



AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

IN LOCAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

A Festschrift in Honour of
Rev. Prof. Isaac Deji Ayegboyin^{FNAL}
Professor of Church History and African Christianity



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A Festschrift in Honour of
Rev. Professor Isaac Deji Ayegboyin FNAL @ 70
(*Religious Studies Series, Volume 7*)

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Chapter Forty One

The Contributions of the Christian Church to Poverty Creation in Nigeria

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Abstract

Poverty is a global phenomenon and various solutions have been proffered by scholars over the years to reduce it. Attempts by government, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), government agencies and individuals to alleviate the menace have continued to generate avalanche of debate from both national and international agencies and, most importantly, in Nigeria. Existing studies on poverty have focused mainly on how churches in Nigeria have made efforts to alleviate poverty through the setting up of various poverty alleviation programmes to better the lots of the people. Yet, an area which seems to have been largely ignored which requires a serious academic engagement is how churches have endangered the economic standard of its members through various teachings and programmes that do not have any direct impact on the economic life of the people, thereby making them to continue to wallow in abject poverty. The methodologies employed are oral interview and materials that are relevant to the subject matter. Therefore, this work will, among other things, examine how churches in Nigeria have endangered the economic lives of their members. Lastly, recommendations will be offered on how the church leaders will re-direct their teachings to focus more on how to improve the living standard of their members.

Keywords: Christian Church, Leaders, Poverty, Nigeria.

Introduction

Movement on prosperity preaching which started between 1970 and 1980 came through a general belief then that anybody who was poor was under satanic bondage, and required an instant deliverance¹. The movement became necessary due to escalating and widespread poverty in the land and all efforts made by government to alleviate it had proved abortive over the years. Due to this insensitivity of government at all levels, Nigerians relied

¹ Movements on Prosperity Preaching began in 1970. <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/2105/4758>. Assessed 09/11/2018

on promises by various Christian bodies to better their lots². The promise of hope by church leaders made them gain acceptance among a substantial number of Nigerians. Poverty is easier to recognise than define. An attempt to define it, makes it more complex. Poverty is relative in nature as what could be described as poverty in a particular society or country may not be seen as poverty in another society or country³. It is as a result of the high rate of poverty in Africa and, particularly in Nigeria, that Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted by the United Nation in 2000 made it as part of its goals, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger in the land⁴.

The efforts of MDGs and other national and international agencies have not really translated to a better living condition for the citizenry, most especially in developing countries like Nigeria, as majority still wallow in abject poverty despite the abundant natural and human resources at her disposal⁵. This paper, therefore, explores how churches in Nigeria have indirectly contributed to poverty rather than being agents of poverty alleviation.

A consideration of poverty from the socio-economic angle shows that it means many things to many people. It has been said in different quarters to mean the inability of an individual to meet the basic needs of life. This means that there some basic necessities of life that an individual must possess at a particular point in time, in as much as such the individual fails to get those basic needs, he or she is considered as being poor⁶. These basic needs for clarifications are food, housing, ability to educate one's children and good medical care. Others also consider the issue of being poor from the angle of inadequacy of income, deprivation of basic needs and rights like access to productive assets as well as to social amenities like pipe-borne water, motorable roads, electricity and so on. These are all from the socio and economic perspectives.⁷

Church fathers are not left out of poverty discourse as, according to them, poverty affects every aspect of man. That is why it is a bit complex to corner its discussion to one dimension. Even, the Bible makes copious references to the issue of poverty as a reality and that it is a global phenomenon. One of such passages is Genesis 45:11 where the Bible described poverty in all its forms and manifestations as a result of the fall of man and its consequences. Though Jesus himself knew that there were poor people in his time, as he emphasised that they must not be ignored for whatever is worth. But, one thing which has ignited the curiosity of the current researcher is that instead of the church alleviating the suffering of the poor people, the preaching, practice and sermons by many ministers of God have made the poor become poorer.

² Simut Ciprian 2016. The Church, the Pulpit, and the Poor. the Role of Preaching in Poor Relief Efforts in the Thinking of Samuel Mccomb (1864-1938). European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research. Vol. 3, Issue 2.

³ Simon Maxwell. 1999. The Meaning and Measurement of poverty. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/3095.pdf>.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millennium_Development_Goals. Assessed

⁵ Taylor and Francis. 2013. Limitations of the Millennium Development Goals. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3877943/>. Assessed

⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271101993_Concept_Measurement_and_Causes_of_Poverty_Nigeria_in_Perspective. Assessed on 12th October, 2018.

⁷ D.O. Ajakaiye, et al. 2003. Understanding Poverty in Nigeria. Overview of Development Performance in Nigeria in Niserian Development 2001/2002.

