

## **The Unethical Misconduct And Ills Of Corrupt Church Leaders In Nigeria**

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### ***Abstract***

*This article examines some of the contemporary challenges affecting Christian practices in Nigeria. An inquiry into the activities and attitude of Church administrators paints a picture that is not fascinating. The ineptitude of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as regards to unregulated springing up of churches, with features of commercial industry, vending of religious services on monetary terms and involvement of church leaders in criminal activities are some of the urgent issues requiring attention for discussion in Nigeria today. The paper therefore recommends that the “Christian Association of Nigeria” (CAN) should urgently acknowledge some of the unchristian practices in its fold and take immediate actions to remediate the situation. The Christian body holds it as a duty to regulate the Christian practice and ensure that the body of Christ does not derail from the standard Christian ecclesiology.*

**Keywords:** *Critical look, challenges, contemporary Nigeria, Christianity.*

## Introduction

Christianity is one of the major religious institution in Nigeria. The presence of Christian denominations and related institutions are as ubiquitous as its faithful. Christian traditions have permeated all aspects of Nigeria's social system. It may not be an over statement 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 yearnings by a significant number of the Nigerian populace. In the mainline churches, Nigerian Christians have made significant impact in the propagation and practice of the faith. The Anglican denomination is now Church of Nigeria 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. Nigerian Christian churches and movements now export' indigenous missionaries to other parts of the world, especially to plant new faithful in areas where commitment and practice appear declining. But in spite of these noticeable growth and expansion, the Nigerian church is faced with unethical practices and unbridled immorality within the denominations. A critical look into the socio-religious outlook and analysis of some of the challenges of modern day Christian practice will be the focus of this paper.

## Unregulated proliferation of churches

The emergence of new churches and other Christian movements in Nigeria without an institutional regulatory framework from Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) is quite undesirable. At present, Nigeria is being spot lighted as a country with the highest number of churches in Africa. This is more-so in the major cities of the southern part of the country. Obviously, churches and prayer houses are known to be a major industry in this geo-political extraction of the country. Churches exist in family houses, uncompleted buildings, and ware houses and in any available spaces. In 1980, Hacket (3) put the African figure of New Christian movement at fifteen thousand (15,000). By 2005, Onuh (in Gbebda 118) put Nigeria's share of new religious movements at one thousand and eighteen (1018). These are calculations based on popular known ones. A greater number exists unregistered. Yet a good number that were in existence and those ordered and founded by the Holy Spirit have emerged and are flourishing. The above figures of new churches emerge on daily basis without passing through any form of registration. The scenario raises puzzling questions concerning Christian commitment and the fulfillment of their mandate. As churches multiply, they gradually shift emphasis from spiritual and eternal life course to earthly — life course, here and now.

## Emphasis on materialism and commercial ministry

The contemporary Nigerian church is currently 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, Godliness and moral sanctity are 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 now it is alarming and critically challenging.

The level of material quest by Nigerian Christians, especially the clergies is radically in deviance and inimically 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 heavenly Kingdom of “the other world”. This scenario places the Nigerian church in a dilemma and frightening challenge. Conventionally, church liturgy and messages should show preference for the poor. But the current structure and functional praxis of Nigerian churches seem to project an elitist form of theology, classiest form of its clergy and the romance between church leaders and politicians, economic power brokers and stake holders in our society portray this preference for the affluent (Ethusam; 161).

Today, most of the churches measure success in life in terms of wealth, influence 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 unacknowledged or at best handled lackadaisically. Every minister in the independent churches and Pentecostal charismatics (self acclaimed evangelists) Bishops and general over seers) is a visioner’ seer and miracle worker or pretend to be one. Their miracles, blessing, and Sunday religious services attract financial charges. Counseling, deliverance, dedication, etc are rated per the social status of the persons seeking to benefit from such special services. A particular pastor is known to look straight in the face of some of the members and tell them their problems ranging from matters of contract, search for a husband. After these, he would ask for payment, N200, 000, N50, 000 or a brand new car (Wanpela 358) with catchy and animating words, ministers advertize for harvest of miracles, which turn out to be harvest of money.

