

# CHRISTIANITY AND HUMANITARIANISM: ASSESSING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHURCHES TO SOCIAL WELFARE IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

*Christianity does not come to a people without affecting their way of life in a significant way. The introduction of Christianity in any place brings the transformation of the society. Christianity influences a people's world-view, their social relationship, education, customs, language and daily habits. The transforming effects of Christianity on the Nigeria society is not in doubt, it is visible everywhere. Christianity has affected the whole of Nigerian community in ways too numerous to mention. Non-Christians of various categories have benefited from Christian programmes such as education, healthcare, transportation and communication, agriculture and social services which are provided by the church. Researchers have concentrated more on the contribution of Christianity to the provision of Western education and healthcare. However, this study identified other areas through which Christianity has affected the Nigerian society to include defense of human right, poverty alleviation and response to emergency situations. The paper recommends synergy among Churches and Church organizations in rendering humanitarian assistance to the needy; as well as the need for Churches to cooperate with international donor agencies in the provision of humanitarian assistance to the needy, among others. It is believed that these will boost the humanitarian efforts of the churches in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Christianity, church, humanitarianism, social welfare, Nigeria

## Introduction

Nigeria being one of the Third World countries has been facing humanitarian challenges associated with poverty and underdevelopment. Uchegbue (2013) observed that;

The basic condition of a greater percentage of the Third World population is generally characterized by institutionalized and routinized poverty and powerlessness. This subhuman condition of the masses in the Third World is not the resultant effect of their slothfulness, natural incapacitation, or lack of physical, mental or moral prowess and ingenuity. It is rather induced poverty and powerlessness caused by impoverishment, deprivation, exploitation, oppression and repression. The consequence of this is the tremendous concentration of economic and political power in a few hands and a sharp division between the classes of the haves and the have-nots (p. 143).

The Christian Religion which was planted in Nigeria in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century brought with it a lot of changes in the social and cultural lives of the people. Hastings (1990) cited by Ugwu and Onah (2008) stated that “Black Africa (Nigeria inclusive) is totally inconceivable without the presence of Christianity, a presence which a couple of generations ago could be unreasonably dismissed as fundamentally marginal and a mere subsidy of colonialism” (p. 33). Corroborating this, Diara and Nche (2013) made it clear that: “The Christian missions did not only contribute a religious factor after their arrival in Nigeria, they also constituted a viable socio-cultural force acting on the traditional life and practices which the people have lived for many millennia, before the advent of Christianity in the Country” (p. 89). This is true because there is no doubt that from the beginning, the Church has been an agent of change in every society. The missionaries were not only concerned with the spiritual emancipation of the people; they were also concerned with the plight of the masses. According to **Ferris (2005)**;

Mission societies which flourished in Europe and North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sought to evangelize in distant continents, but provided humanitarian assistance too. They also raised awareness in their home countries of humanitarian needs elsewhere, and individual congregations therefore often sponsored missionaries, sending money and relief items in response to the needs they reported (p. 314).

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### **1. Propagation of Christianity in Nigeria**

Christianity came to Nigeria when Islam was already established. Christianity therefore had to spread by confronting an already established religion (Islam) and the people's traditional religion, the African Traditional Religion (A.T.R). In such a condition, in addition to the fact that Christianity was not spread through the use of force, Christianity faced stronger opposition from Nigerians at this early beginning. Onyeidu (2004a) observed that; “It would be foolhardy for any people to throw away their time-tested beliefs and practice and to replace these at once with a foreign religion brought in by strangers. Hence Christianity was resisted at first” (p. 23). To survive in the midst of two already existing religions—Islam and Africa Traditional Religion, Christian Missionaries had to adopt some methods in propagating their religion. Education and healthcare services were the two major strategies employed by the Christian Missionaries in propagating their religion. Adamolekun (2002) noted that; “The philosophy of catch them young was adopted as primary and secondary schools were established. Conversions were made through teaching and preaching in schools. Hospitals and medical centres were established and Chaplains or Preachers appointed to witness to the sick people” (p. 61). Also, Ivorgba (2006) observed that “the missionaries saw the educating of the indigenous population as a means of facilitating their conversion to Christianity” (p. 2). He noted that for the Missionaries education and building of schools, hospitals and centres for elementary industrial training were all integral part of evangelism. Through these strategies, the early Christian missionaries were able to penetrate and evangelize most parts of the

country despite the presence of Islam and Traditional Religion.