The Etymological Meaning of the Church

It is very necessary at this point to give a brief definition of one of the keywords in this paper for a better understanding of the discourse. We can have as many meanings of the church as possible. While some refer to it as a building used for public worship, many others see church from a different angle, as they define it as an organisation. The researcher's curiosity in looking at the connection between the church and the society, especially on the issue relating to poverty and economic activities was aroused by the works of Smith and from the consideration of the fact that religion (Christianity) is considered as a living force, actively functioning in every aspect of human life including the economy. The symbiotic relationship between the church and the economy cannot be over-emphasised. Over the years, churches have engaged in the spiritual growth of their members, not leaving out their economic development as well. Religion according to Karl Max is the voice of the voiceless, heart of the heartless, and the opium of the masses. Individual members of each church belong to the society and the restriction of their religion towards a particular commodity affects their business which in implication endangers the economy of such denomination and, by extension, the society where they belong⁸.

In particular, the church has become a significant force in this modern dispensation, especially in Nigeria, where underdevelopment lingers and where the rate of unemployment is alarming. The church has been seen to wax stronger by the day with gigantic buildings rising from every corner; there is the proliferation of churches and clergymen competing in number with the population in Nigeria today. There is the growing trend of unconventional methods being used in the process of proselytisation; liturgy and general administrative pattern. This has placed a question mark on their 'calling'. This background introduction is essential in order to lay a steady foundation on the entire discourse. This paper is therefore centered on the various strategies applied by various churches, most especially the clergies of this modern dispensation which have hitherto led to the impoverishment of church members. It is out to bring out some salient points and facts that have resulted in the interplay of clergies getting richer by the day, without a commensurate effect among their members⁹. This paper does not ignore the fact that there are church members who have benefitted from the ministering of the pulpit, or recognized the churches' contribution to the economy of the society. It is also very pertinent to outline the lacunas that exist in the desperate methods and measures used by these church leaders on the members in this present-day society where there is astronomical growth of Pentecostalism¹⁰.

An Assessment on How Churches Have Endangered the Economic Activities of its Members

The word "endanger" means to put somebody or something at risk, or to expose somebody to danger. Works written over time dwell more on how churches have designed programmes channeled towards alleviating poverty in the lives of members. But, it takes a

⁸ B.Steve.1999. Choice and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-829584-7

⁹ P.J. Welch and J.J. Mueller,2001" The Relationship of Religion to Economics," Review of Social Economy, 59(2)

¹⁰ R. Nwadiolor, and Ugwuja, 2016. "Nigerian Pentecostal Churches and their Prosperity Message: A Safeguard Against Poverty in Nigeria? 1980-2014" Mgbakoigba, Journal of African Studies. Vol.5, No2.

second look at how the church has by its various methods, strategies and programmes such as “prayer for the first born”, “take it by force”, “your month of enlargement”, “it is my turn to shine” and so on, have not translated to a better living condition of members as they continue to wallow in abject poverty. Of a truth, Christianity has not done much in the area of impacting positively on governance in Nigeria. The Bible says “Righteousness exalts a nation,” and that when the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice. This blessing continues to elude Nigeria because there is so much unrighteousness, injustice, oppression, abuse of power and poverty in the land. A deeply religious country that produces the 10th richest person in the world, yet, has the largest number of extremely poor people in the world. Nigeria may be a deeply religious country, but its religiosity is as it is based on spiritual growth at the detriment of other aspects of human development¹¹.

Prosperity theology teaches that Christians are entitled to well-being and because physical and spiritual realities are seen as one inseparable reality, this is interpreted as physical health and economic prosperity. Church leaders focus on personal empowerment, promoting a positive view of the body and spirit. The realisation of positive confession, yielding fruit in hard work, experiencing continuous overflow of God’s blessing can only be made possible through the commitment of the seed faith. There are Biblical references like Malachi 3:10, John 10:10, 2 Cor.9: 6-8, Phil. 4:19, 3 John 1:3 used by church leaders to drive home their points that indeed, Christians can prosper while on earth. The above scriptures have been the fulcrum on which the prosperity sermons revolve. Prosperity teachings have ignited tremendous response from members, who tend to contribute down to the last kobo, to make sure they are not left out in the prosperity race¹². Members struggle to make huge donations and contributions as this becomes a norm. The church leaders will spice up their message with strong reference to 2 Cor. 9:6 “he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” The emphasis has been shifted from “Widows Mite” to how much you sacrifice for the thing of God will determine how prosperous you will be. Members at times go to the length of borrowing, selling properties, making higher pledge and bringing their valuables to church.