Using both “evil and satanic powers to draw large crowd to their churches” (Akwude in Ogunwole, 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 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, in terms of blessing and miraculous deliverance of people in affliction. The Nigerian churches must rise up against this ugly phenomenon and challenge.

### **Declining spiritual commitment**

The spirituality of Nigerian churches is not commensurate with their numerical strength. It seems that the more the proliferation of the churches in Nigeria, the more the faith experience declining in spiritual commitment, morality and practical Christian living (see Ejizu, 19-21). Instead, the churches are more occupied with 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 Sunday clergy-men are ubiquitous, vending individually framed religious ideologies and false imagination, in place of divine revelations and prophecies. Such practices present God, not as 'He is, but as suits their selfish motives, as one common practice among the Pentecostal, charismatics.

They are known for shouting and commanding God to obey and respond according to their wish, as against the will of God which is supreme and periodised or rated. The declining emphasis on spirituality is sequel to the inordinate desire for materialism in churches and this is the background of the emphasis on faith by works, work without spirituality fervor. Thus, donations from any source including well known criminals, failed leaders, cultists and cyber-criminals are heralded by resounding ovation and commendation. The preference for faith by work (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. Prayers from the clergy are preferred to confession to God. And for fear of losing their clients, ministers withhold the truth from people (Apenda, 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 Christianity, however, worries some conscientious ministers. The negative practices in Christianity have taken root in Nigeria, a catholic priest, Adasu (447), spotlight political religion and prosperity gospel as main features which have obliterated and diminished the basic teachings and spiritual commitment of the church in Nigeria. These are teething problems which erode spiritual consciousness.

### **Fraud and criminality**

The unbridled motive for material wealth by ministers and clerics attract 'Money bags and criminals into the Christian fold, since no formal training and other requirements are needed for opening a church, is an 'open industry for all comers consequently, false prophets, and religious deceits loom large in our religious landscape. They use delusive prophecies and innocuous interpretations of the scripture to catch their victims for dubious deals and exploitations, claiming such to be directed by the Holy Spirit. Desire is to grab that which they have no right to ..., an aggressive acquisition, perpetrated by the exploit of the sacred name of God. (Apenda 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, 252), that preaching prosperity without legitimate means to its realization implies aiding and abating of crime. After several prophecies of wealth, breakthrough and a continuous wait for the arrival of the miracle, the expectant may be tempted to fast-track' the prophecy through unethical and dubious human means. While some people die in pursuit of such delusive prophecies, a few get something out of the fraud and are welcomed in thanksgiving service. All associated to the will of God.

Apart from fraudulent ministering, churches have cases of embezzlement and misappropriation of funds. This has become a common feature which often does not portray the church in good light., consequently, Christians in such churches are always engulfed in conflict hence such fraudulent cases affect public perception of the church. For instance, the Saint Andrew's Anglican Church, Diobu, Port Harcourt was for long closed, following frequent fraud related controversies within its fold.

Writing under the caption "money crisis" 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 reports of a Baptist Church pastor at Abeokuta who embezzled church funds. The ensuing feud led to the split of the church, reports of embezzlement and fraud is a daily affair 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 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity in Nigeria. Christianity in Nigeria is faced with cases of criminality. Many of our present day church provide refuge for criminals. With its reverential and unsuspecting status, the church has become a den of robbers and hide out for ritualists who belong to different occult societies. Reports about the Otokoto saga in Owerri about 1997, has it that two human skulls and other human parts were discovered in an Overcomers Mission Church Building (Obeta, 25 1). Again, we also recall that one Pastor King is facing murder charges in a Lagos high court for a crime he committed in the context of performing a sacred duty. Several cases of rape, sexual harassment and other immoral practices have become common features of the contemporary Nigerian church. Clergymen who rape and take married or single women to bed is on frequent occurrence. Some of the culprits go further to sponsor abortion of the pregnancies that result from such intercourse. The problem is as bad as that. There is need to invoke the fear of God in some of these mischievous criminal.

