

PHILOSOPHY, THE CHURCH AND QUEST FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIBERATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigeria as a nation is plagued by a lot of socioeconomic challenges, including poverty, unemployment, ethnicity, youth restiveness, terrorism, secessionist agitations, electoral fraud, political injustice, sectionalism, insecurity and militancy. Many scholars have invested great amount of energy attempting to work out how these problems can be resolved. This study is one of these attempts; it used philosophy as a midwife for the church to realize her potentials as an institution. Particularly, the study adopts the historical method of documentary analysis to investigate the possible roles the Church/Christianity in Nigeria can play to achieve socioeconomic liberation for the country. This was based on the philosophical assumption that the Church has a radical potency and capacity for confronting and transforming unjust social order. To this end, the paper discovered that at the center of Nigeria's socioeconomic problem is the failure of leadership and as such any effort to liberate the country from its present condition must be political in nature. However, maintaining the ecclesiastical paradigm that the Church as a body should not get herself involved in partisan political activism, the paper outlined some possible functions by which the Church in Nigeria can contribute immensely towards the desired liberation. These included prophetic denunciation of the oppressive mechanism; promoting programs of raising social consciousness among the masses; practical alleviation of the conditions of the oppressed masses; peace building through positive reconciliation of the oppressed and oppressive members; and personal conversion of the ordinary man. The paper concluded that a combination of the task of spiritual and social liberation enhances the Church, more than any other institution, to influence the socioeconomic life of the Nigerians.

Keywords: Philosophy, Church, Socio-economic Liberation.

1. Introduction

Social and political scholars often debate on whether or not the Church should involve herself or play any role in the socioeconomic affairs of the society. In this evolving controversy, there are some philosophical and religious thinkers who argue that such involvement would jeopardize the Church's spiritual status as the universal sacrament of salvation. Those in this category also believe that such involvement will endanger the well being of the society considering that modern societies are generally multi religious. An intervention by the Church, the argument goes, might elicit a reciprocal reaction from other religious groups, Islam for example and lead to conflagration of society. A. Gill on this ground claims that the Church in particular and religion in general are increasingly irrelevant in

modern social life (A. Gill, 2001, 117-138). Also, the subsisting 1999 Nigerian Constitution (Section, 10) and indeed all the previous Nigerian Constitutions have consistently provided that, the Government of the Federation of Nigeria shall not adopt any religion as state religion. Hence, the generally held notion of secularism of the Nigerian state essentially derives from this constitutional provision. In any case, it has to be noted that the secularization worldview is not a Nigerian peculiarity. It is a phenomenon that started in Western Europe and North America but has currently spread to most countries across the world.

Nevertheless, there are other scholars who have shown that the refusal to confront societal socioeconomic injustice calls into question the Church's self-understanding as the light and salt of the earth (Callaway 2011, 1). These argue that the Church has something positive and substantial to contribute to the quest for socioeconomic societal liberation. To this end, Dillon, M. (2003) argues that the "Church illuminates the everyday experiences and practices of many individuals; is a significant component of diverse institutional processes, including politics...and plays a vital role in public culture and social change." In the same token, Levy, G., & Razin, R. (2012) maintains that the significance of the Church and religion to social liberation cannot be dispensed with.

It will seem more appropriate to take a re-conciliatory or midway position that while she is not expected to become a political organization, the Church has a substantial role to play in socioeconomic liberation by acting as a principled guide, moral watch dog, spiritual counselor and conscience to the society. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to establish philosophically that implicit in the sacred and sacramental mission of the Church is her social ministry as an instrument of justice in an unjust socioeconomic system, an instrument of reconciliation and peace in a conflict and crisis-ridden society, as well as an instrument of freedom in an oppressive structure. This position is practically at variance with Karl Max perception of the church. The paper argues that participation in the process of socioeconomic liberation for the realization of justice is a task, even a *sine qua non* for the Church as both a religious and viable social institution.

The decision to pursue socioeconomic liberation of Nigeria in this research is informed by the level of socioeconomic injustice currently prevalent in Nigeria. As pointed out at the abstract, the overwhelming upsurge of secessionists' groups in Nigeria these days such as IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra), people of Oduduwa, the *Boko Haram* and banditry insurgency in the North, End SARS protesters and other similar movements are commonly interpreted as demonstrations against the state resulting from the strains of injustice in the system and as signaling the level of discontent among the citizenry especially the young people.

