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A CHRISTIAN DIMENSION TO POVERTY DISCOURSE IN NIGERIA

Olumuyiwa Olusesan Familusi, Ph.D and Olusegun Peter Oke

Abstract

Poverty, which manifests in various forms, has been a major problem for mankind and a source of concern for successive administrations at various levels in Nigeria. Given this, several attempts have been made towards its reduction, eradication and alleviation, but no major success has been recorded, thus majority of the populace continues to wallow in abject poverty while ironically some have more than enough. Several scholars have worked on different perspectives of poverty. In this piece, an attempt is made to discuss the subject matter from a Christian religious view point so as to understand religion as a major factor in the issue of poverty in Nigeria. In other words, the Church is to be understood as an agent of poverty alleviation and possible harbinger of poverty. A pragmatic religious approach to poverty alleviation is provided as recommendations.

Introduction

That poverty is a reality in Nigeria can not be disputed and attempts have always been made by government at all levels, corporate bodies, religious organisations and individuals towards its alleviation or eradication. Scholars have equally carried out extensive researches on the subject matter from different perspectives. However solutions proffered in such studies have not been effective, hence the persistence of poverty. In this piece, attempt is made to present a religious outlook of the issue of poverty in Nigeria, with emphasis on the Christian religion. In order to achieve our

aim, we discuss how well the church has fared in poverty reduction on the one hand and how it has to a large extent contributed to its escalation on the other hand while a contemporary religious alternative to poverty eradication is provided.

Understanding Poverty

Given the multidimensional nature of poverty, it has been variously defined by scholars. According to Scott and Marshall,¹ poverty is a state in which resources, usually material but sometimes cultural, are lacking. In absolute terms, it refers to a situation in which the individual lacks resources necessary for subsistence while in relative expression poverty refers to individual's or group's lack of resources when compared with that of other members of the society. This is a comparison of the standards of living. From a subjective perspective, poverty refers to a situation in which individuals or groups feel that they are poor, when they measure themselves against the standards of the day². Each of the above mentioned forms of poverty is problematic because there is no universal standard for measuring and determining it. Lending credence to this claim Johnstone holds that:

.. economic deprivation,... consists of limited access to the material necessities of life. It may be objectively defined and measured as well as subjectively experienced. That is, although people may technically not be categorised as living at poverty level, they perceive themselves as poor.³

Poverty is also a condition of having insufficient resources or income. In its most extreme form, poverty is a lack of basic human needs, such as adequate and nutritious food, clothing, housing, clean water, and health services.⁴

¹ J. Scott and G. Marshall (eds), 2005. *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press, p512.

² A. Dzurgba, 2007, *Contemporary Ethics: Theory and Issues*, Ibadan: John Archers Publishers Limited, p113.

³ R.L Johnstone, 2001. *Religion in Society : A Sociology of Religion*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, P.91

⁴ T. J. Corbett, "Poverty." Microsoft® Encarta® 2009 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2008.

Poverty as an issue and its manifestation in Nigeria

To say that Nigeria as a country is ravaged by poverty and many Nigerians wallow in abject poverty is stale news as combating poverty has been a serious focus of successive governments, whether or not it was/well executed is another discourse entirely. The level of poverty is extremely high going by what people experience and what are obvious. In fact, a large proportion of the populace lives below the poverty line of one dollar per day⁵

At Secondary School level, students of Economics and Government are always made to understand that in a capitalist state, the rich become richer while the poor become poorer. This is indeed the situation in Nigeria, though not essentially a capitalist state but a country that operates mixed economic system.⁶ The following are some of the manifestations of poverty in the country.

Poor Diet

In the first instance, not many Nigerians are able to satisfy their basic need of food. One is not talking about balanced diet here but food that can sustain the soul and prevent an individual from death that may arise from hunger. This is what is called supplementary ration in Animal Husbandry. A slogan that was invented some years ago was about a parent asking his or her child only if he or she has eaten and not whether the child concerned is satisfied. It is also a common saying that people must gladly eat what is available and not what is desirable. The issue of poverty led also to what

⁵ C.O.E. Onwuliri, 2008, "The Millennium Development Goals and the Church in Nigeria" A Keynote Address presented at the Annual Theological Conference of the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, <http://www.futo.edu.ng/speech>, accessed on 19th September 2011.

