Plot

Boko Haram is a Jihadist terror cell based in northeastern Nigeria. It is also active in Chad, Niger and northern Cameroon. Boko Haram was founded in 2002 by Muhammad Yusuf. I prefer to call Boko Haram a sub-plot because it has succeeded in reaching a level of terror unprecedented in the history of the country that it deserves a separate treatment. In recent times, Nigeria has become synonymous with Boko Haram, the dreaded Islamic terrorist sect that has vowed to establish the state of Islam, based on Sharia, in Nigeria. The fact that it is a religious sect is clear from its formal designation as ‘*Jama’at ahlis Sunnah lid Da’wat wal Jihad*’, which means ‘people committed to the propagation of the Prophet’s teachings and jihad’. The name Boko Haram is loosely translated as ‘Western education is sinful.’ The group became more militant in 2009 when its founder was killed by the Nigerian army. In July, 2009 alone, violent clashes between the group and security forces led to the death of about 800 people. The Nigerian Red Cross (2009) reported that 780 dead bodies were collected in Maiduguri, and buried in three mass graves. Since then, the terrorist organization has engaged in gun battles, arson, bombing and kidnapping in promoting their ideology (Warner, 2012). The sect has recorded lethal attacks on government establishments, religious houses and public places. It has succeeded in the kidnap and killing of police officers, officers and men of the armed forces as well as civilians and even school children. Some of the kidnapped persons are executed and the videos of their execution displayed through various social media platforms. The Human Right Watch (HRW) report revealed that, in 2011 alone, Boko Haram made significant attacks of about 115 times and killed 550 people. Within the first three weeks of the year 2012, the sect killed 250 people with the deadliest being the coordinated bombings in the ancient city of Kano, which claimed 185 lives. The report also claimed that Nigeria lost more than 935 of its human capital between 2009 and 2012. The fact that these attacks crested at a time when a Christian was Nigeria’s president adds to the religious garb of the insurrection.

Perhaps the orchestrated kidnapping of the Chibok girls in 2014 marks the height of the affront of this terror group to the security forces of the nation. On the night of 14-14 April 2014, the Boko Haram terrorist organization kidnapped 276 mostly Christian female students from their hostel in the town of Chibok in Borno State, Nigeria. These school girls were taken through the city of Chibok, to the hideout of the terror organization without the intervention of the Nigerian security forces. It might be important to note that the kidnapping of these girls happened at the height of serious electioneering campaigns for the 2015 general elections. Again On February 19, 2018 at 5:30 pm, 110 schoolgirls aged 11-19 years old were kidnapped by the Boko Haram terrorist group from the Government Girls' Science and Technical College in Yobe State. The connivance of the Nigerian security outfit to this kidnap is very obvious as the Governor of Yobe state claimed the withdrawal of army troops just hours before the kidnap of these girls. To show the religious angle of the kidnap of these girls, the only girl that was not later released was the only Christian girl among the kidnapped children, Lea Sharibu. She was not released because of her refusal to convert to Islam. Till date no one knows, with certainty, what has become of Lea.

What has fuelled the Boko Haram insurgency over the years is a combination of Nigeria's endemic corruption, Nigeria's history of violence, poverty and illiteracy, especially in the Northeastern part of the country, as well as the brutality of security forces (HRW, 2012). All these constitute fertile grounds for militancy. Meanwhile, the group has pledged allegiance to the two notorious Islamic groups of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and probably Al-Shabaab (Warner, 2012). Although the group has been involved in the indiscriminate killing of both Muslims and Christians, the group leaders have often stated that they are still fighting for justice and the Islamisation of Nigeria (Roach, 2012). In a video message in January, 2012, Abubakar Shekau, the group's leader since 2010, alleged that the group hardly touches anyone except security personnel and Christians and those who betray them (Sahara Reporters, 2012). The wanton destruction of churches and forceful conversion of Christians to the Islamic faith are clear evidence of this agenda. The reason behind their actions is the view that the Western brand of education should be eradicated in Nigeria. They feel that only the Islamic education could usher in an era of justice and fear of God. This sort of misguided thinking forgets that even in countries that have almost a hundred percent Muslim population, a just society is only utopic. This explains why a rational entrenchment of religious education is a welcome venture to curtail the use of religion as conflict mercenary in Nigerian politics.

Religious Education and Conflict Management

From the foregoing, it is obvious that for many Nigerians, conflict is seen as the most potent means of achieving religious and political relevance. This approach has only yielded the bastardization of the idea of religion. Religion is no longer seen as the striving to be united to God but a means of procuring political and military control over others. The result is the destruction of lives and property and a continued drifting away from God. Hence, it is my view that religious education

is a very viable means of halting the spate of religious tensions and conflict in the country. For this sort of education to be carried out well, certain factors must be taken into consideration.

