



**RELIGION OF POVERTY AND THE POVERTY OF RELIGION:
ESTABLISHING THE NEXUS IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN
NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Africa's contemporary poverty index has been linked to colonial and post-colonial relations, rudimentary infrastructure, political instability, weak institutions, dismal capital formation, debt-overhang and so on. Yet, religion has seldom been mentioned as one of the harbingers and reinforcers of sustained poverty in Nigeria. To be sure, Nigeria is deeply religious and this has been noted in several dimensions including politics, economics and social relationships. In point of fact, contemporary religious elites have gone further to manipulate the credulity of the masses to their own advantage. Consequently, religion has been seen as a drag ship rather than a flagship in the development enterprise across Nigeria. These elites, especially of the Christian genre, have technically speaking, "formatted" the ordinary "worshippers", who, in the main, belong to the mass of poverty-stricken Nigerians. Though "promised" better conditions of life bye and bye by several *pastorpreneurs*, yet, poverty stares them in the face "eternally" and they, in turn, reinforce poverty through omission and commission. It is a view point that has been severally peripheralised and in some instance, clearly discounted in the development debate. This paper therefore examines the taut liaison between religion and poverty and notes that the Christian religion, in spite of its social engineering propensity, has paradoxically "created" new dimensions of sustained poverty in contemporary Nigeria. The study recommends that a critical examination of religious messaging used by religious elites, especially in the Christian genre must be taken into consideration, to understand how they influence perceptions of wealth and poverty among worshippers.

Keywords: Christianity, Development, Nigeria, Poverty and Religion

Introduction

Man is innately religious and this is particularly true of Nigerians. This is expressed in the worship of the Supreme Being designated God, through deities, lesser gods and spirits. To be sure, the Nigerian pantheon is very rich. In indigenous reckoning. In contemporary times, however, its communal and accommodating proclivity has been emasculated by the ingress and overbearing influences of Christianity, Islam and so on. As observed by John Mbiti, “God is no stranger to African peoples, and in traditional life there are no atheists”.¹ When these extra-African religions came into Africa, they were easily accommodated. After all, the African Traditional Religion (ATR) was (and still is) polytheistic in nature. To the African, an admission of other Gods and gods in their respective religious moulds would simply further enrich the pantheon. But their accommodation, forceful and subtle, has affected the egalitarian fabric of the African society in various, and sometimes, unpleasant ways.

The poverty profile of Nigeria has, to a considerable extent, been ossified by the operationalism of contemporary Christian practices especially. Some of these practices though presented as “godly” in orientation, are, perforce, deprivational and predatory to unsuspecting congregants when subjected to rational analysis. Audio visual montages and the print media severally present Nigeria as a poverty-stricken country, with several reasons being advanced for this condition of affairs at the peripheralisation of religion. This paper argues that religion, especially of the garb of contemporary Christian religion with the so-called “new generation” and “pentecostal” churches are among the harbingers and reinforcers of poverty in the country.

¹ John S. Mbiti. *African Religion and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1982), 48.

Conceptual Explorations

In a paper of this nature, an exploration of concepts is quite germane to clear foggy issues, especially against the backdrop of the fact that concepts used in this paper suffer from the lack of definitive definitions. To be sure, they are quite controversial and are amenable to sentimental conceptualizations. These concepts readily include religion and poverty.

(a) Religion

The etymology of the word religion comes from the Latin root *religio-* meaning “what attaches or retains, or in moral bonding.” It also derives from *religare-* meaning “to connect or to refer to the bond of piety that binds to God.” The human being is said to be “deeply religious”. The planetization of man makes the unknown biosphere his inheritance without his input. In his bewilderment, he gropes with his mind regarding the origins of his universe, how the flora and fauna came to be and how he himself came to be. He tries to fathom his relationships with nature, the natural environment and the observed harmony, seeming or real. In a way, man develops some imagery and in his deconstruction, realizes that there should be some force or forces, power or powers which ensure the “harmony” of the universe and sustains his life. He concomitantly venerates these forces and/or powers and strives to be in harmony with them. Against the backdrop of these build-ups, his thoughts and deeds are crystallized into religion and this gives impetus to his religiosity.

