

A Critical Look At Contemporary Nigerian Christianity

Ngozi N. Iheanacho

Abstract

For over one hundred and sixty years of Christian flourish in Nigeria, it has recorded remarkable progress, especially in terms of evangelism, structural expansion, and numerical strength. However, recent trend in its manifest and latent practices show signs of contradistinction leading to significant reduction in practical living and sanctity of its teachings, and ways of its founder. From our phenomenological method and qualitative analysis, some of these shortcomings are specifically observed in recent astronomic proliferation of churches; materialism and commercial ministry; declining spiritual commitment; fraud and criminality; rivalry and confusion and, unhealthy Moslem-Christian relations. These are identified as teething challenges which Christendom in Nigeria must confront to reposition its flourish in this part of the world.

Introduction

Christianity is a major religious tradition in Nigeria. The presences of its churches and related institutions are as ubiquitous as its faithfuls. Christian traditions have permeated all aspects of Nigeria social system. It may not be an overstatement to say that Christianity has attained the level of indigenous religion in the country. The teachings and doctrines

are internalized and conceived as the driving force of life yawning by a significant number of the Nigerian populace. In the mainline churches, Nigerian Christians have made significant impacts in the propagation and practice of the faith. The Anglican denomination is now Church of Nigeria, Anglican Communion instead of Church of England. In Catholicism, Nigerians constitute members of the College of Cardinals in recent times. This feat gives hope of a possible Nigerian Pope in the near future. Similar impacts are also recorded in other Christian denominations. Hence, the above are few examples. Again, Nigerian Christian churches and Movements now ‘export’ indigenous Missionaries to other parts of the world, especially to prop-up the faith in areas where the commitment and practice is declining. Within the country, evangelism and creation of new church administrative units are on steady increase. But in spite of these factors of growth and expansion, the Nigerian church is faced with challenges and problems in the present time. A socio-religious spotlight and analysis of such problems is the focus of this contribution.

As a social institution operating in the larger society, Christianity in Nigeria is faced by challenges. However, right from the time of its propagation in Nigeria, there have been problems and challenges to surmount. But what is the nature of current problems challenges? Identifying such contemporary problems is the aim of this essay. To achieve our aim, we sourced our data from phenomenal observation of Nigeria’s religious landscape, from the Christian paradigm. To complement this approach, we used qualitative analytical method, and with existing literature to validate our findings.

Astronomic Proliferation of Churches

The emergence of New Churches and other Christian Movements in Nigeria is unprecedented. At present, Nigeria is being spotlighted as the country with the highest number of churches in Africa. This is more so in the major cities of the southern part of the country. Hence, churches and prayer

houses are said to be a major industry in that geo-political extraction of the country. Churches exist in family houses, uncompleted buildings, warehouses, and in any available space.

In 1980 Hackett (3) puts the African figure of New Christian Movements at 15000. By 1999 Onuh (in Gbenda 2006: 118), puts Nigeria's share of New Religious Movements at 1018. However, these are permutations, based on popular and registered groups. A greater number exist unregistered. Yet, a good number that were in conception, and those immediately 'ordered and founded by the Holy Spirit' have emerged and are flourishing. The above figures are not reliable. They are far-cries. New churches emerge on daily basis, hence it will continue to defy statistical conceptualization. Consequently, the continued, and indiscriminate emergence of New churches is a challenge to Christianity in Nigeria. The scenario raise puzzling questions concerning Christian commitment, and faithfulness, towards salvation. It seems that as churches multiply they gradually shift emphasis from spiritual and eternal life course to earthly life course, here and now.