Some, scholars such as T.S. Garret and R.M.C Jeffery, even believe that the education introduced by the missionaries has been the platform on which the technology and politics of Africa were built. Garret and Jeffery (1965) observed that wherever the Christian mission has gone, it has gone with learning, literacy and education in the arts of living. Without such education the technological and political revolution of Africa would not have been possible. The educational work of the churches has made possible the independent African states. This education brought by the missionaries no doubt has helped Nigeria to brace up to modern trends in political and technological development.

In the course of the growth of Christianity in Nigeria, “towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was the strong dream and subsequent, but gradual agitation for African churches” (Onah, 2000, p. 5). The African Churches or African Independent Churches came particularly from the protestant mission established churches. They emerged with the aim to address African problems and adopt the worship style which reflects African culture and life. In terms of organization and liturgy they are not far from the churches they broke away from. Oyeshola (1991) noted that the “new African Churches were born, largely as a protest against white domination and the moral impossibility of the promotion of blacks above a certain level” (p. 42). Writing on the African Independent Churches, Gbenda (2001) observed that; “The brand of Christianity as practised by these new religious movements is unique and much in line with African culture. They appeal more to the African identity, sense of belonging, religiosity, spirituality and life philosophy” (p. 16). The objective of independent churches therefore was to incorporate African values and traditions in Christianity. For Africans, visions, dreams, rituals, classification of animals as clean and unclean, the practice of polygamy, possession of the prophets by the spirit, healing and exorcism must be present in the Church. All these are contained in the Bible and should be applied in the African context. This gives rise to what may be regarded as “African Christianity”. Hence, Cox (1995) stated that;

African independent Christians seem proud that they have not forsaken the spiritual customs their ancestors passed on to them before the whites came, even though the first missionaries urged them to abandon these 'remnants of superstition'. They believe that God was already present in Africa before the Europeans arrived and that many of the ways Africans worshipped then are better than the ways the missionaries taught them. The result is a thoroughly 'Africanized' version of Christianity (p. 247).

Furthermore, while the Orthodox or Mission founded Churches are increasing their membership, an upsurge of new brand of Christianity popularly known as the Pentecostal Churches has emerged on the scene in full force. According to Onyeidu (2004b), the “Pentecostal Churches are making waves, which have transformed the religious contour of the society” (p. 56). Pentecostal Churches are known for organizing open air crusades and revival meetings everywhere and inviting renowned preachers to lead them. Emphasis is laid on receiving the power of the Holy Spirit, healing, casting out demons, and binding all forces of evil. They preach a prosperity gospel and because poverty is real in Nigeria many people

are attracted to receive free healing from their sickness and prayers to live prosperous lives. These preachers conduct their ministries in passenger trains and buses. Another method of propagation is the distribution of religious tracts and literature books with enticing titles.

With improved technology, Churches now use television, radio and other electronics and mass media platforms to spread the gospel. Many preaching stations are now available on television via the satellite. Also, Christianity has reached all corners of Nigeria through the efforts of traders and government workers, especially the army and the police. Traders and workers take Christianity to everywhere they went preaching and establishing Churches to enable them worship. Due to the interest of more people to live in urban areas to have access to urban development and employment, the Church has taken significant steps in developing urban missions. These missions target youths who roam the streets and the working class.

## **2. Humanitarian Efforts of Churches in Nigeria**

Some of the areas Churches have rendered humanitarian services in Nigeria apart from education and healthcare include human right and poverty alleviation as well as response to emergency situations.

### ***3.1 Christianity and the Defense of Human Right in Nigeria***

One of the social and cultural practices in Nigeria when Christianity was introduced in the country was human right abuse, which manifested in the form of slavery, killing of twins, child abandonment etc. The Roman Catholic Church, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and other Mission Churches that brought Christianity to Nigeria, made frantic efforts at confronting the different forms of abuse in the Nigerian society. For instance, the Churches fought and wiped out the killing of twins in Nigeria. Agha (1997) noted that before the advent of the Christian missions in many parts of the country, especially in the south, the twins were victims of circumstance because they were killed at birth or abandoned to die after birth. In many cases both the mother and the innocent twins suffered the same fate. According to him, the various missionary societies in Nigeria did not leave any stone unturned in their war against the evil cultural practices, where they existed. Noticeable among the missionaries who helped in the stopping of the killing of twins was Mary Slessor, a Presbyterian Church missionary. In order to settle and care for the abandoned children in those days, the Churches established Motherless Babies Homes in different parts of the country. For instance, in 1942 the Methodist Church built a Motherless Babies Home in Uzuakoli in Bende L.G.A of Abia state. The home presently has about 29 inmates and operates under the care of Mary Corput, a Briton.