⁶ O. Olaniyan and O. A. Lawanson, 2006. "Concepts of Economics and Development" in S. K. Balogun and A.O. Taiwo, (eds.) *Introduction to Basic Concepts In Government, Society and Economy*, Ibadan: GSP, University of Ibadan, p.106

may be termed alimentary mathematical formulae like: 0-1-0 that is no breakfast and supper, 1-0-1 meaning no lunch, 0-1-1 signifying no breakfast among others. People attend parties not as invitees but as gate crashers in which case, many fight over what is left over which the Yoruba people call *ajeku*. The rate at which people scavenge is alarmingly dis-encouraging, yet but the soul must be kept surviving. What can one say about malnutrition, which is equally a problem of many of those who can afford to eat three times daily? The point being made is that many a Nigerian is not well nourished; that many children of under five years old have stunted growth and are under weight.⁷ Moreover, there is no access to safe water and this is usually responsible for the outbreak of epidemics such as diarrhoea and cholera⁸ as recently experienced in some parts of Oyo State.⁹

Poor shelter

Similar to food is shelter, which is one of the basic needs according to Abraham Maslow¹⁰. As evident in different parts of the country, many Nigerians live in slums where there are no basic amenities like road, electricity¹¹, and toilet facilities. People live in unsafe and degraded environment, and in many cases houses are built in unauthorised areas, which is one of the factors that propel flood disasters. The recent experience in Ibadan is a practical example. That people do not enjoy basic health facilities is an understatement as countless avoidable deaths have been

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ G.T. Ijaiya and H.I. Mobolaji, 2004. "Which Should Come First in Nigeria: Poverty Reduction or Poverty Analysis?" in H.A. Saliu (ed) *Nigeria Under Democratic Rule*, Ibadan: University Press PLC., P.241.

⁹ In the last four weeks, many people have died of cholera.

¹⁰ J. Scott and G. Marshall (eds.), 2005, *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, op cit.*, p.441.

¹¹ The problem of electricity in Nigeria can not be explained here. Even where there are good houses, Power Holding Company of Nigeria PLC. (PHCN) may not supply power for months. This has led to the use of generators, which is also capable of constituting health hazards.

recorded. Where hospital bills can not be paid, patients patronize quacks and untrained medical personnel, who may charge something low and when they cannot afford to pay anything at all, they resort to self-medication without proper diagnosis.

Access to qualitative Education

On the other hand, poverty manifests in the inability of many Nigerians to have access to basic education. As cheap as education may appear to be, especially in public schools, some still go to school bare footed and in tattered uniforms. To such students, eating during break time is a big issue. There have been cases of students who could not write public examinations because the fees could not be paid. Even in States where education is free in public schools, payment of some levies is inevitable; such levies, no matter how small they appear to be, beyond the reach of those who are extremely poverty stricken. This development has led to child labour. Many school children must hawk before going to school in the morning and immediately after the school hours so as to assist in the little family business; while many are regular absentees from school because of the same purpose. At this point, we shall digress a bit on the lack of access to education. Experience has shown that it is not in all cases that this development is an indication of poverty as some parents do sacrifice important family responsibilities for social activities such as buying *Aso Ebi*- group uniform. It is commonplace for some people to save money for the purpose of buying a group uniform while children's school fees might not have been paid thereby jeopardising the future of such children¹². This point should be made because of the need to understand the issue being discussed objectively. The following information on poverty in Nigeria sheds more light on the abovementioned.

¹² O.O Familusi, 2010. "The Yoruba Culture of *Aso Ebi*-Group Uniform in Socio-Ethical Context" in *AAU: African Studies Review*, A journal of the Department of History and International Studies, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Nigeria, Vol.9, p 270.