First and foremost, an integral education has to be seen as “the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he lives” (Fafunwa, 1971; 17). Character formation belongs to the fundamental functions of education (Onyenali, 2013). This character formation engages the learning subject in the awareness of instincts, primary needs, emotions and wishes so as to lead to a sound moral upbringing (Langer, 1995; 310). Again, education should be seen as the striving for balance between the influence of the environment on the person and the influence of the person on the environment. This mutual influence is achieved through the processes of assimilation and accommodation. Through assimilation, the subject interprets the world to fit into his/her own subjective experience. Accommodation enables the subject to realize the inability to explain all the realities of his environment according to his/her private modes and structures. The subject is then forced to adjust their ways of thinking, feeling, action and values in order to fit their environment (Mietzel, 1986; 64).

Hence, religious education must be a rational approach to religion. It must ensure that the learning subjects are equipped with the abilities to become positive agents in the Nigerian society. A very important aspect of being positive agents in the society is that religious education should take into consideration that the encounter of the youths with religious learning or study should lead them to overcome the readiness to engage in conflict and violence. In other words, this learning should lead them to be competent in conflict management. In this connection, Kiechle and Ziebertz have identified conflict management as an area of competence in inter-religious learning. In their study on the ability of inter-religious education to address conflict situations, they began by referencing the study of Ram Adhar Mall who sees inter-religiosity as an attitude that makes one open and tolerant as well as helps one to withstand the temptation of fundamentalism (Kiechle & Ziebertz, 2005). This openness and tolerance can be achieved through a rational confrontation with strange or foreign elements in a new religion. Although this confrontation could evoke fear and rejection of the new religion, in most cases it awakens interest and fascination. Since there can be no religion that is not culturally conditioned (Neville, 2000), in order to be inter-religious competent, therefore, one has to learn how to react to the presence of other cultures and other religions (Kiechle & Ziebertz, 2005; 283). And since religions are culturally conditioned, which means that no religion fell down from heaven *suiiuris*, efforts to understand foreign religions should involve efforts to understand different cultures and vice versa. This is because religion is a fundamental aspect of culture and cannot be understood apart from its cultural background. This involves the understanding of other forms of value judgment. It demands corresponding education.

Through the processes of assimilation and accommodation which education provides, the individual is enabled to adapt the world around him to his/her ways of thinking, feeling, acting, etc. In the same way, the individual is enabled to adjust to the demands of the environment. This blending of the self to the environment begins with the appreciation of the other and a gradual but constant adjustment of the hitherto accepted self-understanding of reality. This adjustment “does not imply equating the religions or holding their claims on the same footing. Rather, the differences between them become an aspect of inter-religious learning” (Onyenali, 2013; 141). This encounter enables the learning subjects to ask how an inter-religious encounter can take place without neutralizing the differences among the religions (Kiechle & Ziebertz, 2005). This helps the learning subjects to understand that plurality is an important dimension of the human person.

When this plurality is allowed to blossom, one is enabled to appreciate that the different religions have the right to be different. In our case, it helps the adherents of Christianity and Islam to understand that the two religions have the right to exist side by side. This understanding helps them to accept that the differences which the two religions evince are enrichment and not a threat to each other. It also helps the adherents of the two religions to rationally and critically evaluate what they have hitherto accepted as religious truth or dogma in their religions. It enables them to view the teachings of their religions through a rational prism. This shows that the door to the understanding of the “other” is rooted in the understanding of the “self.” Waldenfels (2007, 65-83) has given us the insight that the self and the other are intertwined. It is only when the “self” adopts an attitude of absolute denial of the “other” that the “other” is transformed into an enemy. This conclusion of Waldenfels could offer much to the analysis of the Nigerian situation. This is because identity is only possible when it allows the reality of distinction and differentiation (Kiechle & Ziebertz, 2005; 286).

Perhaps, the first stage of inter-religious learning would be a concentration on the different sects in these two religions to show their adherents that there are also differences in a particular religion and also in a particular sect (Ziebertz, 2001). Osaghae and Suberu (2005) have noted that the Christian religion in Nigeria is roughly made up of the Protestants (Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and Lutheran, etc.), the Catholics, the Evangelical Church of West Africa, Jehovah’s Witnesses and a myriad of other local (Aladura, Cherubim and Seraphim, Celestial Church of Christ) and Pentecostal churches. Religious education should enable Christians to learn the differences within these sects of Christianity. This learning should then enable the students to sharpen their sensibility and ability to handle these differences. The same applies to the Muslim students. They should be helped to learn the diversities within the Shia, the Sufi, the Ahmadiyya, and the Quraniyoon Muslim sects. Since these sects have their conflicts and mutual suspicions, the students learn the coping mechanism among the Islamic sects that could be translated to coping mechanism with Christians.