Many churches in the past neglected this crucial aspect of economic growth. There is a little or more Theodicy of Escape in the ministry of Methodism which means that if we do not make it here, there is a better place for us hereafter, which limited them from preaching more on money. Emphasis was placed more on holiness, salvation, sanctification, justification and so on. The lack of orientation and education from the beginning affected the socio-economic imports of her adherents. This does not mean that the church does not appreciate prosperity but it was not the foundational practice. Though, Wesley advocated for wealth creation, he tried to avoid wealth becoming an obstacle to faith. He did not really major on how to be social, creative and entrepreneurial.

Another area is in the drinking of alcoholic substances. Throughout the first 1,800 years of Church history, Christians generally consumed alcoholic beverages as a common part of everyday life and used “the fruit of the vine” in their central rite-the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper. They held this belief that both the Bible and Christian tradition taught that alcohol is a

¹¹ Olupona, J., 2009, ‘Understanding poverty and its alleviation in Africa and the African diaspora: An interdisciplinary approach’, in P.J. Paris (ed.), *Religion and Poverty: Pan-African Perspectives*, pp. ix–xxiii, Duke University Press, Durham.

¹² D.P. Upong 2006. *The Presence and the impact Pentecostalism in Nigeria*.

gift from God that makes life more enjoyable, but that over-indulgence leading to drunkenness is sinful or at least a vice. Alcoholic beverages appear in the Bible, both in usage and in poetic expression. The Bible is ambivalent towards alcohol, considering it both a blessing from God that brings merriment and a potential danger that can be unwise and sinful. The Bible languages have several words for alcoholic beverages and though prohibitionists and some abstentionists' dissent, there is a broad consensus that the words did ordinarily refer to intoxicating drinks. Many church leaders through their preaching have totally condemned the drinking of alcoholic substances. Members in such churches have, as a result, stopped selling drink and could not lay their hands on any other job. But, the church takes offering and tithe from members who still sell alcoholic drinks.

There are Church leaders today who are fond of organising various programmes that are not divinely directed, as such, have no spiritual benefit to members. On many occasions, members will be forced to leave their jobs and business just to make sure they come up with the myriad of programmes. As said earlier, these programmes are not designed for growth of the members but for the purpose of making money. The programmes require the financial commitment of members. A typical example of this, is the Shiloh offering which is brought yearly to the church by members of Winners' Chapel. The money realised from such a programme is supposed to be given to the less privileged. Unfortunately, when such item is sold, the money is used to enrich the leaders, and this has effects on the economy of such members.¹³

Over the years, churches have tended to treat poverty as a virtue by discouraging members from being encumbered with acquisition of property. It is true that the Bible extols poverty in Biblical passage like "Blessed are the, poor for they shall inherit the earth," or "How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." It is of a fact that religious groups need money to operate and function well. It is only when members are allowed to work hard rather than spending their productive hours with programmes that they will be blessed to give generously to the house of God¹⁴.

From the findings of the researcher, it was discovered that many programmes are organised without any direction from God. This usually manifests in the way such ministers of God announce the commencement of the programme. This they do through our findings to keep members busy so that they will not be lured into joining other faith and be abducted by their god" We also have what is called 'packaging palaver' which means various ways churches adopt to make their religious organisations look attractive to the members of the public. This, according to them, is the only way the church can be relevant and keep pace with the changes in the society. This packaging palaver has really affected many members of the church most especially the workers. Some have to spend extra cash to meet up with such demand. This made many to run faster than their shadows. The packaging system of the church has deviated the minds of many ministers of God from spiritual consciousness to lust for materialism. A large percentage of programmes in the church now focus more on administration¹⁵. This consciousness is done at the expense of the gullible members who are being pushed and tossed by the wind of doctrines and sweet oratory speech from the pulpit.

¹³ McCleary, Rachel M. (2011) *The Oxford Handbook of the Economics of Religion*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ R.A. Akanmidu. 1995. *Ethics and Poverty: Inquires in Moral Philosophy*. Lagos. Pacific Education Publishers.

¹⁵ www.wikipedia.com/Prosperity Theology. Assessed on 12th August, 2018.

This has over the years made many members to donate the very few properties they have, which is given to them by the church as seed-faith to the pastors and then back to square one.

Preaching on leadership by example affects a lot of church officers to the point of borrowing money to impress the pastor that they have what it takes to be called an elder or a deacon or deaconess. They do this even when it is absolutely not financially convenient for them. In some Pentecostal churches, our findings through interview conducted among some members revealed that workers who are on night duties in their places of work, and as a result, miss workers' meetings for two or three times will be labelled 'unserious'. It is required that church workers must have no excuse to miss church services or come late for programmes. Late coming is strongly frowned at. This means, therefore, that business owners who are workers will have to close earlier than necessary to meet up. This has seriously affected the economic activities of the people negatively.