Population, total (2009)	154,728,892.0
Population growth (annual %) (2009)	2.3
Population density (people per sq. km) (2008)	166.0
Rural population (2009)	78,787,951.8
Mortality rate, infant (per 1,000 live births) (2009)	85.8
Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1,000) (2009)	137.9
Number of rural poor (million, approximate) (2009)	28,678,814.5
Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above) (2008)	60.1

HEALTH

Health expenditure, total (% of GDP) (2007)	6.6
Physicians (per 1,000 people) (2008)	0.4
Improved sanitation facilities, rural (% of rural population with access) (2008)	28.0
Prevalence of HIV, total (% of population ages 15-49) (2007)	3.1
Under-5 mortality rate, 2009	138
Infant mortality rate (under 1), 2009	86
Infant mortality rate (under 1), 2009	86
Percentage of infants with low birth weight, 2005-2009*	12
Percentage of children (2005-2009) who are breastfed with complementary foods (6-9) months	75
Percentage of children (2003-2009) suffering from underweight moderate and severe	29
Percentage of population using improved drinking water (rural)	58
Percentage of population using improved drinking water (urban)	75 ¹³

Causes of Poverty

Poverty as a social malady could be blamed on several factors. One of such is the issue of salaries, wages and allowances, which are often determined by employers. Poverty in Nigeria affects educated and

¹³ UNICEF-At a glance: Nigeria – Statistics, in http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nigeria_statistic.html, accessed on 19th September, 2011.

uneducated people alike. Until very recently many Nigerian workers in government establishments earned as low as eight thousand naira per month. The situation is worse in private companies. The battle of minimum wage, which the Federal Government put at 18,000 Naira, is yet to be settled in many states. Even if it is settled, one wonders how it would reduce the level of poverty when prices of commodities have risen astronomically even before its implementation. Slogans of the Academic Staff Union of Universities many years ago used to be “my take home pay can not take me home” and “my boss is a comedian, the wages he pays are a joke”. What is being established here is that where workers do not earn living wages, people are prone to poverty. One sensitive thing about Nigerian situation is that many workers have several dependants. Thus even if they are well remunerated, there are several people- immediate family members who are statutorily primary dependants, friends and other associates who may be unemployed, waiting for their own share. When this is done, the benefactors are left with little or nothing. This is why the Yoruba often say: *Olowo kan laarin igba otosi, babanla otosi ni*- literally put, “One wealthy man in the midst of two hundred poor people is the poorest of them”. Retirees in Nigeria are worse hit by poverty because of unpaid pensions. It is not too difficult to recognise them on the streets. It has been so difficult for them to survive that many of them have become beggars. In 2009, a prayer request sent to a Church read thus: “People of God please pray for me, my pension has not been paid for the past five years, and I have five unemployed graduates in my family”. This is one of the several ordeals of the masses in Nigeria and many have lost their lives while waiting to collect their retirement benefits.

The wealth of the nation is not well distributed as evident in marginalization of some groups and monetization of political posts, which has led to a concentration of national or state resources in the hands of few individuals, who squander them at the expense of the poor. It is very expensive to maintain political functionaries who are only interested in how to amass wealth. According to Familusi:

In Nigeria, politics has become a lucrative and viable business. In fact, it is purported to be the fastest way of getting rich quick because political posts are alarmingly monetized, thereby making them to be very attractive to people. Political officers

enjoy several allowances at the expense of the general public. In the matter of wealth, they are more relevant than other groups in the society... they live the most comfortable type of life, which has resulted in extravagance and reckless life style as much is wasted on frivolities.¹⁴

The foregoing can only escalate poverty as what belongs to a whole nation is being controlled and mismanaged by just few individuals. It is ironical that many politicians have become self-styled philanthropists. They dole out money to unsuspecting poor people who now see them as generous people. They need to be asked if their generosity is not hypocritical or if the money they spend under the guise of being generous belongs to them. On the mismanagement of the nation's wealth, Omoregbe is emphatic that:

Nigeria is a country richly endowed by God with both natural and human resources. Yet Nigeria is a beggar-country, today with a huge and crushing debt while ironically Nigerian millionaires, multi-millionaires, and even billionaires abound everywhere. As the country acquires more money through the sale of oil, the money goes into private accounts and she gets poorer while very few of her citizens especially ex-politicians... get richer¹⁵

It is not only political functionaries that are corrupt. There is corruption almost everywhere in Nigeria, as the civil service is corrupt, so also is the education sector as well as religious institutions.¹⁶ One major reason why people are corrupt is the uncertainty that the future holds for them. Many

¹⁴ O.O Familusi, 2010. "A Religious-Ethical Evaluation of Electoral Malpractices in Nigeria" in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, XLIII/1, p.96.

