Commercialization of Church in Nigeria 1980 – 2020

By

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Abstract

This study investigates the increasing commercialization of church in Nigeria from 1980-2020.This historic date is important because it witnessed unprecedented rise in prosperity gospel preaching, which also gave rise to the sudden proliferation of churches and the implementation of business practices by pastors and leaders of religious institutions. The aim of the paper is to discover its root, analyze causes, the extent of the manifestations, and consequences. The study employs descriptive and historical methods. The findings reveal that factors such as poverty, prosperity theology of promotion of wealth, faith, health, and weak regulatory frameworks contribute to the prioritization of financial gain over spiritual values. The impact of commercialization of church includes erosion of trust, compromised spiritual values, and increased inequality within religious communities. This study highlights the significant implications of these trends for the integrity of the Christian faith and its role in Nigerian society. The paper recommends strengthening theological education, promoting ethical leadership, and implementation of denominational regulatory bodies to foster accountability and curb the impacts of commercialization of Church in Nigeria. In conclusion, the paper advocates urgent need for the church to return and uphold its core values and prioritize spiritual development and social responsibility over financial and material gain.

Keywords: Church, Commercialization, Nigeria, Historical, Aberration

Introduction

The commercialization of Christianity in Nigeria from 1980- 2020 has attracted the attention of scholars from various fields, including religious studies, sociological studies, management studies and economic history. This work explores the

historical roots, driving factors, manifestations, and consequences of this phenomenon. The paper traces the growth of Christianity in Nigeria, noting the gradual shift from traditional stereotype mission churches to the emergence of indigenous Pentecostal and charismatic movements. This shift is often associated with a greater emphasis on prosperity theology and entrepreneurial approach to church administration (Ojo, 2008). One of the cardinal themes in this study is the identification of factors contributing to commercialization of churches in Nigeria. Scholars highlight the role of socio-economic conditions, such as poverty, unemployment, and inequality, which has created a fertile ground for the preaching and acceptance of prosperity messages over some decades (Dairo, 2017). The desire for upward social mobility and the pursuit of material wealth in a context of economic hardship are also identified as significant drivers. The impact of charismatic leaders and their influence on church practices is another area of focus. Some researchers argue that the leadership styles of these figures, characterized by a focus on personal wealth and institutional growth, have contributed to the adoption of business-oriented models by both Pentecostal and Mainline churches.

Furthermore, the paper examines the various ways in which commercialization of churches manifests in the recent past. This includes the emphasis on impulsive financial giving of tithes and offerings, the sale of religious merchandise, the organization of large-scale fundraising events, and the expansion of churches into diverse business ventures in most cities in Nigeria (Adabembe, 2024). Also, historians trace the advent of Christianity in Nigeria to Benin City, Nigeria, to August 1515, this was when the Oba of Benin invited the missionaries from Portugal; on their arrival, and he was already in a war with his community in Idah. The Oba requested the missionaries to join. This remains the turning point in the history of Christianity in Nigeria, moreover the people of Benin (presently Edo State) and Warri (presently Delta State), by the Portuguese missionaries was unsuccessful because their mission focus were characterized by serious trading with little attention to evangelism (Oshitelu, 2002). It is in the light of this that, some indigenous scholars have identified the slave trade as one of the effective forms of trades introduced by Christian missionaries at the inception of Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa; Africans were sold into slavery across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans (Ajayi, 1979 & ,IIega & Iheanacho, 2013). Base on this

relevance, Russell (1946) and Mugambi (2002) reveal that slavery was based on Aristotle's philosophy. This was why the slave trade was tagged "a living tool" (Ayandele, 1966).

The early involvement between religion and trade in Sub-Saharan Africa can be traced back to the arrival of missionaries, who often combined evangelism with the promotion of Western trade and economic practices. Missionaries sometimes attracted people to their folds through the wealth they created and distributed (Falola et al., 1991). This missionary approach was evident in the promotion of the Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization in Nigerian nation.

Fortunately for Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, the Act of Slavery was seen as inhuman and in the year 1807, the Slave Trade Abolition Act was passed by Britain, while America and Denmark also abolished this trade (Falk, 1997). In the same vein IIega & Iheanacho (2008) reveal that the Slave Abolition Act was followed by another emancipation act that freed all enslaved people in Britain. The Emancipation Act promulgated ended the slave trade business and set free all the slaves in the British colony. As soon as the slave trade was abolished, commercialization of Christianity and commerce were introduced. Boston promoted plough and spade, which literarily refers to missionaries and school teachers, should join hands to promote and engage in agriculture in Nigeria (Buston1840). Cities such as Benin, Calabar, and Warri were noted for an economic boom as a result of the activities of European traders around 1841 (Dike, 1990). Interestingly, Ajayi, (1979) notes that Calabar Chiefs permitted the Christian missionary operations in their town for three essential commodities: the establishment of the sugar industry, the establishment of schools, and the development of agriculture. Shortly, the European traders influenced Lagos and Badagry, making these states famous and developing rapidly (Ajayi, 1979). Webster (1964) agrees that European missionaries were the first group of people in the developed nation to plant cash crops such as cocoa, coffee, and rubber. The African church members were the brains behind cocoa plantations in Agege, Lagos State, Nigeria (Falola et al.). Also, studies have indicated that religious beliefs and practices have contributed immensely to Nigeria's commercial activities and economic growth (Falola et al.,1991). The majority of Christian organizations around the world were interested in commerce. It is true that, their

involvement in commerce assisted them in their missionary activities; it equally assisted Africans by connecting them to the rest of the world for commerce and missionary activities. Falola and Babalola (1991) believed that it is not in doubt that European Christian missionaries, acted deeply as precursors of British colonial administration in Nigeria, contributed significantly to the evolution and development of a monetized economy in the country.