In this direction, John Mbiti notes that African peoples contend that:

Man lives in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God. They not only originate from Him but also bear witness to Him. Man’s understanding of God is strongly coloured by the universe of which man is himself a part. Man sees in the universe not only the imprint but the reflection of God; and whether that image is marred or clearly focused and defined, it is never the less an image

of God, the only image known to traditional African societies.²

The above narrative underscores the religious inclination of the African and by implication, the Nigerian. But what is religion?

Religion has severally been defined and none is sacrosanct. The strategy towards its definition is to cite a few examples for epistemological purposes and to provide a foot path for the purposes of this paper.

Whereas Abraham Rosman and Paula Rubel look at religion as “the interaction of humans with the superriatural”³, Udo Etuk, for instance, has it that:

Religion may rightly be considered as man’s attempt to bring some order into his universal experience of disorder and disharmony; an effort to achieve salvation or some other ultimate solution to the problem of life, including the problems of suffering, pain, sickness and ultimately, death.⁴

To Max Weber, religion was developed as an effort to explain why human beings undergo suffering on earth.⁵ Sigmund Freud likens the evolution of religion to a childish and neurotic trait of dependency which “finds expression in the form of all-powerful gods and deities who control the individual’s destiny.”⁶ In this wise, Melford Spiro in his *expose*’ observes that religion addresses three needs of man, namely, the need of cognition in terms of explanations and meanings; the substantive need to ensure that specific goals such as “rain, good crops and health by carrying out religious acts” are secured; and the psychological need “to reduce fear and anxiety in situations in which these are provoked.”⁷

² *Ibid*

³ Abraham Rosman and Paula Rubel. *The Tapestry of Culture: An introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, (New York: Newberry Award Records, Inc., 1989), 184.

⁴ Udo Etuk. “Religion, Culture and National Conscience” in Anthonia Essien and Donatus Ukpong (Eds.) *Dialectics of Religion and National Conscience* (Uyo: Fruities Publications Ltd., 2017),3.

⁵ Abraham Rosman and Paula Rubel. *The Tapestry of Culture: An Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*. 184

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

Emile Durkheim looks at the primacy of religion in terms of his functionalist doctrine. Accordingly, religion is seen as a vehicle of enculturation in terms of inculcating values and group identity to enhance social fluidity and solidarity. This, he argues, engenders the survival of the society.⁸ But Karl Marx does not only note that religion is the opium of the masses but also that “religion represents either a salve to the pain of exploitation or a justification for oppression. In either case, it is a distortion of reality which man can do well without.”⁹ These viewpoints present the benchmark for analysis in this paper.

(b) Poverty

The meaning of poverty is quite a tricky one as it is not characterized by any sharpness in definition. Joe Umo observes that it is a “complex phenomenon.”¹⁰ However, in poverty, three typologies have been identified. These are absolute, relative and subjective poverty. In their treatment, especially when discussed in comparison to various societies, the boundaries seem to be blurred.¹¹ In any event, absolute poverty presupposes the absence of basic life essentials such as food, clothing, shelter, basic education and so on.¹² This condition approximates to “destitution or abject/extreme poverty.”¹³ Daniel Offiong looks at this typology thus:

Absolute poverty refers to the inability of people to maintain physical survival on a long-term basis.... Hunger is the target of absolute poverty. Poverty is a form of economic deprivation. Disease is closely associated with it. Both being physical discomfort, prevent children as well as adults from reaching their physical and mental potential.... Their housing and sanitation are likely to be enough to contribute to disease, their education inadequate

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Michael Haralambos and Robin Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives* (Slough: University Tutorial Press Ltd., 1980), 490.

¹⁰ Joe Umo, *Economics: An African Perspective* 2nd Edition (Lagos: Millennium Text Publishers Ltd., 2007), 641.