The historical method of documentary analysis adopted in the paper involves the consultation of existing documents to validate the claims made in the work. The

discussion is divided into three broad sections. The first section attempts a clarification of the key concept, 'Philosophy' and 'Church' as the paper uses it. The second section discusses Nigeria's unjust socioeconomic system and the reality of the need for liberation. The third and final section deals with the liberating role of the Church in achieving the desired justice in the socioeconomic life of Nigeria. It is maintained in the paper that the Church's socioeconomic engagement in the pursuit of justice should not be construed to mean that as a body it should be expected to leave the ministry of the Word of God to serve tables by getting herself involved in a violent revolutionary overthrowing of governments or even in partisan political activism. The liberating role of the Church should be such that will enhance her influence on the socio-political and economic order without jeopardizing her spiritual and evangelistic vision and mission. Some possible functions are outlined by which the Church in Nigeria can contribute immensely towards the requisite liberation that would create the desired atmosphere of justice.

2. Conceptual Elucidation of Philosophy and the Church

Historically, philosophy is understood as the fundamental of all disciplines: the basic human inquiry which has yielded the multiplicity of all disciplines that take care of virtually all aspects of human life. It is an inquiry which is the mother of all inquiries and from which all other modes of inquiries originated. Philosophy is also an attitude to life. This is closely linked with the etymological meaning which portrays philosophy as a conscious quest for knowledge. Philosophy in this regard is that critical attitude to life which is characterized by curiosity to know, openness of the mind to all issues, lack of dogmatic assertions or stand, tolerance and preparedness to examine everything without prejudice. It is from this perspective that philosophy is used in this research to serve the purpose of socioeconomic liberation of Nigeria through the Church.

Scholars usually conceptualize the Church in two senses: the institutional and organismic senses. In one sense, the Church is used as an institution while in another sense it is used as an organism. The Church as an institution is defined by Van Reken as the "formal organization that sets out to accomplish a specific purpose" (1999, 198). According to him:

It is an agent which can do things; and can say things because it has its own voice. The Church as an institution has its own purposes and plans, its own structure and officers, and its own mission. It has its own proper sphere. In many ways it parallels other institutions, like governments or schools.

It is from this perspective that C. N. Ogugua (2019, 31) understands the term, Church to mean an organized people of God, a spiritual and moral force to be reckoned with. On the other hand, the Church as an organism refers to “the church as the body of believers, the communion of believers” (Van Reken 1999, 198). The distinction between the two concepts of the Church is that while the institutional church refers to a unified organization, the Church as an organism refers to an aggregate of individual believers in which each Christian acts as a personal agent with a purpose and a call in God’s plan. Based on this distinction, Van Reken goes further to distinguish between “Church work” and “kingdom work”. Church work, according to him, is the work that a Christian does as an agent of the institutional church, while kingdom work is the work that a Christian does in service of his Lord not as an agent of the institutional church but in his/her secular vocation or calling, whether as a plumber, a teacher, or a politician (Van Reken 1999, 198). This twofold meaning of Church reverberates in Jim Harris’ view when he says: “By ‘church’ I mean both the individual believer and the institutional entity” (Harris <http://thebigpicture.homestead.com/ChurchinPolitics.html>). It therefore means that in discussing the role of the Church in the pursuit of justice in the socioeconomic system of a given country, we are invariably dealing with the part that both individuals and the corporate body have to play in the society.

3. Socioeconomic/Political Injustice in Nigeria: An Evolutionary Approach

Nigeria became independent from Great Britain in October 1960. However, by January 1966, the civilian government was brutally ousted by the nation’s Military. Central to the arguments of the soldiers, for toppling the government in power was the question of corruption, in which the adherents of each of the two major religious persuasions in the country were self-evident participants. In addition to leadership sleaze, there was inter-tribal hatred in the national polity. Hence, the first military coup of January 1966 in the country and the counter coup in July of the same year, featured on massive scales, alleged and proven cases of tribal induced murder of the nation’s leaders.