Economic dwindling and poverty arise in a situation where businesses operated by church members are restricted as a result of their religious beliefs¹⁶. The problem of poverty in the society is not a new phenomenon as it was a major issue at the time of Jesus Christ. He was moved when he witnessed the state of poverty amongst his people. His concern was about how his people will be liberated from the claw of poverty. His gospel was centered on liberation, socio-economic injustices and oppression. He was not only to preach the gospel, but to make sure that his people are well taken care of physically. He emphasised this on many occasions that man's physical and spiritual needs must be met to make a complete being. This means, the good News of Jesus Christ to mankind was not only meant for spiritual nourishment but, it was also to take care of the physical needs. The categories of people whom Jesus was referring to were the materially poor people, the sick, the diseased, illiterate, unemployed, and the exploited and so on¹⁷.

In our discussion of the relationship of the church with poverty, attention is drawn to the fact that the poor have suffered due to the fact that pastors preach more on wealth, health, and prosperity, but do not teach members how to make money and better their lots by engaging in genuine business ventures. Instead, they coerce members to donate and pay offerings out of their meager resources. In line with this is the time spent on some religious gatherings which can be effectively used to enhance productivity which will positively impact on the economic growth of the nation. While some people see such attendance as a spiritual rejuvenation, others see it as a form of laziness and time wasting strategies. Religious practices are kinds of informal institutions which impose constraints on the economic, political and social interactions of the society. These include going to temples, pilgrimages, numerous religious days of rest or public holidays such as Easter, Christmas, *Id el Kabir*, *Id- el Fitri* respectively. Many religious adherents are taken away for weeks or months. The time they are to spend productively in order to enhance economic growth is being spent on religious activities. No wonder the Bible says my people perish for lack of knowledge. For further

¹⁶ S.O.Abogunrin.2010. "Jesus" Pronouncement on Wealth in the Context of Health and Wealth Gospel in Nigeria. In S.O. Abogunrin (eds.) et.al Biblical Studies and Corruption in Africa. Ibadan: Alonge Nigeria Enterprises.

¹⁷ R.J.Barro and R.M. McCleary,2003. Religion and Economic Growth. National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge. Assessed on 10th September at [http:// www.nber.org/papers/w9682](http://www.nber.org/papers/w9682).

clarification, the Bible does not in any way condemn wealth, it only warned against excessive love for it, so that they would not lose their salvation.¹⁸

Implications for the Contemporary Nigerian Society

The points so far raised on how pastors of various denominations have endangered the economic lives of the adherents have a lot of implications on the church and the individual on entrepreneurship. Training of members who do not have jobs in the church will go a long way in meeting their spiritual and physical needs. The church can constantly engage and educate its members not only on spiritual matters but on how their members will be productive, creative and make money¹⁹. The absence of this programme in many churches today has brought untold economic problem to the country. Those that are supposed to contribute to the economic growth of the country are always alone with God. This is a common practice in Nigeria. In the developed countries of the world, service to God does not affect economic activities as God does not bless an idle person. According to them, service to humanity is considered as service to God. I will bless the work of your hands so says the Holy Bible²⁰. We should not fail to say that there are few churches that have taken to entrepreneurship to help members to be economically stable. However, churches must be cautious of what the incessant “alone with God” can cause the economic advancement of individuals and the country at large.

Conclusion

Religious programmes have posed serious impediment to the economic growth of the church and members. The quest for materialism and its attendant practices by church founders have ridiculed the office of the clergy. This has portrayed and presented an analogy of the church becoming worldly and the world becoming churchy. No doubt, many financial crises faced by the church members in the society emanate from the teachings from the altar. This is to buttress the fact that the people they refer to as “unbelievers” are wealthier than them that are professing faith; but on the contrary, the ministers, pastors, general overseers are smiling to the bank, driving expensive cars and building mansions, trying to live up to the status of the “Papa”, Daddy and G.O. as they are normally addressed by members.

The gravest effect of poverty which many ministers of God indirectly introduce to members is the degradation of human dignity. Society has become accustomed to look upon poverty with disdain. A poor man has no dignity. Poverty is defined as a ‘violation of human dignity’. Economic inequality contributed to social inequality, resulting in viewing poor people as less than human. Therefore, in order for members to be free from poverty, churches need to direct the attention of their members to how to be economically buoyant. Ministers of God should hold the bull by the horn to help members grow economically through sermon, teaching and seminars that will be both economically and spiritually beneficial to members. If

¹⁸ I.O. Adesanya, 2004. Profeliration of Churches: Bane or Blessing. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 11(1).

¹⁹ R.L. Johnstone. 2001. *Religion in Society. A Sociology of Religion*. New Jersey. Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River.

²⁰ D.O Olayiwola. 2002. Pentecostal and Charismatic Perspectives of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Ondo. *Journal of Religion*, Vol.111.