¹⁵ J.I. Omoregbe, 1998. *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*, Lagos: JERPL, P.133.

¹⁶ O.O. Familusi, 2010. "Corruption and the Prospect of Pastoral Ministry in the 21st Century Nigeria" in I.G. Awotanmi, S.O. Olanisebe and C.A. Adeleye (eds) *Corruption and Church Growth in 21st Century Nigeria*, Ilesa: TACTS.pp.77-96.

people want to secure the future of their families by embezzling public funds among other corrupt practices. Ethically speaking, one can not justify corruption but it now seems unreasonable in the 21st century Nigeria not to siphon money if the opportunity is available.

Poverty thrives also in Nigeria because many people are lazy. One is not oblivious of the fact that the rate of unemployment is high and that many have tried the option of self-employment and job creation without success. The fact remains that there are many able bodied men and women who are simply indolent and allergic to hard work. They seem unaware of the dignity of labour, which Christianity too emphasis as in I Thessalonians 3: 6-15. Today young people are seen early in the morning at newspapers stands discussing politics and football, thereby wasting precious time. It is also evident that there are many contemporary beggars that suffer no disability. What such people suffer from is laziness. What about some jobless people who want juicy appointments and will never take up any appointment with low pay package?¹⁷ The issue of poverty must be taken with objectivity. If the government is to be blamed for bad economy and maladministration, which have seriously contributed to poverty in the area of inflation and unemployment, individual citizens have their own part to play in its reduction. One can not but say at this juncture that government needs to be proactive in job creation. A large percentage of Nigerians are jobless. To confirm this, one needs to see how many applications are submitted any time there is a job advertisement. Some time ago, the University of Ibadan wanted to recruit some porters and about seven hundred and fifty people applied and many of the applicants are Master Degree holders. This is one of the several examples of such in Nigeria. ,

Natural calamities such as drought and flooding; and man-made disasters such as wars, environmental degradation are inevitable.¹⁸ They occur once in a while, and when they do, the effects are devastating, thereby inducing

¹⁷ O.O. Akindoyeni, an Anglican Priest stressed this point in a sermon preached at the Chapel of The Resurrection, University of Ibadan on 18-09-2011.

¹⁸ G.T. Ijaiya and H.I. Mobolaji, 2004. "Which Should Come First in Nigeria: Poverty Reduction or Poverty Analysis?" *op cit.* p.239.

poverty. There are several of these in different parts of the country every year. The July and August flood disasters in Lagos and Ibadan respectively destroyed the means of livelihood of many people; the immediate or long term effect of which is poverty. In the University of Ibadan, for instance, fish ponds and poultries and other farms, which would have been sources of income for some people, were destroyed. The loss was estimated to be up to eight billion naira.

Effects of Poverty

The havoc that poverty has wreaked and is wreaking in Nigeria and the world over is evident. Several avertable deaths have been recorded because people are more caught in the web of poverty. Of course, those who are not well nourished, especially babies, are prone to ailments, which can claim lives. Moreover, living in an indecent and unhygienic environment exposes people to health hazards.

The alarming rate of crime in Nigeria is also attributable to poverty. Many of those who engage in stealing, armed robbery, political thuggery and other forms of vices are victims of poverty.¹⁹ Such people, when pushed to the wall, may not see anything wrong in doing whatever they think will be a way out of the web of poverty. This is corroborated by Olukunle who says that:

You cannot preach ethics to a hungry and jobless man who could do anything including robbery and ‘thuggery’ to keep body and soul together. The poor man has nothing to lose but his poverty. If he makes a run in a bank raid and gets killed, he would lose his poverty and rest in grave. If he gets away with it, he has once and for all shed his poverty²⁰

¹⁹ It should be noted that many of those arrested in connection crime often blame their involvement on joblessness and poverty.

²⁰ O. Olukunle (1986). “Ethical Revolution: The latest Doubtful Craze in Town” in S.O. Abogunrin (ed) *Religion and Ethics in Nigeria*, Ibadan: Daystar Press, p29.