Profoundly found in the country at this time were deep-seated ethnic antagonisms, not religious bigotry. A civil war ensued (the Nigeria-Biafra war) fought between July 1967 and January 1970. At the end of the warfare, the Military remained in power, with intermittent pretenses of handing over the affairs of the state to civilians, whom they would subsequently bring down. S. I. Ebohon, and N. O. Obakhedo, (2012) argue that despite the heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian state and its concomitant defects, the nation at independence, was seen as a beacon of hope to many other nation-states in the continent. That is to say that no matter the circumstances, Nigeria held the prospects of a strong developmental state that would be a rallying point to other states. The reason for this huge confidence was that Nigeria was perceived as a regional economic hub and political force and an African regional super-power. The military mishap in the politics of the country however unfortunately accelerated the pace of bringing the emergent state to its developmental nadir. The Military in the country continued to stage counter coups

against subsisting military governments in the Nigerian state. Hence, leadership instability (as driven by the soldiers) remained a permanent feature of governance in Nigeria, from October 1960 to May 1999, when the men of the Armed Forces seemed to have finally surrendered power to civilian politicians.

However, in all of the foregoing, another enduring feature of national affairs in the country is what seems to border on elite determination to guarantee that the Nigerian nation fails to survive as a nationally prosperous entity, for the good of all her citizens. Consequently, either in military fatigues or civilian garbs, the power elite in Nigeria possesses a seemingly irrepressible tendency to gravitate towards the thieving of national resources. Citing Ihonvbere C. C. Ojukwu & J. O. Shopeju (2010) contend that the country's picture and identity is replete with confused, factionalized and extremely corrupt elites, with a limited sense of nationhood. These elites, Ojukwu & Shopeju argue, lacking strong and viable base in production, turns the state as its primary instrument of primitive accumulation and in the end, the state is mangled and rendered impotent, in the quest for nationhood, growth and development, much less democracy.

Hence, according to T. Soniyi (2012), it was estimated that \$400 billion of Nigeria's oil revenue had been stolen or misspent since the country's independence in 1960. The estimation was attributed to a Nigerian-born former World Bank Vice-President for Africa, Dr. Oby Ezekwesili. In that same year (2012), almost 100 million Nigerians were living on less than \$1 (£0.63) a day (BBC News (2012). World Population Review (World Population Review, 2015), highlights that Nigeria's current population is in the region of 194.0 million people out of which almost 100 million were living on less than \$1 (£0.63) a day. Furthermore, according to L. Nwabughio (2015), Nigeria's Vice President, Yemi Osinbajo, had disclosed that about 110 million Nigerians were still living below poverty line in the country, despite the policies of past governments to improve their welfare. It is however held in this study that elite grandstanding had fully tainted such policies of government, thereby making them largely ineffectual, as such policies were not truly designed with the needy citizens in mind. In the face of these apparent distresses, B. Ademola-Olateju (2013) then ponders:

Why are Nigerians content at setting new unbecoming standards every day? Bad roads? Take it to The Lord in prayer! Comatose Healthcare System? Bad diseases will not be our portion in Jesus name! Collapsed Educational System? What will be will be, our children are overcomers! Epileptic Power Supply? May the good Lord bind all the principalities, demonic spirits and the powers of darkness preventing Nigeria from enjoying stable electricity supply! In consequence, Nigerians sit on their hands, praying

for celestial edicts to be beamed down to them
from God's majestic throne.

Nigeria's contemporary narrative therefore borders on hopes betrayed by the elite and new expectations solely hoisted on the benefaction of the Almighty by the citizenry. It is also a history of evident elite-arrest of a national system - what Ebohon & Obakhedo (2012) have similarly depicted as elite constructivism. In addition, embodied in these configurations, is a critical case of apparent acquiescence to such state capture, by the subaltern class of the Nigerian polity.

4. The Church and the Socio-Economic Liberation of the Nigerian Society

As already noted at the introductory part of this work, participation in the process of socioeconomic liberation for the realization of justice is a task, even a 'sine qua non' for the Church both as a religious and viable social institution. Christians are to take positive actions to destroy all forms of oppression and injustice wherever they are found (Hastings 1976, 91). Nevertheless, this does not mean, that the Church as a body should be expected to leave the Word of God to serve tables by getting herself involved in a violent revolutionary overthrowing of governments or even in partisan political activism. The liberating role of the Church should be such that will enhance her influence on the socioeconomic order without jeopardizing her spiritual and evangelistic vision and mission. This will involve her confronting and challenging every unjust, oppressive and exploitative structure with Christian values and ideals. This implies a prophetic and priestly role for the Church in Nigeria, just like Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and other prophets in the Bible. In this role, the Church can, along with her direct spiritual vocation, be committed to the process of justice, human liberation and social transformation by fulfilling the following five functions: prophetic denunciation of the oppressive mechanism; promoting programs of raising social consciousness among the masses; practical alleviation of the conditions of the oppressed masses; peace building through positive reconciliation of the oppressed and oppressive members; and personal conversion of the ordinary man. We shall now examine these points in some details.