Materialism and Commercial Ministry

The contemporary Nigerian church is engulfed by the quest for materialism, prevalent in the society. Rather than find solace in the Christian hope of eternal life, signs of total submission to capitalistic tendencies, especially in insatiable material acquisition, looms large in Nigerian churches. Spiritual growth and moral sanctity towards better eternity is fast giving way to material craving, as the 'new idea of fulfillment of life and ultimate reality'. The quest for materialism in religion may not be peculiar to Nigeria. But, it is now alarming and critically challenging. The level of material quest by Nigerian Christians, especially clergy men is radically in deviance, and inimical to the values and life of the early Church. Consequently, a new kingdom in which treasures are found here on earth is preferred to a delayed gratification, and treasure in the heavenly kingdom of 'the other world'. This scenario place the Nigerian church in

a dilemma and frightening challenge. Conventionally, church liturgy and messages show preference for the poor. But the structure and functional praxis of Nigerian churches, such as elitist form of theology, classiest form of its clergy and the romance between church leaders and politico-economic power brokers and stakeholders in our society betray and reverse this preference for the affluent (Ehusani, 1991:161).

Today, many of our church leaders consciously or unconsciously measure success in life in terms of wealth, prestige and power; three key principles of stratification, and social mobility in secular society. No wonder, in the churches, issues that concern the rich resound high, while that of the poor is many a time un-acknowledged or at best handled lackadaisically.

Every Minister in the Independent Churches and Pentecostal Charismatics, (the self-proclaimed Evangelists, self-ordained Bishops, Arch-bishops and General Overseers), is a vision seer, and a miracle worker, or pretend to be one. Their miracles, blessings, and sundry religious services attract financial charges.

A particular pastor is known to look straight in the face of some members and tell them their problems ranging from matters of contract, search for the fruit of the womb or search for a husband. After these, he would ask for payment, - ₦200,000, ₦50,000, or a brand new car (Waapela, 2006:358).

With catchy and animating words, Ministers advertise for harvest of miracles, which turn out to be harvest of money. Using both “evil and satanic powers to draw large crowds to their churches” (Akiode in Ogunwole, 2006:327), they convince their followers to sow ‘quality seeds’ (special Levy), and wait for their miracles, coming on the way. Followers are told that the more they sow, the more blessings that will come their way. While the Minister and miracle worker smile to the bank, his clients go home in the euphoria of hope for imminent and miraculous socio-economic break-through in life. This phenomenon of materialism and commercial ministry is

contrary to the teachings and attitude of Christ and the early church over blessing, and miraculous deliverance of people in affliction. Nigerian churches must rise up against this challenge.

Declining Spiritual Commitment

It may not be overstatement to state that the practical spiritual life of Nigerian Christians is not commensurate with their numerical strength. The renowned Professor of Religious studies, and Catholic Priest Ejizu (2008:19-21) underscore this phenomenon, that it seems that the more proliferation of the churches in Nigeria, the more the faith experience decline in spiritual commitment, morality and practical Christian living. Instead, many of the churches are significantly occupied with the here, and now affairs of this world as shaped by the Nigerian social system. The scenario facilitates rapid secularization of Christian spirituality. The implication is that the practice of Christianity in modern Nigeria is deviating from its intrinsic worth and value, to some motives which are at variance with its fundamentals. Fake Ministers, Prophets, Evangelists and sundry clergy-men are ubiquitous, vending 'individually framed, and false imaginations', in place of Divine revelations and fervour. Is like such practice present God, not as He is, but as suits their selfish motives. One common practice among the Pentecostal Charismatics variety is shouting and 'commanding' God to 'obey' and respond according to their wish, not by the will of God.

The declining emphasis on spirituality is concomitant with the crave for materialism in churches. This is the background of the emphasis on faith by works; works without spiritual fervour. Thus, donations from any source, including known cheats and criminals are heralded by resounding ovation and commendation. The preference for faith by works (materialism), is diminishing spirituality towards eternal life. In followers' relationship with the clergy, they create an aura of sin-free, and 'ignorance' of the importance of confession of sins

to God before forgiveness. Many a times, prayers from the clergy is preferred to confession to God. And, for fear of losing their clients, Ministers sometimes withhold the truth from people (Apenda, 2006:133). The spiritual commitment of the poor is reducing in church value. This is a fundamental challenge to tackle if the Nigerian church will not concede that it is radically deviating or reinterpreting Christianity for mundane ends.