Akanmidu also sees poverty as a determinant of good behaviour. In his view, high degree of poverty often breeds high tendency for immoral behaviour. It is on the basis of this that he writes that:

... the main characteristic of this kind of study is the factor of moral choice forced upon persons as a result of enormous burden of poverty. The point in this study is that, life is prospect influence behaviour which in the long run, has effects on people's character. While it may not be absolutely accepted that character formulation is a by-product of life's situation, still such situations have clear roles to play in the process of character choices and changes.²¹

The point of emphasis is that poverty is antithetical to good deeds and a possible cause of social vices. We are not in any way justifying crime on the ground of poverty, but the reality is that poverty impels female prostitution is fast becoming a legalized business. Apart from those who engage in it because of the craving for materialism, there are those who have chosen that option because of hunger. One needs to visit University campuses and other higher institutions of learning to know whether prostitution which is now a course of study. According to a female student of the University of Ibadan who preferred anonymity, there are students who engage in prostitution at the neglect of their studies because they have to cater for themselves and other family members financially. Such students go out with their clients on Fridays and come back on Sunday or Monday. Some equally go out during the week and come back the following morning. It is also common to see them around during holidays working for the money they will spend during the next semester or session.²² Also in a chat with a Pastor, it was revealed that prostitution is a threat to spirituality as many Christians engage in immoral practices so as to make ends meet. According

²¹ R. A. Akanmidu, *Ethics and Poverty: Inquiries in Moral Philosophy* Lagos, Pacific Educational Publishers 1995, p. 51.

²² Anonymous interview respondent, 22-08-2011.

to him, in some places, it is lamentable that wives of ministers of God do sleep with Church members in exchange for money.²³ Apart from prostitution, (an immoral act) being an effect of poverty, it is a very direct way of contracting Sexually Transmitted Diseases notably, gonorrhoea, syphilis, HIV/AIDS among others. Pathetically, many parents either directly or indirectly encourage their daughters to engage in prostitution despite the fact that they are not ignorant of its disastrous effects.

A Christian Perspective of Poverty

Poverty has been a serious issue in religion and there are divergent opinions about what it is or is not. While some see it in terms of lack of material things, it is understood in some cases as a spiritual matter. In other words, poverty could be physical or spiritual. However, a major dilemma is that some see poverty as a sign of punishment from God. Hence the phenomenon of Prosperity Gospel, which is believed to be a panacea for harsh economic social condition. In the latest version of prosperity gospel, it is argued that poverty is an indication of divine wrath and that affluence of any kind depicts God's favour. As noted by Dada, prosperity gospel might have emerged as response to unfavourable social conditions. He affirms that:

The basic teaching of prosperity Gospel is that God's plan for all believers is to have them free from sickness and material poverty. The proponents of prosperity gospel believe that poverty, disease and other forms of deprivation are some of the consequences of the fall of man according to Biblical account ... For the prosperity message to be effectual, adherents are often admonished to operate and live along some principles and to think and confess wealth in order to bring into operation forces or angels in charge of wealth.²⁴

²³ L. Adelaja aged 38 years, a priest interviewed on 13-09-2011

²⁴ A.O. Dada, (2004). "Prosperity Gospel in Nigerian Context: A Medium of Social Transformation or An Impetus for Delusion?" in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol.xxxvii/ 1&2,p96.

To some Christians, poverty is a Christian virtue, because of the belief that wealth is capable of drawing people away from God. This is what is referred to as “theodicy of disprivilege” or “theodicy of escape”, which is a rationalization or justification of one’s disprivileged economic and social status as an advantage as far as salvation is concerned. Therefore, true riches and enhanced status will accrue in the hereafter, when it really counts; that is when it is for eternity and not just sixty or seventy years of toil and trouble on this planet.²⁵ It has been argued that formation of religious sect is a form of compensation for deficiencies epitomized by inferior social status and statements such as “I may not be in high society, but I’m on God’s first string”, “I may not have a big house, a fancy car, and a college education, but I’ve got what is really important” - a true religion are prominent among sectarians as they transmute poverty into a symptom of grace.²⁶ The parables of the rich man and Lazarus, rich fool and rich young ruler are often misinterpreted to justify poverty as something desirable. In this sense, it can be adduced that religious mentality is a possible cause of poverty. To be objective, the Bible does not in any way condemn wealth; Christians are only warned against excessive love for it so that they would not lose their salvation. Of course the Gospel cannot be propagated without money.