Fortunately, the orientation the missionaries gave during their missionary activities spurred the governments of many African countries to be interested in endorsing the teachings of these missionaries on agriculture in African continents. Therefore, they were actively involved in the breeding of new crops that were alien to Africans. These crops include citrus fruits, cotton, coffee, and cocoa. The first sets of converts in Nigeria were traders (Falola and Babalola, 1991). Moreso, in Yoruba land in particular and other areas in Nigeria, the cultivation of cash crops such as cocoa, cotton, and rubber, which the area was recognized for, was said to have been introduced and popularized by Christian converts from Nigeria (Oshitelu,2002).

Commercialization of Christianity in Nigeria

With the sudden rise of Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel in the 1980s, Christianity in Nigeria started having commercial undertones. For Alala and Eko (2020), the prosperity gospel has been widely seen and accepted as a message of redemption that addresses the needs of the poor and the well-being of Nigerian nation. This is true because in Nigeria, televangelists and mega-churches rose to prominence as a result of the trend of Pentecostalism with the prosperity gospel. This is to say that, various methods like miracle services, prophetic declaration and announcements, and seed-faith offering, are employed on weekly bases by these churches and their pastors use this approach regularly to attract and retain both new and members. Many pastors emerged in Nigeria in the recent past as a result of the commercialization of Christianity, and these preachers and pastors are highly interested in making money than in spreading the gospel. It is in this regard that Jemiriye (1998) argues that church leaders have deviated from the foundations of religious practices and the church only to focus on economic gains. It was established that Christian religious organizations established educational institutions for economic gains, sometimes to the detriment of the adherents.

Offiong (2003) affirmed that the health and wealth theologies of Nigerian Pentecostal churches seem to be tailored to meet the social and existential realities of their adherents, leading to recruitment and sustenance of their membership. Jegede (2009) is of the opinion that, the introduction of prosperity preaching and the belief that the wealth of members is a confirmation of acceptable service to God and his blessings upon them are famous for the churches known as Neo-Pentecostal churches. This group believes that prosperity teaching is imperative for Christians to be prosperous while on earth and it is an integral part of Pentecostalism.

Factors responsible for the Commercialization of Christianity

Iluno Nelson views Nigeria as Africa's main center of Pentecostal force because Pentecostal waves in the country have spread like wild- fire worldwide (Iluno, 2019. p. 234). Pentecostalism in Nigeria has been the bedrock for the promotion of wealth, faith, and health as the central theme. Thus, all these are evident in prosperity preachers, who emphasize that God desires believers to prosper materially, physically, and spiritually. These prosperity theologians teach that getting rich is the will of God for all his children, and it is evidence or a physical manifestation of God's divine blessings on those who have faith in God (Lovemore, 2016).This teaching of prosperity regardless of concomitant hard work promotes commercialization of Christianity in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Unemployment and Underemployment: High rates of unemployment can lead people to seek solace and financial opportunities within religious organizations. In Nigeria, unemployment is a major factor in the commercialization of Christianity. Some impoverished and unemployed Nigerians view the founding of new churches as a profitable business and one of the quickest financial ventures under the guise of a Divine calling (Obiefuna et al.2016). This shows that Church is the most valuable commodity to make wealth. This has made, many people including graduates and those who never attended school to see Christianity as a feasible source of income and have turned it into a successful business.

Poverty and Economic Hardship: Many Nigerians face economic challenges, and some churches offer a message of prosperity and financial blessing, which can be appealing to the poor (Ojo, 2008). As a result, churches sell apparel, accessories, music, holy water, anointing oil, and other religious items with a religious theme.

Pastors have even been known to pressure people into buying multiple items to make money thereby making the members poorer. Economic hardship could be caused by over population, inadequate health care, illiteracy, ethnic strife and corruption (Essein, 2010).

Prophecies and Miracles: It has been argued that certain charismatic pastors are placing prices on miracles and prophecies for sale, with adherents paying a certain fee to access them. In addition, some even bribe people to attend and offer fictitious testimony while claiming to have received miracles during crusades. All these and many more are to attract people to their churches for economic gain.

Prosperity Gospel: By prosperity preachers emphasis on material wealth and divine blessing has driven some churches to adopt business-like models to generate income (Dairo, 2017). Also, theological doctrines, which serve as direct link between faith, a positive confession, and material prosperity. This prosperity teaching is often referred to as the health and riches gospel. Preachers that demonstrate their wealth through bogus cars, mansions, luxury and as well as private jets are known as prosperity preachers, and their lifestyles have contributed to the attractiveness of the gospel.