4.1 Prophetic Denunciation of the Oppressive Mechanism

The Church's prophetic stance obligates her to confront and challenge the systems of corruption and injustice which oppress, exploit and deprive the masses by criticizing and judging them by the Gospel standards. The Church in Nigeria, in the words of Archbishop Cyril Garbett, is to "fight the world by bearing against it militant and prophetic witness ... shown in open attacks on the sins of the world ... and expose the falseness of the values accepted by the world ..." (Ryan 1987, 159-160). By Means of official statements from ecumenical bodies like CAN, ecclesiastical councils, critical and corrective sermons, and so on, such unjust systems can be decried, denounced and called to order. Such prophetic calls can function to disturb the comfort and untouched conscience of the affluent in the society whose power and wealth are accumulated at the expense and to the

detriment of the impoverished peasants. As the proclaimer and interpreter of the Divine purpose and will for the nation, the Church can act as a moral check on the activities of the ruling class, rejecting, resisting and denouncing ungodly and unpopular policies which prevent the full realization of justice and equity in the society. She can provide an “alternative voice” through the establishment of a more reliable, intrepid and independent media for the dissemination of her prophetic messages to the nation. As a prophet the Church can function as the conscience of the nation, the voice of the voiceless, a critic of unjust institution and an iconoclast in the oppressive tradition. As S. I. Omoera points out, the Church is “to be aggressive ... in condemning sin” in demanding for justice, and in fighting “the battle of the poor, the hungry ...” against a system that “too often turns deaf ear to their appeals” (Hastings 1987, 93).

4.2 Promoting Programs of Raising Social Consciousness among the Masses

In line with Francis Bacon’s sagacious assertion that knowledge is power, this is a social educational program aimed at creating socio-political awareness among the people for an eventual peaceful elimination of the structures of oppression. It is a gradual but effective approach to structural change through a re-orientation of the group and individual’s consciousness. The sensitization of the masses involves, among other things, the provocation, stimulation, creation and building up of “a new awareness in them” to give them “a new consciousness” which encourages them “to see the possibility” and “accept responsibility for their own development.” It also involves the mobilization of the masses “to join hands together for positive action towards change” (Omoera, 1987, 125). The goal of this mental liberation is to emancipate the Nigerian minds from such “fatalistic world view” which makes them to resign themselves to the culture of poverty and hopelessness. It enables them to be able to see their “capacity to create a better society for themselves” (Adegbola 1987, 69 - 70). This is the attitudinal aspect of liberation philosophy in which the marginalized, oppressed and down-trodden masses are able to face the future with meaningful and reasonable optimism. This is done by helping them to see themselves in the light of the biblical evaluation of themselves. Such function disabuses and emancipates their minds from the belief that God has destined their lot to be so. This attitudinal aspect of liberation philosophy also involves the sensitization of the upper and middle class elite members of the Church to the real nature and extent of the plight of the oppressed, thereby soliciting their change of attitude, sympathy and commitment to the cause of the oppressed. It may be that some of them do not actually realize the full implications and effects of their activities on the masses. They may likely change for better and help to change their colleagues when their consciences are awakened.

4.3 Practical Alleviation of the Conditions of the Oppressed Masses

The Church’s liberation work as the champion of the cause of the poor, weak and oppressed masses does not end with attacking the perpetrators of injustice and oppression “afflicting the comfortable”, but also includes the alleviation of the

miserable and painful condition of the victims of the system “comforting the afflicted”. This will necessitate practical concern with economic programs for the improvement of their conditions, since the callous bureaucratic system would only frustrate the hopes of the helpless masses for such projects if left in their hands. This goes beyond mere charity works for the provision of subsistence needs. The Churches can embark on practical socioeconomic projects such as we see in some Latin American countries. This can include building of hospitals, establishing co-operative bodies for joint venture, scholarship funds for students from poor families, educational programs for those who are disadvantaged by the government’s educational system, organizing training programmes in business and technological skills. Although some of these projects have been undertaken by some churches already, their lack of liberating tendencies is obvious when we try to answer the question, which category of people benefit from them, the poor or the rich members of these churches? In addition to this, the Church must also seek for ways of influencing public policies to favor the improvement of the poor and powerless masses, since she is their last hope and place of refuge.