¹¹ Michael Haralambos and Robin Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, pp. 140-142

¹² Joe Umo, *Economics: An African Perspective*, p.641

¹³ *Ibid*

to get employment paying enough to properly feed them. All aspects of absolute poverty combine to deny victims a fully, or sometimes even minimally, human existence.¹⁴

Relative poverty derives from the abandonment of the booby trap of absolutism in definitional matters. Researchers reckon that standards are neither sacrosanct nor unassailably standardized and that they are conditioned by time and space. The recourse therefore is to reckon poverty in terms of relativity. This readily brings to focus the idea of comparison. It is deprivation as compared to some other individual, group or society.¹⁵

The third typology of poverty is what Michael Haralambos and Robin Heald call subjective poverty. This is located within the province of psychology since it has to do with feelings, as well as personal and collective perception that he or they are poor. It is related to relative poverty in the sense that those who are termed as poor by the standards of the day see themselves as being poor.¹⁶

By and large, Joe Umoh in *Economics: An African Perspective* surmises the following namely:

- i. Poverty has the face of unemployment and under-employment;
- ii. Poverty has a gender face;
- iii. Poverty is an ignoramus;
- iv. Poverty has the face of a criminal;
- v. Poverty has a face of corruption;
- vi. Poverty has a rural face;
- vii. Poverty has the face of a beggar;
- viii. Poverty has the face of the socially excluded and the marginalized;
- ix. Poverty leads to loss of dignity;

¹⁴ Daniel Offiong, *Globalisation: Post-Neodependency, and Poverty in Africa* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd., 2001), 96.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 96-97.

¹⁶ Michael Haralambos and Robin Heald, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, 143

- x. Poverty has the face of a child labourer and child trafficking;
- xi. Poverty has the face of a degraded environment;
- xii. Poverty has the face of the disabled and the incapacitated;
- xiii. Poverty has the face of a refugee;
- xiv. Poverty has the face of hunger and malnutrition;
- xv. Poverty has the face of homelessness;
- xvi. Poverty has the face of the youth; and,
- xvii. Poverty has the face of death.¹⁷

It is the contention of this paper that poverty also has the face of religion especially at the instance of contemporary Christian genre in contemporary Nigeria.

Indigenous Religion and Poverty in Nigeria

A plethora of differentiated religious practices across Africa and in Nigeria in particular, are usually subsumed under the taxonomy of African Traditional Religion (ATR). It is derived from the cosmological and transcendental world view of Africa. From infancy, the African child is oriented towards functionalism within his society. Aliyu Babs Fafunwa in his book titled *History of Education in Nigeria*, has identified and clearly enunciated the strategies of enculturation of the young ones into the African society. These range from physical training, development of character, respect for elders and peers, intellectual training, poetic and prophetic aspects, vocational training and community participation to the promotion of cultural heritage.¹⁸ What this implied (and still implies) is that the development of the society was (and still is) a collective responsibility. It therefore provided (or provides) no room for destitution. Indigenous African

¹⁷ Joe Umo, *Economics: African Perspective*, 645-648

¹⁸ A. Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), pp. 17-49.

society operated (and some still do especially the hunter-gatherers societies) within the confines of conventions which were (are) sanctioned by traditions and sanctified with rituals. Rituals, according to Margaret Peil in *Consensus and Conflict in African Societies: An Introduction to Sociology*, has it that “rituals are patterns of behaviour recognized by the community and include the celebration of individual and communal events.”¹⁹

Through traditional practices, efforts were made to mitigate observed tendencies towards poverty. In a classic study of rural structures for instance, Allan McPhee in *The Economic Revolution in British West Africa*, notes that to Africans “land is of paramount importance in their economic, social and political life.”²⁰ Akin Mabogunje also has it that land which was a principal factor of production was owned communally and appropriated communally. Communal land ownership had both philosophical and ethical orientations and underpinnings to enhance collective survival.²¹ Philosophically, land was held to belong to ancestors, the living and the future generations. The living was therefore a mere trustee, holding the land in trust for both the ancestors and the future generations.²²

Ethically, various communities ensured that no one within the communities was rendered a destitute through the denial of this crucial factor of production. Land ownership was through inheritance. In this wise, it was generally shared among surviving male children of a man and the plots so shared, remained theirs in free hold. According to the author, this practice rested on the principles of

¹⁹ Margaret Peil, *Consensus and Conflict in African Societies: An Introduction to Sociology* (Essex: Longman Group Ltd., 1977), pp.215-216.

²⁰ Allan McPhee. *The Economic Revolution in British West Africa* (London: Frank Cass & Company Ltd., 1971), 73.

²¹ Akin Mabogunje, *The Development Process: A Spatial Perspective*, (London: Hutchinson & Co. Publisher Ltd., 1980) 73.