Currently, the Mission Churches are still waxing strong in their efforts at tackling the problem of child abuse, which has taken different shapes in the country today. They do this by preaching against child abuse, sensitizing the public on the dangers of child abuse and frequent call on the governments to step up efforts in tackling the problem. For instance, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) in a communiqué issued at the end of its meeting in Umuahia in September 2012, condemned the abuse of human rights and dignity in the country, and called on relevant authorities to wake up to their responsibilities (Kaigama & Martins, 2012). Also, the Diocese of Lagos West (Anglican Communion) at the end of its third

season of the 5<sup>th</sup> Synod in Lagos, in May, 2014 decried the increase in the cases of violence against women and children and frowned at the sales of babies by outfits popularly called “baby factories”. The Synod called on the states that have not adopted the Child Rights Act to do so in the interest of the Nigerian Child. It called on the Federal Government to establish a special agency to co-ordinate efforts in rehabilitating abused women and children (Odedeji, et al, 2014).

The Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria are not left out in humanitarian services in the country. Some Pentecostal churches have taken practical steps in rehabilitating abused children in the society. Two Pentecostal churches that have done more practical works in helping abused children are the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and This Present House, Lagos (Burgess, 2012). The Redeemed Christian Church of God runs a Faith-Based Organization that takes care of street children in Lagos, known as Habitation of Hope. Habitation of Hope was started after a team of women belonging to the Redeemed Christian Church of God began to evangelize street children at Kurano Beach in Lagos.

According to Burgess (2012);

During the day, boys from Kurano Beach go out on to the streets of Lagos to hustle and scavenge for food in an attempt to scrape a living, only to return to the beach at night because they cannot afford accommodation. Girls as young as eleven ply their trade as commercial sex workers under the sway of pimps who profit from their exploitation (p. 33).

In 2004, the Redeemed Christian Church of God evangelists brought a group of newly converted boys to the RCCG's annual Holy Ghost Congress. At the end of the week-long event, the boys refused to return to the beach and were temporarily housed in rented accommodation paid for by the Church. Since then, Habitation of Hope has opened a residential rehabilitation centre. It has also opened several branches of the church, called 'Street Parishes', which are specifically geared towards catering for the needs of children on the streets. Habitation of Hope sees street children as victims in need of rescue, rehabilitation, and if possible, restoration to their families of origin. This is reflected in its mission statement; 'To help street persons make Heaven; to help them become useful to society; to raise evangelists out of street persons; to settle and reunite them with their family' (Redeemed Christian Church of God, 2009).

Also, Freedom Foundation was founded in 1999 as the social arm of This Present House, a large congregation in Lagos. The outreach arm of Freedom Foundation evangelizes those living on the streets and invites them to church every week. Currently, the church owns two residential centers, Genesis House and House of Refuge. Genesis House caters for street girls involved in challenging situations such as forced labour, drug addiction, and prostitution. House of Refuge caters for male drug addicts, many of whom are also living on the streets. Through these initiatives the Churches have been able to contribute to the welfare of the less privileged Nigerians.

### ***3.2 Christianity and Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria***

On the area of poverty alleviation, Churches have also made their marks. In Osun

State for instance, the Anglican Church provides welfare packages for the people through its Social and Economic Development Commission of Osun Anglican Diocese (SEDECOAD). It is the social arm of the Church with the aim of catering for and supporting the underprivileged people across religious frontiers. The various forms of welfare schemes under this commission include healthcare services, prevention of HIV/AIDS, good governance and democracy, human rights, legal aids and prison welfare, peace building and conflict resolution, agriculture and rural development, women's, children's and youth development, microfinance and general administration (Awoniyi, 2015). Other Churches have similar social welfare schemes targeted at catering for the welfare of the less privileged Nigerians.

### ***3.3 Christianity and Emergency Response in Nigeria***

Christian Organizations have also responded to emergency situations in Nigeria by providing relief materials to cushion the effects of disasters. For instance, Caritas Nigeria, a social welfare organization of the Catholic Church has contributed immensely in alleviating the sufferings of people affected by disasters and emergencies in the country. The Organization shares in the mission of the Catholic Church to serve the poor and to promote charity and justice throughout the world.