Still on the spiritual perspective of poverty, being poor or wealthy is understood as a spiritual matter. Thus one who is rich in material things may be poor in spiritual sense and vice versa. The problem that is associated with this is how spiritual poverty or wealth can be measured. On the one hand, one may be rich both materially and spiritually and on the other hand it is possible to be poor at both ends. In Matthew 5:3, a blessing is pronounced on the poor in spirit as they would inherit the kingdom of heaven. This verse, like many other passages of the Bible, is often misinterpreted. Examples abound of some Christians who have become indolent because of spirituality. Such people are religiously committed at the neglect of their secular jobs, thereby promoting material poverty.

Religious beliefs and practices to a large extent determine economic status and empowerment. There are people whose religious conviction

²⁶ *Ibid*, p.90.

will prevent from working with some organizations. As long as this belief subsists, they remain unemployed and become prone to poverty. In two separate group discussions with some undergraduates and postgraduate students of the University of Ibadan on religion and economy, some (Christians) claimed that they could work with Tobacco companies or where alcoholic drinks are made while others on religious ground prefer to remain unemployed if working with any of those companies is the only alternative. This is a matter of belief, which is personal; none of the two groups can therefore be pilloried for maintaining a position. Discussing the over commitment of people to religious activities is imperative. This should be understood in relation to poverty escalation. What can one say about people who are regular attendees at religious programmes while secular jobs are not attended to? If such people are traders and their businesses are not flourishing, who are they going to hold responsible? Or is the devil going to be blamed if someone's appointment is terminated because of absenteeism, which results from excessive religiosity? Those who belong to these categories are potential victims of poverty and they should take note of Paul's warning in his second letter to the Thessalonians that whoever does not work must not eat (II Thessalonians 3:6-15). Students who are always alone with God when lectures are going on risk coming out with poor grade, which in turn will limit their chances of getting good jobs and at the end of the day, they join the league of either unemployed or under employed populace. Religious leaders who organise meetings at odd times should be apportioned their share of blame as they do make gullible people, especially the jobless ones to believe in miracle without action. Consequently, some prefer attending religious programmes to looking for job while traders abandon their business centres for the same purpose, thereby wasting several production hours of the day. An observable effect of this in Nigeria is poverty escalation in the face of religiosity.

In Anosike's opinion, some beliefs and practices of the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA) and Deeper Life Bible Church are responsible for poverty among their members. Such beliefs include withdrawal from the world upheld by the former, interpretation of I John2:15-17 "Do not love the world or the thing in the world" to mean that associating with world in any form is sin, expectation of the second advent of Jesus and

interpretation of poverty related passages notably; ‘The love of money is the root of all evil’ I Timothy 6:10 and ‘Man shall not live by bread alone’ Matthew 4:4. Also members of these churches are to abstain from alcohol and they are not expected to partake in its production or sale. In the SDA Church, in particular, money got from alcohol must not be brought to the church²⁷ and the law of Sabbath is obeyed to the letter not minding its implications for economic empowerment either now or in future.²⁸ The main argument of this section is the fact that religion in some ways contributes to the prevalence of poverty.

On the other hand, the Church in her social transformation activities has been working towards poverty alleviation and eradication. In other words, beyond spirituality religion has social effectiveness.²⁹ Even the ministry of Jesus was both spiritual and social. This can be established in his teachings and actions. For example, as he preached the message of salvation, so also He met the needs of people. The feeding of five thousand people is a vivid example (Matt. 15: 15-21). Also He enjoins Christians to help those in need in terms of almsgiving, which must be done secretly (Matthew 6:3-4). This is mandatory as there will always be poor people in the world and a point is made clear that on the day of judgement, those who in this life had given themselves and their resources to help the poor would enjoy eternal life while those who had not done so would have a different experience (Matthew 25: 31-46). And in the words of James, “One of the attributes of religion that is pure and undefiled before God is to visit orphans and widows in their afflictions” (James 1:27).