²² *Ibid.*, 74

“partible inheritance” rather than on the principles of primogeniture.²³ The underpinnings of land ownership held sway, both in patriarchal and matriarchal societies across Africa generally and Nigeria in particular.

Again, labour relations were essentially communal. The implication of this state of affairs is that labour was also communally exploited starting from the nuclear family unit to the co-option of agnatic kins for production purposes. The age-grades also formed the predicate of co-operative labour arrangements based on the “indigenous contract system” where people helped each other out in turns. People tended to be their brothers’ keepers and considerably, labour was not commoditized.²⁴ All told, destitution which breeds poverty was for the most part, unknown across Africa.²⁵

Early Christianity and Poverty in Nigeria

Christianity is quite old in Africa. John Mbiti describes Christianity as an “indigenous, traditional and African religion.”²⁶ As a matter of fact, the whole of North Africa including Egypt, parts of the Sudan and Ethiopia had been Christianized long before the evolution of Islam in the seventh century.²⁷

In any event, the Portuguese explorative enterprise from the fifteenth century gave a new gusto to the spread of Christianity in juxtaposition with the slave trade. Sequel to the abolition of slave trade in 1807 and the abolition of slavery by Britain in 1833, Christian missionary enterprise commenced in earnest and by the end of the colonial enterprise in Nigeria. Christianity had taken firm roots in much of the country.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Ini Etuk, “The Origins of Hunger in Africa”, *Ibom Journal of History & International Studies*, Vol.14, No.1, June 2012, 1-20.

²⁵ William Jones, “Economic Man in Africa” in Z. A. Konczki and J. M. Konczacki (Eds.), *An Economic History of Tropical Africa* Vol.1 (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1970), 133.

²⁶ For more details, see John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 229.

²⁷ V. H. H. Green, *Renaissance and Reformation: A Survey of European History Between 1450 and 1660* (London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1977), 175.

Christianity as propagated by the Europeans came with the hue and colour of capitalism of the European society. Capitalist structures were imbued by the pursuit of individualism and enterprise which pitched a brother against one another. The Industrial Revolution with its contradictions, later came to rubbish what was left of humanity in Europe. In a bid to avert noted contradictions of industrialism, the European imperialists and colonialists spewed into Africa in concert with the missionary wing.

In a frenzy, missionaries of different garbs established mission posts and institutions, ostensibly to bring Nigerians to the “knowledge of God” and to prepare them for a blissful life in eternity. Through subtle machinations and sometimes brute force of conquest, Nigerians started to “embrace” Christianity and abandoned their indigenous religion in its wake. By extension, the egalitarian accommodation of community members became greatly circumscribed. The social security structures of the extended family principles and practice became supplanted by individualistic code of Christian Europeans.

Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* asserts that the protestant faith of the genre of Calvinism emphasized vocation as a noble pursuit. This helped to incubate capitalist enterprise. According to John Calvin, a religious reformer and leader and whose influence spread a great deal across Europe, categorised the human kind into the “damned” and the “elect”. Calvinism emphasized thrift and industry and virtues were associated with success and riches with clear signs of “election”. Failure was associated with the “damned.”²⁸ The point to note is that early European missionaries in Africa accordingly saw themselves as the “elect” of God with the divine commission to evangelise the heathen. This was one of the driving forces of imperialism and colonialism.²⁹

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Norman D. Palmer and Howard Perkins, *International Relations: The World Community in Transition* 3rd Edition (Delhi: AITBS Publishers, 2010), pp. 158-182.

European missionaries in the colonial and immediate postcolonial times tried to develop Nigerians through the provision of health care services and education. Charges for the provision of these services were considerably tolerable. In some instances, these services were provided on the basis of gratis. Nigeria's early Christians generally saw the enhancement of their statuses (*or stati*) as they became teachers, dispensers, clerks, administrators, lay preachers and so on. This condition of affairs, it would be noted, considerably put poverty, in spite of its gradations, at bay. European missionaries and early orthodox church leaders and preachers were not ardently predatory on their congregants as later contemporary church founders and *pastorpreneurs* in Nigeria came to be.