The second stage would then be on the level of inter-religious education between Islam and Christianity. Having learnt that both Islam and Christianity cannot boast of uniformity in their doctrines and institutional outlook, and having learnt the means through which these differences can be handled, the students are then led to a study of Christianity and Islam. Such a study should begin by focusing on the things that unite the two religions. It is a multi-faith-approach. As we shall come to see, Christianity and Islam have enough resources to guarantee some level of understanding provided these resources are given adequate consideration. When such studies are well conducted, they should lead the students to gain the ability to interact and argue on religious matters without negative confrontation. This is only possible when the boundary to the others is respected. We have already noted that this venture should proceed from an intra-subjective dialogue and then develop to an inter-subjective dialogue. Since the self as well as the other is confronted, there would be new views and convictions.

The dialogue with the other, in this case, between Christians and Muslims, should lead to a change in perspective in a dialogical sense. This does not imply a total agreement between the two religions. Rather it asks how the “self-perspective” can be transformed into the “other-perspective” so as to arrive at a dynamic-relational contact in which respect and acceptance are real. It enables Christians and Muslims to see their religions both from the perspective of the self and also from the perspective of the other. The dialogue realizes that we need the other in order to come close to the truth of God’s revelation (Ziebertz, 2001). This dialogue demands openness and makes one sensible enough to realize the ambiguities, tensions, contradictions that are contained in both Christianity and Islam. This demands self-distance and disinterestedness. It involves the use of the God-given reasoning faculty with the conviction that God would not have given the human person the ability to reason if he does not want them to use it. It also helps one to learn the contents, forms of communication, rituals, experiences, history, etc. of the other religion (Sieg, 2005). When this is done, one is enabled to achieve a sort of self-critical reflection over one’s religion. In our context, one begins to see how the clear lines dividing Islam and Christianity into good and bad begin to get blurred. This will lead to the ability to avoid conflict.

It can thus be concluded that inter-religious learning means a constructive contention with differences which results in knowledge, not only of the other, but also of the religious tradition of the reflecting subject. It gives the ability to critically and constructively reflect on one’s religion and other religions. There is no doubt that a constructive establishment of such religious reflections in the Nigerian school system would yield huge results. However, such a move would undoubtedly be confronted with initial hitches. These hitches would be a result of the abysmal level of critical and constructive reasoning that is applied to religion in the Nigerian environment. As already shown, religion in Nigeria is still principally on the level of fundamentalism. Hence, any attempt to apply critical thought to it would be seen as an attack on God. Funny enough most of those who think that God has been attacked by the use of the God-given reason may not allow God to

defend himself. It is my fear that some people might end up taking to violence in order to defend God. However, this fear would surely be abated if the school system has adequately prepared the students for this noble venture.

Conclusion

Despite the adulterations down the ages, Christianity was a religion of tolerance right from its origin. The same can also be said of Islam. In his *No god but God*, ResaAslan explains that in the Qur'an, "the killing of women, children, monks, rabbis, the elderly, or any other noncombatant was absolutely forbidden under any circumstances. Muslim law eventually expanded on these prohibitions to outlaw the torture of prisoners of war; the mutilation of the dead; rape, molestation, or any kind of sexual violence during combats; the killing of diplomats, the wanton destruction of property, and the demolition of religious or medical institutions..." (2005, 57). This is an expansion of the law that takes into account not only the high premium placed on the value of the human person but also considers the use of practical reason. A good religious learning process should be able to elucidate the absurdity of worshipping a God that makes the killing of human beings a divine command. It is on this account that one must see Islam as a religion of peace. This explains why the holy Qur'an begins with the following words: "in the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful." This submission to the compassionate and merciful nature of God can be said to be the original intention of Islam. The normal Islamic greeting *assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullah wa barakatuhu* (May Peace and Mercy and Blessings of Allah be Upon You) shows how peace forms the foundation of Islam. With all these points of convergence between the two religions, especially calling to mind the tolerant and peaceful nature of these two religions, it is easy to see how concerted efforts towards a rational education of the Nigerian youths would lead to an atmosphere of religious tolerance and the end of religious conflict in the country.

Although what has been described above, relating to the use of education to curb religious conflict is possible and praiseworthy, one wonders whether the agents of the educational process in Nigeria have the ability to implement such measures. This is because of the overt lack of good will from the political class who make the laws of the land to undertake such a task. This lack of good will is shown in the overt lack of interest in the education of the youth. A typical example of how this lack of interest in the education sector is manifested is the reduction of allocation for Universal Basic Education (UBE) from 111.7 billion naira to 51.1 billion naira for the fiscal year 2020. In comparison, a whopping 27 billion naira was earmarked for the renovation of the national assembly complex. This lack of interest in education affects the area of religious education. Since religion has become a tool in the hands of politicians, it is to be wondered as to the possibility of the political class adopting measures that would curb religious conflict, when it is a proven fact that such conflicts favour the politicians. Nonetheless, all hands must be on the deck to do all that is possible to bring about this serious and urgent task of religious education.

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