Responding to emergencies is a core mandate of Caritas Nigeria. *Caritas Internationalis* has a unique worldwide network of 165 member organizations among which is Caritas Nigeria. In Nigeria, Caritas is a network of 55 Diocesan development and humanitarian organizations. Caritas Nigeria has experience and skills to respond efficiently and effectively to humanitarian situations. Caritas Nigeria's Emergency and Humanitarian Response (EHR) interventions are usually designed and implemented together with the local Caritas in the affected areas in the 55 local (diocesan) Caritas offices spread across the 36 states and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) in Nigeria (Caritas Nigeria, 2015a).

Caritas Nigeria has implemented several emergency response and humanitarian assistance programmes in the areas of; food insecurity (using cash transfers and food voucher distribution), flood relief activities, humanitarian assistance (food and non-food items) to victims of conflict and Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) responses. Caritas works closely with the Office of the UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance and provides regular updates to them on the different humanitarian response activities implemented across the Caritas network. In late 2012, Caritas Nigeria joined state actors like National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to carry out a joint-assessment of flood-affected areas in Nigeria. Thereafter, Caritas Nigeria partnered with the local diocesan Caritas to distribute food and non-food relief items as well as cash transfers to various communities in five affected states in the wake of the 2012 flood disaster in Delta, Edo, Anambra, Imo and Cross River States. In 2013, Caritas Nigeria joined with other non-governmental organizations to support 6 flood-affected communities namely; Kpakama, Esanma, Ogbein-ama, Adobu, Bedeseigha and Aven around Bomadi and Patani Local Government Areas in Delta State, through its Integrated Emergency Recovery (IER) programme (Caritas Nigeria,

2015b). Caritas Nigeria has also responded to the problem of food insecurity in the Sahel Region of the country. Through the food security project of Caritas Nigeria 991 households comprising of 9,798 persons in selected communities in Sokoto, Katsina, Zamfara and Jigawa states, have been supported financially through unconditional cash transfers to improve their livelihoods, and they also received hygiene and sanitation education. The goal of the programme was to “enhance access to food in the Sahel region in Northern Nigeria at the height of the Sahelian food crisis” (Caritas Nigeria, 2016, p. 1). Categories of people targeted by the programme include the poorest and most vulnerable households such as households with large numbers of children and households headed by widows and disabled or aged persons.

### 3. Recommendations

Based on the above discussions, the following recommendations are made:

- i. There should be synergy among Churches and Church organizations in rendering humanitarian assistance to the needy. This will help Churches mobilize enough resources for humanitarian work.
- ii. The Christian Association of Nigeria should open a single account where all the member Churches should donate their Sunday offerings for a given period of time. Funds pulled from this arrangement should be used for humanitarian work in Nigeria.
- iii. The financial and logistics requirements for humanitarian work are enormous. This calls for synergy between government and Churches in rendering assistance to the vulnerable member of the society.
- iv. There is also the need for Churches to cooperate with international donor agencies in the provision of humanitarian assistance to the needy. This will help Churches in raising enough funds for catering for the needs of different categories of people in need of assistance.
- v. Government should support Churches and Church Organizations that have the interest of the poor masses at heart. Government should release funds meant for social welfare to such Churches. This will help reduce mismanagement and ensure the delivery of relief materials to the vulnerable members of the society.
- vi. Churches should mobilize their members in different professions such as teachers, medical doctors and counsellors to assist the poor and the needy in different ways such as provision of educational, medical and counselling services.

### 4. Conclusion

There is poverty, poor health and educational services, food insecurity, and malnutrition across Nigeria. As a result of poverty, so many Nigerians are faced with and are in dire need of assistance. Unfortunately, the Nigerian governments are not doing enough to ameliorate the suffering of the poor masses. Hence, all eyes are now on charity organizations and religious bodies to alleviate the suffering of the less privileged in the society. The Christian Religion was founded on love and care for the poor and less privileged in the society. Hence churches and different church organizations have waded into the problems affecting the poor and the needy in Nigeria, with a view to ameliorating their plights. Despite limited resources,

Christian churches have demonstrated seriousness in assisting the poor and vulnerable Nigerians. They have provided food aids, shelter and non-food items, medical and educational services among others. Churches should speak up against government policies that breed corruption, poverty, unemployment and wide spread suffering in the country. Through this, things can change for better in the land.

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