Christianity and Poverty in Contemporary Nigeria

Contemporary Nigeria presents a montage of unmitigated poverty in spite of the propagation and proliferation of Christianity as well as the establishment of churches by Nigerians themselves. The propagators and proliferators of these churches are the self-styled "end-time men of God or gods" who look at "orthodox" churches with disdain but refer to themselves as "pentecostal preachers", "founders", "general overseers", "bishops", "archbishops", "apostles", "prophets" with prophetic messages" and so on. These are men and a few women who play on the credulity of their congregants and lay claim to having been "called" by God as well as being imbued with extraneous and esoteric powers from on high. They are the leaders and founders of contemporary "churches" in Nigeria.

To a very considerable extent, the establishment of churches is now considered a vocation with very promising and indeed, rewarding prospects. In an *expose* on the concept of vocation in contemporary Christianity, Nathaniel Ndiokwere notes that:

Although some prophets relate the circumstances leading to their assumption of prophetic office, it is nevertheless evidence that a considerable number of the so-called prophets in Africa have no idea of what religious vocation means, it is not unusual for some charlatan to get up any morning claiming that he has been visited by an angel of God. The rate at which calls to prophecy in the independent churches multiply makes the whole affair look absurd. Often non-religious motives, like healing activities or political aspirations, become the basis of religious vocation.³⁰

Sequel to the above, four issues need some, but brief clarifications. These are “Church”, “Orthodox”, “Pentecostal” and “Leadership”.

- (a) **Church:** The word “Church” has two dimensions to its Greek concepts namely *Kyriak-os* and *Ecclesia*. *Kyriak-os* means “belonging to” or “pertaining to” *Kyrios* meaning “Lord”. Thus *Kyriakos oikos*, refers to “House of the Lord” or church. *Ecclesia* is a more familiar term and it means a “congregation” or an “assembly”. Generally, it refers to the overall community of faithfuls.
- (b) **Orthodox:** This derives from the Greek root “*Orthos*”, meaning the “right path” or “way” or the “ordained path” or “way”; “true and straight”.
- (c) **Pentecostal:** This derives from the Greek word “*Pentecost*”, the name for the Jewish feast of weeks. It emphasizes direct personal experience of God through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is associated with various spiritual gifts including speaking in tongues and healing.³¹
- (d) **Leadership:** Leadership implies “knowing the way, showing the way and going the way”.³² It also connotes the co-ordination and motivation of a group of people to achieve appointed and desirable goals.

³⁰ Nathaniel Ndiokwere, *Prophecy and Revolution* (London: SPCK, 1981), 255.

³¹ Ini Etuk, “The Church” A paper presented at the 1st Area Youth Conference of The Apostolic Church, Ikot Ekpene Udo Area on the 28th of September, 2018.

³² Anthony, Nwabughuogu, *Problems of Nation Building in Africa* (Okigwe: Fasmen Educational & Research Publications FERP 2004), 94.

Jude Ekele has identified four types of leadership in the church. These are visionary and charismatic leadership; executive leadership; transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Visionary and charismatic leadership goes out to show the way to his followers and tries to take them out of the woods by putting them on the right path. Executive leadership is bureaucratic and pays premium to power struggle and prestige. Transactional leadership is a market place kind of leadership. It believes in the exchange of one thing for the other. It is also influenced by price mechanism-the forces of demand and supply. Transformational leadership shapes, alters and elevates the motives and values of followers.³³

To be sure, it does not tantamount to making a sweeping statement that many contemporary church founders and general overseers are at home with executive and transactional leadership modules which they employ effectively to engender the poverty of unsuspecting and credulous congregants across Nigeria. They elicit immense awe and trepidation to congregants who in turn raise them to the status of deities and demi-gods. They are *pastorpreneurs* in their own rights with stupendous wealth. For instance, *Forbes Magazine* listed Bishop Olaniyi Oyedepo the founder and General Overseer of Living Faith Bible Church, also known as “Winners “Chapel” as Nigeria’s wealthiest pastor in 2010. As at then, he was estimated to be worth US\$150 million (N23b) with four luxury aircrafts, vast congregations in over 40 nations in the world and various grades of institutions charging outrageous fees for tuition and sundry fees. As at then also, he was closely followed by Christ Oyakhilome of Christ Embassey.³⁴ Since then the litany has swelled to include the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Salvation Ministries, some so called orthodox churches including Presbyterian,

³³ Jude Ekele, “Promoting Leadership Excellence through Youth Mentorship”. A Paper presented at The Apostolic Church, Uyo during her Youth Convention, April 22, 2019, pp. 25-35.