### **Rivalry and confusion**

On arrival, Christian missions in Nigeria engaged in denominational rivalry. In recent times, the tempo is rising higher as a result of the astronomic proliferation of churches. The various churches in Nigeria compete for legitimacy, acceptance and spiritual superiority amongst themselves. Every 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 own variety of 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 group. Followers are confused as groups profess differing and contradicting messages and doctrines, people now wonder which the true path to salvation is.

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? The church must rise up to this challenge.

### **Muslim-Christian relations and religious freedom**

Both Islam and Christianity came to Nigeria as foreign religions and were discreetly embraced by the people in different locations. The two religions had converts in their respective geo-religious divide in spite of the presence of faithful of the two religions in all parts of the country, the north is predominantly Muslim and the south is dominated by side, sharing some fundamental beliefs in common. This relationship was 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 prevailing unfriendly relationship between the two predominant religions in Nigeria was the ethno-religious sentiment 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 divides of the country. Christian missionaries were accused of showing sympathy and support for Biafra, while the entire Muslim Umar were seen to have approached the war as a religious jihad. When Biafra lost the war, the Muslim north saw it a victory for their geo-religious extraction consequently, mission school which gave Igbos an edge in education and human development was weak end with a policy that nationalized them. With this conception imbedded in the mind of the populace, religious practice became a very volatile institution in the Nigerian state Isichei (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 immediate antecedent and catalyst in the 1977/78 constituent assembly debate, our 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, 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 Sheikh Abubaker 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 given religious colouration which must be resisted by the other tribe.

This was the state and driving force of muslim-Christian relations, from the post 1977/78 Constituent Assembly to the present time, religious crisis has taken prominence as a structural property of our social system.

On 6<sup>th</sup> 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 inferno 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, 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, 16). Political religions and mutual suspicion, therefore became the order of the day (Takaya 113-114), notes the dangerous legacy of the sharia debate of the 1977-78 Constituent Assembly.

...then, religious politicization in Nigeria only grew deeper, such that both Christian and Muslim leaders tend to weigh every government decision from religious perspectives in terms of respective religion calculating, therefore, their possible gains and loses. Thus, the 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, Ogun State, the crisis claimed about 50 lives with churches, mosques and industrial institutions burnt down, (The Punch 19, July 199, 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. In that inferno, about 3000 lives were lost in Kaduna City alone. The colossal loss of Christian lives (Southerners), resident in the north led to a 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 on May 22 and 23 2002, in which over 59 lives were lost. In November, 2002, Kaduna was engulfed again by another religious conflagration, spearheaded by rampaging Muslims who were angered by a “This day” news paper remark about Mohammed, in the context of an analysis of 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 crisis was on September 9, 2001. The episode claimed many lives and properties worth billions of Naira. On Sunday February 23, 2002, 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 properties were violently destroyed in an unprecedented magnitude, note, Bakoji & Onoja (Daily Independent, May 14, 2004). The crisis also spread to Kano. In a 3 day reprisal attack on 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. This scenario of religious conflicts between Christians and Muslims is a distraction to Christianity. It threatens the freedom of Christians to profess and practice their faith in Nigeria. Nigerian Christians are faced with the challenge of peaceful co-existence and inter-religious tolerance and mutual respect.

The challenge of elusive dialogues between the two dominant religions stares us on the face. This will continue to affect Christian practice until better and sustainable relationship with Muslims is fostered.

### Conclusion

An appraisal of the activities of Christianity in Nigeria show evidence of both good and bad results. Proudly, Christianity has taken firm root in the country, surviving threats of hostility. But current developments in the practice of the faith is a regrettable tale of contradictions and degenerating spiritual commitment. There exist unregulated proliferation of churches, with features of small scale industries, vending of religious services on commercial terms. A good number of the churches indulge in fraudulent, moral and criminal activities and unhealthy rivalry for superiority and wider acceptance. The church in Nigeria should engage in a strategic reformation; to be pioneered by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). It should honestly acknowledge the 'unchristian' practices in its fold and rise up to the challenge. The church 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 garb of Christianity to pursue worldly selfish ends that which is contrary to the course of Christianity and its ethics.

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