This regrettable trend in the house, and name of God, however, worries some conscientious Ministers. Noting that negative practices in Christianity have taken root in Nigeria, a priest, Adasu (1992:447), spotlights political religion, and prosperity gospel as main features which have obliterated and diminished the basic teachings and spiritual fervour of the church in Nigeria. These are teething problems which erode spiritual commitment. Where lies the strength of Christian faith if the spiritual fervour and quality is eroded?

Fraud and Criminality

The unguarded quest for material wealth by Ministers and Clerics attract ‘money-bags’, and criminals into Christian fold. Since no formal training, and requirement(s) are needed for opening a church, it is an ‘open industry’ for all comers. Consequently, false prophets, and religious deceits loom large in our religious landscape. They use delusive prophecies and erroneous interpretations of the scripture to catch their victims for foul deals and exploitation, claiming such to be directed by the Holy Spirit. A fraudulent and fearless use of the sacred name of God. The Ministers’ “sole desire is grabbing that which they have not right ... an aggressive acquisition, perpetrated by the exploit of the sacred name of God” (Apenda, 2006:123). Freedom of worship is turned into freedom of exploitation and fraud. People are fraudulently asked to sow seeds that never germinate, pay and expect miracles that never arrive, or surrender the benefits of their labour to the Lord’s vineyard, only reaped by one person and his family members.

We agree with Kumuyi (in Obeta, 2006:252), that preaching prosperity without legitimate means to its realization implies aiding and abating crime. After several prophecies for wealth, ‘break-through’, and a continuous wait for the arrival of the miracle, the expectant may be tempted to ‘fast-track’ the prophecy through foul and dubious human means. While some people die in pursuit of such delusive utterances, a few get something out of the fraud, and are welcomed by the Minister in a well commended thanksgiving service. All, associated to the will of God.

Apart from fraudulent ministering, churches have cases of embezzlement and misappropriation of funds. At one time, it is the Pastor, at the other time it is the members. This has become a common feature which sometimes attract more shame than in the secular sphere of our social system. Consequently, Christians in such churches are engulfed in conflict. Such fraudulent cases affect public perception of the church in contradiction to the basic teachings of the institution, and its founder. For instance, the Saint Andrew’s Anglican Church Diobu, Port Harcourt had for long been closed, following frequent fraud related controversies within its fold. Writing under the caption “Money Crises” the Sunday Sketch of May 19, 1985, reports of how money contributed for musical instruments and the one realized from thanksgiving, and dedication were embezzled at the Christ Holy Church of Nigeria, Mokola Ibadan. The Sunday Concord of May 19, 1985 also report of a Baptist Church Pastor at Abeokuta who embezzled church funds. The ensuing feud led to the split of the church. Report of embezzlement and fraud is a frequent occurrence in our churches. Many of the fraudulent cases in the church end up in the law courts. Nigerian ‘followers of Christ’ shamelessly prosecute and follow-up court processes of litigation to the latter. They portray barren hearts of repentance, reconciliation and forgiving spirit. This is an open challenge to 21st century Christianity in Nigeria.

Christianity in Nigeria is yet faced with cases of criminality. Many of our present day churches provide refuge for criminals. With its reverential and 'unsuspecting' status many of the churches have become den, and hideout for robbers and ritualists who deal in human parts. Reports about the Otokoto saga in Owerri about 1997, has it that two human skulls and other human parts were discovered in one Overcomer Mission Church building, (Obeta, 2006:251). Again, we also recall that one Pastor King is facing murder charges in a Lagos high court. Either that some ministers are interested in criminal endeavours or they are loose in managing the human, and infrastructural resources under their leadership. Several cases of rape, sexual harassment and other immoral practices have become negative features of contemporary Nigerian churches.