³⁴ *The News* April 9, 2012.

Methodist, The Apostolic Church and so on. The Catholic Church is in a class of its own as it has been touted to have the world's largest gold reserve in its vault at the Vatican City.

As a matter of fact, contemporary Christian churches are led by proprietors and entrepreneurs who harp on continuous payment of tithes and offerings in order for them to line their pockets, wallow in stupendous wealth and provide the good things of life for their immediate families. Most contemporary and "Pentecostal" church founders, again, establish their churches in the cities and have little or nothing to do with the hinterland. After all, the cities host most of the rich people with a high prospect of patronage of the new churches. The *pastorpreneurs* go after this class of people and each of them engages in membership poaching to swell the volume of their congregants. For the most part, they are less interested in "winning souls for Christ" but in "winning souls" to line their pockets. They are oblivious of biblical teachings which are supposed to be their reference point or point of departure. 1st Timothy in King James version, for instance, has it that:

This is a true saying, if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach, not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, nor covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) Not a novice lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must have a good report of them, which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.³⁵

³⁵ 1st Timothy 3:1-7, King James Version.

Again, John Bunyan in his classic work entitled, *The Pilgrims Progress in Modern English*, maintains that;

The soul of religion is the practical part. Religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this; to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.³⁶

Paradox to the-above prescriptions much control is exerted over poor congregants who are made to attend endless “breakthrough services”, covenant breaking services”, prayer meetings as well as “days, weeks and months of glory”. This strategy ensures the formatting of the congregants to depend on their “pastors” for life which is freely given by God. Much time is expended on supplications rather than production of goods and services. Congregants are constantly reminded that “what happens in the physical was first revealed in the spiritual”. Some adherents believe this without asking if hunger and poverty were first revealed in the spiritual. Does it sound divine when the leadership is rich and the followership is poor? In various preachments, poverty is presented as a “spiritual” phenomenon. So also is nil production which is presented as being pre-destined by the gods in the imagery of the church founders. The panacea in the imagination of church proprietors is to agglutinate with God or gods at the expense of material production.

For instance, most of the warehouses of manufacturing companies in Aba, Onitsha, Ibadan, Bompai in Kano, Trans-Amadi Industrial Layout in Port Harcourt, Apapa, Ijora-Costain, Ogba-Ikeja in Lagos, Kaduna and so on in the country, have since become churches. The point to note is that churches only employ a few people, yet, ironically, congregants attend churches to pray for

³⁶ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrims Progress in Modern English* (Benin city; Joint Heirs Publications Nigeria Ltd., 2002), 104.

employment.³⁷ The mega rich *pastorpreneurs* hardly assist the poor to secure employment. The “ushers” and “church workers” are usually encouraged to “work for God” without receiving pittance. After all, their god is a poor god and the one of the church proprietors is a rich one.

Much more worrisome has been the fact that many contemporary Christian religious leaders and church founders in Nigeria align with the political leadership and “scramble for a role in national public life.”³⁸ They are constantly hired to organize solemn assemblies for the government, appointed chaplains for government house chapels and they also constitute prominent members of audiences at state functions. The government, state and federal, sponsor some select members of the Christian population on pilgrimage to Jerusalem on yearly and regular basis. This strategy has also been reinforced through government undertakings in projects which should be outside the purview of governments.

An online check of government’s forays into the annals of religion, for instance, is typified in the construction of an “International Christian Worship Centre” in Uyo, the capital of Akwa Ibom State in the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Meanwhile, the “Worship Centre” is festooned by hundreds of churches and denominations in its immediate vicinity. Its construction was flagged off by the state’s former governor, Deacon Udom Emmanuel in 2021 but was eventually inaugurated by the state’s present governor, Pastor Umo Bassey Eno. The project according to its progenitors is intended to promote unity at the cost of thirty-two billion, three-hundred million naira (N32.3billion) about US\$ 2.1 million. Meanwhile, there are no functional industries in the state and several sectors of its economy beg for attention. About 71% out of the state’s 5.45 million

³⁷ For more ventilation, see Ini Etuk, “Nigeria’s Development Profile: A Montage of Illusory Engagements Since Independence, in *SAPHA: Journal of Historical Studies*, No. 4, No.1, 2017.