Charismatic Leadership: The rise of influential charismatic leaders has sometimes been associated with the accumulation of wealth and the commercialization of religious activities. The startling rate at which pastors, priests and bishops from mainline churches run their ministries is alarming. This has accelerated to great extent commercialization of churches in Nigeria.

Commercialization's effects and implications on Christianity

The commercialization of churches in Nigeria has several implications, affecting both the religious landscape and the broader society. These implications can be broadly categorized as follows:

Erosion of Trust and Credibility: The focus on financial gain can erode trust in religious leaders and institutions, leading to skepticism among believers and the general public (Ogunkunle, 2006). The emphasis on materialism and the pursuit of wealth contradicts the spiritual focus that is expected of religious institutions. As some scholars note, the church has "rooted itself in

the pursuit of materialism and mundane pleasures" (Nwanganga, 2017). This means that, the concept of commercialization suggests a deviation from the traditional role and function of the church. Several scholars argue that the church's primary focus has shifted from spiritual enrichment and community service to financial profit, thus becoming an aberration.

Compromised Spiritual Values: Commercialization leads to a dilution or distortion of core spiritual values, with a greater emphasis on material wealth than on salvation, service, and moral conduct. Commercialization is seen as a departure from the core tenets of Christianity, such as "sacredness, purity, holiness and promotion of truth" (Nwanganga, 2017).

Increased Inequality within the Church: It may result in a concentration of wealth in the hands of church leaders, while many members struggle with poverty, creating inequality within the church community. This is true because when people feel that the church is prioritizing profit over people, it can lead to social discontent and disillusionment with religious institutions.

Manipulation of Vulnerable People: The poor and the sick that desperately need spiritual help are often manipulated by some religious leaders who compel them to buy olive oil, holy water among others (DergiPark, n.d).

Distortion of religious values: The fundamental religious principles of compassion, justice, peace, solidarity, stewardship, and accountability have been warped by the commercialization of religion, converting revered customs into things that can be sold. This perversion of Christian principles may cause people to prioritize financial gain over their sincere spiritual growth. For example, the free education that foreign missionaries brought to Nigeria has become so commercialized that even members cannot afford to put their children in the schools established by their churches due to exorbitant school fees. Another issue is that some religious leaders in today's Christendom routinely kill people for ritualistic purposes. Uzodinma in Adabemb (2024), for instance, writes about a church in Enugu State where three dead bodies were discovered buried in the foundation of the auditorium. In the vein Rotimi in Adabemb (2024) reports that the High Court of Justice, Ado-Ekiti imprisoned a pastor for killing one of his

church members for religious purposes. Also, Matthew in Adabemb (2024) also reveals that a clergyman in Delta State killed a little girl for money making. One wonders why this killing since, religion is meant to be society's moral bulwark (Adabembe, 2022).

Ways to mitigate the high rate of Church Commercialization in Nigeria

The commercialization of churches in Nigeria is greatly needed to redeem the core values and mission of the Church for the salvation of humanity. We shall now discuss possible ways to mitigate the high rate of this trend. They are:

1. Strengthening Theological Education:

Providing sound theological education to clergy, religious teachers and laity .This is necessary because it would help to promote a deeper understanding of the true purposes of the church while pointing out the dangers of prioritizing financial gain in spiritual matter (DergiPark, n.d.). This education should emphasize the core values of Christianity, focusing on service, sacrifice, and the importance of spiritual growth over material wealth.

2. Promoting Ethical Leadership and Accountability: The promotion of ethical and moral values would be useful in the sense that the leadership would operate an open door policy while maintaining leadership financial transparence. Encouraging ethical leadership in churches is crucial. This can be achieved through establishment of clear guidelines for financial management. This Promoting transparency in church finances will facilitate implementing accountability mechanisms to ensure that church leaders are held responsible for their actions.

3. Empowering Congregants: Educating church members about their rights and responsibilities can empower them to challenge financial exploitation and demand accountability from their leaders.

4. Regulatory Framework: Developing a regulatory framework for religious bodies in Nigeria could help ensure compliance with ethical standards and prevent the abuse of power. However, this must be done carefully to avoid infringing on religious freedom.

5. Encouraging Self-Regulation: Christian bodies, such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), could play a more active role in promoting self-regulation among member churches. This could involve developing and enforcing ethical codes of conduct and providing guidance on financial management.
Promoting a holistic approach by preaching and emphasizing both spiritual and material well-being, while avoiding the excesses of the prosperity gospel, this will go a long way to help and redirect the focus of the Church away from commercialization of Christianity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper affirms that the Church leaders have drifted completely from biblical standard, mission and practices of the Church, thereby leading to the erosion of Christian ethics and moral valves the church has been noted for. The paper advocates urgent need for the church to return and uphold its core values and prioritize spiritual development and reformation of practices to align with the spiritual values and Christian ethos of the early church. The church members and leaders are called to rethink and uphold church responsibilities over financial and material gain and personal aggrandizement. The church is also encouraged to reassess her doctrines to embrace both spiritual development and institutional benefits without watering and weakening the integrity and the image of the church.

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