Rivalry and Confusion

On arrival, Christian missions in Nigeria engaged in denominational rivalry. In recent time, the tempo is rising higher as a result of the astronomic proliferation of churches. The various churches compete for legitimacy, acceptance and spiritual superiority amongst themselves. Each group claim possession of the 'real Christian truth' and bask in the euphoria of denominational triumphalism. That is, each group hold the unshaken conviction that it is their church that can lead people to salvation. In fact, many of the new churches express sympathy for non members, hence for them such people are few steps to damnation, and eternal punishment. This is the background of the appellative stereotype of 'living' and 'non-living' churches in Nigeria. The pursuit of religious legitimacy and superiority promote fundamentalism, and fanaticism amongst the groups.

Followers are confused as groups profess differing and contradicting messages and doctrines. Which is the true path to salvation? This question becomes more puzzling against the backdrop of the absence of standard measurement and quality

control devices. Each claim revelation from the Holy Spirit. Followers are only expected to believe, and not query their veracity. Since it is a matter of faith, which do we believe? Do we believe all or none? or profess the Christian faith in delusion, and confusion? There is accusation and counter accusations of 'sheep stealing'. Against this backdrop, we ask: are the different churches preparing their faithfuls for different kingdoms of God? The church must rise up to this challenge.

Unhealthy Moslem-Christian Relations and Religious Freedom

Both Islam and Christianity came to Nigeria as foreign religions, and were gladly embraced by the people. The two religions drew a sketchy geo-social divide. In spite of the presence of faithfuls of the two religions in all parts of the country, the north is predominantly Muslim and the south predominantly Christians. The two faiths exist side by side, sharing some fundamental beliefs in common. This relationship was nourished, and maintained by the colonial authorities that governed the Nigerian state then. Freedom of worship was emphasized, and equally enforced by government.

The background of the current sour relationship between the two predominant faiths in Nigeria was the ethno-religious sentiment and fervour used to interpret the military coup of January 1966. Consequently, there was a spurious interpretation of the factors building up to the civil war which started in May 1967, along ethno-religious divide of the country. Christian missionaries were accused of showing sympathy and support for Biafrans, while the entire Muslim *Umar* were conceived to have approached the war as a religious course. When Biafra lost the war, the muslim north saw it as a victory for their geo-religious extraction. Consequently, mission schools which gave Igbos an edge in education, and human development was weakened with a policy that nationalized them. With this conception internalized in the mind of the populace, religious practice became a very volatile

institution in the Nigerian state. Isichei (1995:342) underscores this, as she notes that: “Christian-Muslim conflict became much more of a reality in the two decades that followed. Many Christians in the south accepted Muslim political dominance, preferring this to the risk of further bloodshed, but there was always an underlying tension”.

The build-up to the incessant muslim-Christian conflict in the country has its antecedents, and catalyst in the 1977-78 Constituent Assembly debate, over the establishment, and membership of the Sharia Court of appeal. Religious freedom was on the verge of abuse in the infamous and unpopular debate. In 1982 some churches in Kano were burnt down by Muslim fundamentalists, who felt that the Anglicans had no freedom to expand their church building, which was in close proximity to a Mosque, (Ibrahim cited in Isichei, 1995:411). In 1986, the controversial issue of Nigeria joining the Organization of Islamic Conference (O.I.C), heightened the religious tension in the country. Christians became suspicious of the Babangida led military government, and the utterances of prominent Muslims like Shiek Abubakar Gumi. Accusation of alleged plan to turn the country into an Islamic state; a situation which will obliterate the secularity status of the nation and its constitutional provisions for religious freedom, loomed large. Christians were agitated. The situation was like a gun powder waiting to explode. Every issue in the country was hence forth attached religious implication that must be resisted by the other group. This was the state and driving force of Muslim-Christian relations, from the post 1977-78 Constituent Assembly to the present time that religious crisis has taken permanence as a structural property of our social system.