4.4 Peace Building through Positive Reconciliation of the Oppressed and Oppressing Members

The priestly role of reconciliation is another major social function of the Church in the process of socio-political and economic liberation. Unlike the Marxist approach to justice, which implies the elimination of the oppressive rich for the liberation of the oppressed poor, the Christian approach to justice seeks to create a community of reconciled people, the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed. It is “a peace-creating justice which binds together in a new transformed community” (Hellwig 1974, 169). The Church’s liberation ministry is, therefore, a ministry of positive reconciliation of both parties and not that of violent revolution. The Church is to show concern both for the deplorable conditions of the victims of injustice and oppression and also for the ultimate judgment on the vices of the oppressors. Thus, its prophetic indictments of the oppressive status quo should not be mere arbitrary, malicious and vindictive criticisms of the system, but rather constructive and corrective criticisms which ultimately aim at the eventual liberation of both the oppressors from their vices and the oppressed from their victimization, thereby reconciling them. This fact is aptly captured in the statement cited by Uchegbue that “God does not seek the destruction of members of the ruling classes who are willing to change their ways ... in order to create a new system...” (Uchegbue 1985, 99).

4.5 Personal Conversion of the Ordinary Man

The Church’s liberating mission in Nigeria goes beyond commitment to mere philanthropic activism or welfarism, protesting against social injustices and motivating and mobilizing people for active participation in social transformation. Religion essentially sets a transcendental goal by helping us to realize that life is more than the satisfaction of immediate material needs of hunger and poverty

(Luke 12:15; Matthew 6:25). As Douglas Webster cited in Norman Autton rightly pointed out, the human tragedy is sin and not hunger while the worst privation is ignorance of God rather than social inequality. Therefore, though poverty, exploitation, oppression, and so on seems to be the prevailing problems of our day which provide the Church with “the context for mission”, the “contents” of her mission are not determined by them. In the final analysis, the Church’s mission is ultimately and supremely concerned with God (Autton 1972: 226-227). According to him, though “Man does need bread”, he needs God above all (Autton 1972: 227).

Thus while the Church seeks for socio-political and economic liberation to provide a more just system in Nigeria, it must relentlessly and without distraction seek for the spiritual liberation of the people – a change in the personal man himself. If social changes are to bear lasting fruits, a deep-seated conversion and fundamental spiritual transformation of the individual members of society – the oppressed, the oppressors and the liberators are of indispensable necessity. The reason is that the ordinary, normal, usual or average man is inherently corrupt. History has proved that the revolutionary of today may become the reactionary of tomorrow and the progressive of today may become the conservative of tomorrow unless they are inwardly transformed themselves. How can one under the iron shackles of evil and wickedness change an evil and wicked system? This reflects the picture of the hypocritical liberators presented by the Apostle Peter in his Second Epistle where he writes, “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage” (2 Peter 2:19 KJV).

5. Conclusion

This study has used critical analysis to demonstrate that Nigeria, like many countries of the world today, especially, countries in Africa is in great need of socioeconomic liberation. It is also very obvious that the Church as a sacred institution with indispensable social significance and relevance can and should contribute significantly towards the realization of this noble responsibility. What is needed, for the church to enhance her effectiveness in fulfilling this aspect of her mission therefore, is a balanced form of theological and philosophical orientation which is both spiritually oriented and socioeconomically relevant. This will produce a kind of church “that calls the world evil and steps into the world, looks at its evil forms full in the face, and does something to change it” (Verkuyl and Schulte 1974, 69). It is in this light that Edmund Ilogu rightly comments that “There is no hope for calling any organization a Church that has not manifested the marks of Christ’s fight against evil in the world” (Ilogu 1964, 275). Such a church that must be able to fulfill this task must be a dynamic and progressive church rather than a static and conservative church that arbitrarily supports the status quo. As Iwe equally points out, “Only a creative church with a high sense of ministry and commitment can effect significant contributions to the life of its people” and

adequately, legitimately and competently work for the welfare of society ...” (Iwe 1979, 161).

In sum therefore, a combination of the task of spiritual and social liberation enhances the Church, more than any other institution, to influence the socioeconomic life of the Nigerian society positively. It is no exaggeration to maintain that an inspired, honest, faithful, dedicated, converted and courageous Church, through its clergy and laity, remains a powerful agent for social change and liberation of the citizens of a callous, corrupt, inept and exploitative society like Nigeria. In other words, the Church in Nigeria has the mandate, message and method which can contribute greatly in the attempts to solve the socioeconomic problems of the country.

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