³⁸ Ebenezer Obadare, *Pntecostal Republic: Religion and the Struggle for State Power in Nigeria* (London; Zeal Books Ltd., 2018), 39.

people in 2016 population estimate are “multi-dimensionally, poor,”³⁹ Over the years, politics has been expeditiously deployed to court the pleasure of Christian voters in periodic elections. The strategy has also been ossified and cemented with juicy appointments of “supportive Christians.” Richard Holloway captures this symbiotic relationship quite vividly as he maintains that: People pick up their politics where they live and work and study, they absorb them from their surrounding culture, and Christians are no more immune to the process than others. The only distinction thing about Christians is that they have a strange need to bring in Jesus to anoint the convictions that they have picked up without any reference to him.⁴⁰ Contemporary Christianity is yet to find an answer to the poverty question in Nigeria, in spite of the plenitude of churches and some of their phoney founders.

Conclusion

Nigeria has been severally regarded as being poverty-stricken. The predicate of this state of affairs has been blamed on the internal and external dynamics of developments across Nigeria. These dynamics are reckoned to include the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, post-independence leadership question, corruption, poor level of technology, poor capital formation and a plethora of other reasons. Yet, the ramifying impact of contemporary “Pentecostal” Christianity has been peripheralised in various reckonings as one of the potent harbingers of poverty in the country. Christianity, no doubt, came to Nigeria at the exogamous instance of the Europeans, who came to meet the African Traditional Religion (ATR) in earnest. The point to note is that African Traditional Religion was an outcrop of communal relations since its

³⁹ www.thecable.ng. Retrieved on March 24, 2024.

⁴⁰ Richard Holloway, *The Sidelong Glance: Politics, Conflict and the Church* (Great Britain: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), 13.

political economy for the most part, was predicated on communalism. To be sure, communalism had scant tolerance for the peripheralisation and immiserization of poor general congregants.

Christianity, arguably, came and into West Africa through the instrumentality of European Trans-Atlantic slave traders. In the 19th nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christianity was propagated by the missionaries of various European nationalities. They established many mission posts and such institutions like schools, hospitals and so on, to assist in cowing down the people into “submission to those in higher authority” as enunciated in the bible. This was in keeping with the tenets of colonialism by the missionary wing of the colonial enterprise in Nigeria. However, Christianity at the instance of the missionaries wore a humane garb as they provided health care services and introduced western education with minimal and in some instances, no charges through mentorship and scholarship schemes. European missionaries avoided those tendencies which predated on their converts and eventual congregants.

Christianity as epitomized in independent and “Pentecostal” churches with their founders, general overseers, apostles, prophets and other phoney taxonomies and prefixes, has raised a lot of concerns. Its contemporary genre has, among other things, engendered and indeed, ossified poverty sequel to its mode of operations. From homilies and liturgies which ooze out of various pulpits and abracadabra of “healing” miracles and spurious claims, unsuspecting and poor congregants are further impoverished. Endless prayer meetings, seed sowing and breakthrough services are consistently organized with consistent price tags. “Nothing goes for nothing” is the familiar mantra of *pastorpreneurs*.

All told, this paper has argued that the garb and content of contemporary Christianity in Nigeria is a formidable participant in the impoverishment of

Nigeria and Nigerians. It is a far cry from the ethos and mores of indigenous religious practice and those of early European missionaries.

Recommendations

This study therefore, recommends the following;

- i. that a critical examination of religious messaging used by religious elites, especially in the Christian genre must be taken into consideration, to understand how they influence perceptions of wealth and poverty among worshippers.
- ii. thorough investigation should be given priority on the specific ways in which religious institutions contribute to or alleviate poverty considering factors such as charitable activities, economic empowerment programs, and social welfare initiatives.
- iii. religious leaders should not only see themselves as spiritual leaders but should explore their roles and responsibilities in addressing poverty issues within their communities, including their influence on public policies, advocacy efforts and resource allocation.
- iv. religious leaders should propose strategies for leveraging religious networks and community structures to empower individuals and communities economically, with a focus on sustainable development and poverty reduction.
- v. there is need to advocate for educational programs and awareness campaigns within religious settings to promote financial literacy, entrepreneurship skills, and responsible stewardship of resources among worshippers.

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