On 6th March, 1986, the second recorded religious crisis in modern Nigeria took place. The crisis was sequel to a misunderstanding between Muslim Students Society (MSS) and the Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS) at the Federal College of Education, Kafanchan, Kaduna State. The riot spread to neighbouring states. At the end of the uprising which

lasted for about two weeks, “a total of 19 people were killed, and 152 churches and five Mosques destroyed” (Ibrahim, cited in Isichei 1995:343). Some prominent Muslims noted with dismay the level of Christian involvement in group violence, to the extent of killing Muslims, as unprecedented, (This Week, 1987:16). Political religion, and mutual suspicion therefore, became a front burner in Muslim – Christian relations. Takaya (1992:113-114), notes the dangerous legacy of the Sharia debate of the 1977-78 Constituent Assembly, that: ... then, religious politicization in Nigeria only grew deeper, such that both Christian, and Muslim leaders tend to weigh every government decision in terms of their respective religions; calculating, therefore, their possible gains and losses.

Religious tension and crisis nurtured during the military era were carried over to the present democratic government. First was the July 1999 religious uprising in Sagamu. The crisis claimed about 50 lives with Churches, Mosques and industrial institutions raised down, (The Punch 19, July, 1999, The Guardian July 19, 1999).

In the year 2000, Muslims, and Christians were at it again, in what became known as the Kaduna 2000 ethno-religious clashes. The crisis was over the introduction of Sharia Law in parts of the North. Between 21 & 23 February, about 3000 lives were lost in Kaduna city alone. The colossal loss of Christian lives (Southerners), resident in the North led to reprisal attack in the eastern city of Aba. The result of the reprisal attack was the loss of about 450 more lives. Kaduna, yet experienced another episode of religious uprising in May 22 & 23, 2002, in which over 300 lives were lost. In November 2002, Kaduna was yet engulfed by another religious uprising, spearheaded by rampaging Muslims who were angered by a This Day Newspaper remark about Mohammed, in the context of an analysis of the Miss World Beauty Pageant slated to hold in Nigeria that month. The riot even spread to Abuja.

Between 2001 and 2004, Plateau was a spotlight of ethno-religious crisis. The first episode was on September 9, 2001. The crisis claimed many lives and properties worth billions of naira. On Sunday February 23, the Hausa-Fulani Muslim Youths carried out an organized attack on kafirs (non believers of Islam). The attack spread to Yelwa and Shedam. Christian lives and property were violently destroyed in an unprecedented magnitude, notes Bakoji & Onoja (2004). The crisis also spread to Kano. In a 3 day reprisal attack of Christians, and non-indigenes by Muslim Youths, 40 persons were killed, according to official records. Several hundreds of people were injured, while thousands of people became homeless and refugees. In 2008, Jos was yet another spotlight of fierce religious crisis. Several lives and properties were destroyed.

The scenario of religious conflict is a distraction to Christianity. It threatens the freedom of Christians to profess and live their faith in Nigeria. Nigerian Christians are faced with the challenge of peaceful co-existence, and inter-religious tolerance and respect. The challenge of elusive dialogue between the two dominant religions start at them. This will continue to affect Christian practice until better relationship with Muslims is fostered.

Conclusion

An appraisal of the activities of Christianity in Nigeria show evidence of good results. Proudly, the faith has taken firm root in the country, surviving threats of hostility. But developments in the contemporary practice of the faith is a regrettable tale of contradictions and degenerating spiritual fervour. There is astronomic proliferation of churches, with features of small scale industries; vending of religious services on commercial terms. A good number of the churches indulge in 'unchristian activities', and unhealthy rivalry to show superiority and acceptance. Yet, Christianity in Nigeria is faced with frequent inter-religious conflicts.

The church in Nigeria should wake up from its slumber in practicalization of its teachings. It should honestly acknowledge the ‘unchristian’ practices in its fold and rise up to the challenge. The church should anchor its courage and inspiration on the spirit of reformation. In this case, it will be worthwhile to set some standards, and quality control measures. This will reduce the activities of Ministers hiding under the religion for the pursuit of worldly-selfish ends, that run contrary to the cause of Christianity and its faithfuls. The Nigerian church should confront the secular onslaught against it in the society.

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