At this point, we shall discuss how some Christian organizations engage in poverty alleviation. Many denominations engage in welfare services to

²⁷ N.W. Nwanna, 2010. “Religious Beliefs and Practices of SDA and DLBC as factors to Poverty in Nigeria” M.A. Dissertation, University of Ibadan , Nigeria pp. 30-48

²⁸ C. Adebajre, aged 30, a student and an Adventist during a class discussion said that she would not write any examination fixed for Saturday.

²⁹ M. Haralambos and M. Holborn, 2008. *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, London: Harper Collins Publishers Limited, P. 396

improve the standard of living of members and non-members alike. This is indeed a strategy for evangelism. The Catholic Church for instance through the Justice Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) in various dioceses has multifarious poverty reduction mechanisms such as vocational training, micro credit scheme and charity through which many people have benefited. In practical terms, the Owerri Archdiocese through the intermediacy of the EU-CARE charity has the EU-CARE farm at Agbala along Owerri-Aba road, where massive agriculture in the form of animal husbandry and crop production is operational. The farm covers a total area of over 80 hectares of land with the Onumurukwa River which forms its axis for irrigation. Furthermore, in association with the EU-CARE farms, the EU-CARE Charity Services of the Archdiocese has a pineapple orchard at the Maria Assumpta podium as part of its strategies for poverty alleviation for members of the society. There are also cooperative and thrift societies as well as micro-credit schemes for church members and groups meant for poverty alleviation.³⁰

In the Methodist Church Nigeria, statutorily there is a special offering for poor people, which is taken during Holy Communion service while different dioceses have different welfare schemes. Globally, The United Methodist Committee on Relief has a scheme tagged 'The Global Hunger and Poverty Program' as part of its mission to empower the most vulnerable. It aims at assisting United Methodists to put their love into action in a world where more than 800 million people go hungry every day. In its efforts to resolve the problem of hunger and poverty, members are encouraged to share the blessings that God has bestowed on them in the spirit of sacrifice and not charity. According to this group, charity is giving out of one's excess while sacrifice is as Christ did - when one may not have enough. Strategies adopted to ensure poverty alleviation are sustainable

³⁰ C.O.E. Onwuliri, 2008. "The Millennium Development Goals and the Church in Nigeria" A Keynote Address presented at the Annual Theological Conference of the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, in <http://www.futo.edu.ng/speech>, accessed on 19th September 2011.

agriculture and development, microcredit and enterprise development, supplemental food, programs, advocacy to alleviate hunger and poverty; and eradication of the root causes of hunger and poverty.³¹

The Anglican Church has equally been proactive in poverty alleviation; so also the Baptist Church through social ministries³², the Redeemed Christian Church of God among others. Oguntoyinbo-Atere provides an exhaustive description of the Redeemed Christian Church of God programmes for the poor in Lagos. Among other things, the church engages in God's provision programme, which takes care of the old and the handicapped, single mothers, the jobless, helpless orphans and the sick, 'CAN' can make a difference, which feeds prison inmates and destitute; and scholarship scheme for poor students.³³ The Chapel of the Resurrection, University of Ibadan Nigeria attends to the needs of indigent people through its welfare Sub-Committee; and widows, widowers and orphans welfare Sub-Committee. Beneficiaries include widows, widowers, students and others who solicit assistance. During festive seasons such as Christmas and Easter, these Sub-Committees provide welfare packages for the needy.³⁴ There is the Resurrection Youth Education Centre, which organises extra-moral classes for candidates preparing for Examinations such as SSSCE and UTME. This programme is free for children and wards of members and non-members after a registration fee of one thousand naira might have been paid.³⁵ The chapel pays the teachers who are not

³¹ "Love into Action: Alleviating Global hunger and poverty" in <http://new.gbgm.umc.org/work/hunger>, accessed on 19th September 2011.

³² Nigerian Baptist Convention, 2009. "Kingdom Expansion: Our Coast Through Social Ministry" 96th Annual Convention Handbook, pp.6-11.

³³ M.I. Oguntoyinbo -Atere, 2005. "The Redeemed Christian Church of God Programme for the Poor in the Context of Lucan Teaching", Ph.D Thesis University of Ibadan, pp.188-197

³⁴ T.O.Olatunji, 2011, Chaplain/Secretary's Report for the Period of April 1, 2010-March 31, 2011, presented at the 2011 Annual Congregational Meeting held on May 29th 2011.

³⁵ O.K. Oyelade, aged 42, a priest and Assistant Chaplain I, Chapel of the Resurrection, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, interviewed on 20th September, 2011.

less than twenty and a supervisor. It is a sort of succour to indigent parents who would not have been able to afford amount charged in other tutorial centres. Also the host parent's project of the Church has in a way helped indigent students. Though it is aimed at providing moral guidance and spiritual mentoring, poor students are equally helped when the need arises.

The efforts of the Church towards poverty alleviation have been highlighted. We have not in any way exhausted the list of available programmes. Apart from the ones discussed, there are several others. However, these programmes are faced with many difficulties, and that is why they have not been very effective in some Christian organisations. A major problem identified is how to identify the poor and what they actually need. For instance, if there is a welfare package for widows and widowers, it may be difficult to know those among them that need financial assistance and those whose problem is loneliness. With this problem, wealthy widows are often grouped with indigent ones and when relief materials are given, those who do not need them benefit at the neglect of those who are poor indeed. Associated with this is the fact that some poor people prefer suffering in silence to soliciting assistance from the church because of their apprehension of stigmatization.³⁶ In all fairness it would be quite impossible for the church especially where there are many members to identify such people. As a result, despite the efforts of the church many poor people will continue to wallow in abject poverty. And it is also not impossible that the needy may over rely on the welfare package of the church, thereby promoting indolence and lack of creativity. Moreover, there have always been complaints of favouritism and corruption on the part of those who are in charge of the programme.³⁷

³⁶ T. O. Olatunji, aged 42, a Priest and Chaplain, Chapel of the Resurrection, University of Ibadan interviewed on 18th December, 2009.

³⁷ This problem was indentified by S. Awoniyi during a research carried out on welfare schemes of some churches in Osun State. It was discovered that several materials did not get to the beneficiaries because they were diverted into personal use.

Concluding remarks

There is no denying the fact that the church in Nigeria, even beyond, has been proactive in reducing the incidence of poverty among the common people. This is one of the mandates of the adherents of the religion as can be identified in the Bible. However, the lapses and difficulties identified in this exercise impel us to make the following recommendations towards ensuring a reality-based poverty alleviation scheme in the Church. It would be helpful if morality is brought into the mode of operation of the programme so as to guard against some unethical practices manifesting in double standards, favouritism and corruption that have rubbished the laudable efforts.

Moreover, more efforts should be geared towards training unemployed people so that they will be self-employed, at least on a small scale basis. In this case people will not just be given fish to eat but they will be taught how to fish. This is important because no amount of relief material can be enough to cater for the large number of poor people. It will be good and progressive development if the church can partner with the Government at any level and relevant Non Governmental Organisations (NGO's) so that more funds will be available for the execution of the programme. As the government can not do it alone, neither also the church.

It is important for many denominations to wake up from their slumber and be actively involved in workable poverty alleviation. This becomes imperative because there are still so many people in the church that need welfare attention. It has been discovered that some ministers of God are poorly remunerated; this portends a great danger as they patronise the same markets and they have dependants like other people. These people need to be helped; otherwise they will compromise by engaging in anything that can bring them money, whether it is ethical or not. Having gigantic church buildings should not be the priority when people are dying of hunger. In the same vein, craving for materialism should be de-emphasised. The experience in many places of worship today is that of car and dressing competition, thereby turning Christianity to a mere social activity. It should be stated that extravagant living is a threat to spiritual growth, which is a

major goal of Christian religion. Proponents of Prosperity Gospel need to exercise caution in order not to mislead the people. If people keep having the mentality that it is a sin not to be rich, they may keep employing all sorts of means to get money. While one is preaching against wealth or supporting the “theodicy of disprivilege” or “theodicy of escape” of Marx Weber, ways of acquiring wealth by Christians are expected to be godly.

On the whole, poverty is a source of concern to the Church. Therefore in their social responsibility, many denominations have been actively involved in poverty alleviation. This is a welcome development despite some shortcomings noticed in the scheme. We expect a serious application of the recommendations made above. It is only through this that the Church can continue to be relevant not only in spiritual matter but also in respect of meeting the material needs of people.

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