Is the Christian Religion a Conservative Force in the midst of Religious Corruption in Nigeria?

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Abstract
The paper examines the disadvantages that the activities of Christian leaders in the church are doing to the growth of adherents of the Christian religion. In contemporary Nigerian society, it could be seen that religion is losing its place as a means of ethical control. It was discovered that Christian leaders have in recent times being involved in financial misappropriation of their respective churches funds, and sexual abuse, especially of children. The descriptive phenomenological method of qualitative research was utilized in this paper. As part of the recommendation, it is the job of religious leaders to restore the dignity of religion as a conservative force, such as putting emphasis on the moral aspect of religious practices and avoiding formatting religion to suit their selfish aim at the detriment of their followers. Also, a punishment should be meted out to any erring Christian leader.
Keywords: Religion, Corruption, Conservative Force, Conventional Force, Morality

1. Introduction
Nigeria no doubt is a religious nation. There is the belief that a supreme being exists and guards the whole affairs of man, hence, man feels subordinated to this being in worship and service.

Consequently, it is believed that this supreme-being, otherwise known as God almighty, has intermediaries who serve to relate the mind of the supreme-being to the followers. These intermediaries are believed to be religious preachers.

Religious corruption exists mostly amongst these religious preachers and it has been striving in recent times. There is a rise in the number of Churches that are being established on every street in cities in Nigeria. Consequently, most of these churches are centers of sugar-coated preaching and exhortations and also centers of motivational messages towards riches and honour on earth without a mention of the consequences of engaging in any odd activities. Femi (2015) explains that this so-called gospel appeals to the rich because it tells them they will become richer. It appeals to the poor because it promises them they will become rich. There are reports of ministers of God monetizing prayers and deliverance. That is why Bishop Moses Deng (2013) laments that prosperity preachers' lust for money, and that is why the prosperity preachers who have been trusted to lead in faith are taking advantage of people that cannot understand the message of Jesus properly.

Furthermore, there are also situations whereby so-called ministers of God commit adultery and also engage in child sexual abuse. Nolly (2014) explains thus: "When I was growing up, the few times that such nonsense ever happened in my area, the men and women in the act were taken to pastors who prayed for them to be delivered from the spirit controlling and pushing them into such shameful act. But these days, some pastors are the one getting controlled by that same spirit". Enogholase (2017) gives an example of a Benin-based pastor, Emokpae Great, who is currently on the run following the alleged discovery of a love affair between

him and a female member of his church by the woman's husband, one Mr Anthony Ehikioya.

From the recording of the wife's discourse with the pastor, the husband alleged that the pastor was heard telling his wife how good she was in bed and that she should come for sex. With all these anomalies, one begins to wonder if religion is indeed a conservative force, or has changed into a conventional force. This paper examines the place of the Christian religion in the lives of Nigerians who are ministers of God, and how prosperity preachers have been able to coerce the intelligence of followers of their religion into believing that giving all you have attracts God's blessing faster. The descriptive phenomenological method of qualitative research was used in the study. It was discovered that religion is fast becoming less conservative and indeed becoming a tool in the economic exploitation of the masses with a promise of eternal bliss by religious leaders.

2. Conceptual Framework

Under this subheading, critical concepts which are very important for a proper understanding of this research problem were sketched. They are religion and religious corruption.

David Émile Durkheim a French sociologist, psychologist and philosopher in 1954 sees religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden--beliefs and practices which unite in one single community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (1954, p. 47). Robertson (1977, p.366) sees religion as "a system of communally held beliefs and practices." Furthermore, Bellah (1964, p.358) notes that "religion is a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate condition of his existence." Milton Yinger John, as emeritus professor at Oberlin college in

1970 defines religion as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems (the problems of origins, the purpose and meaning of life, what is right and wrong, etc.) of human life. From these definitions, it could be deciphered that religion deals with man's relationship with the supreme-being and also his relationship with his fellow man.

Religious corruption could be seen as a means of using religion towards achieving personal gains. Jigbale (2015) sees religious corruption as the loss of religious and societal values. "Corruption" (1969) puts that unscrupulous and power hungry individuals take control of the organization through manipulation and greed. They regulate the teachings to fit their perspective and greed, and consequently, the religion they professed becomes corrupted. "Angel" (n.d) says that organized religions have been run by a corrupt body of people, that's why religious groups and entity such as the church is run just like a business.

2.1. Religion and Social Control

Religion as an agent of social control has from time immemorial served as a tool of social harmony. However, its place as an agent of social control is being threatened by aggressive progressive order of world religions caused by scientific breakthroughs. Hence, the place of religion as both a conservative as well as a conventional force would be analyzed.

2.2. Religion as a Conservative Force

Religion as a conservative force entails that religion is disposed to preserve existing conditions, institutions, such as integrity, honesty, hard work, among others. The phrase *conservative force* is usually used to refer to religion as preventing

a change and religion maintaining the status quo of regulating man's behaviour. However, functionalists, Marxist and feminists have generally dismissed the possibility that religion can cause change in society. They believe religion acts as a conservative force and that it is change in society that shape religion, and not vice versa. According to this group, societal developments and scientific innovations aid in the changes that occurs in religion, however, religion still maintains its value if not forcibly tempered with by societal changes.

Functionalists have claimed that religion as a conservative force acts in this way because it promotes integration and social solidarity. From a functionalist's perspective, religion provides shared beliefs, norms and values, and helps individuals to cope with stresses that might disrupt social life. In these ways, it facilitates the continued existence of society in its present form. Marx had similar vies although he saw religion as maintaining the status quo in the interests of the ruling class rather than those of society as a whole. Religion as a conservative force according to Marx is an illusion which eases the pain produced by exploitation and oppression. It is a series of myths that justify and legitimate the subordination of the subject class and the domination and privilege of the ruling class (Haralambos & Holborn 2004, p.409). Conservative may, however, be used in another way: it can refer to traditional beliefs and customs. Usually, a religion helps to maintain the status quo, it will also maintain traditional norms and beliefs (Haralambos and Holborn 2004).

2.3. Religion as a Conventional Force

As a conventional force, religion is being shaped to serve the need of the manipulators who use it to the detriment of their followers. Religion is a tool of subjugating the populace to the whims and

caprices of their aggressors (Uchegbue, 2011). As a convention, followers are promised blessings if they bring their tithes and offerings to the pastor. They are promised prosperity if they learn to give much offerings in the church notwithstanding where it is gotten from. As a conventional force, people are only interested in how religion can benefit their present. It was on this premise that Avatar Adi Da Samraj (2017) says that conventional religion is inherently false. Rotimi (2010) explains that the religion especially Christianity has become conventional in that pastors usually tell their members that every believer is expected to enjoy good and robust health when they give to God and in this regard, a lot of propaganda is put in place to attract people to the revivals and crusades for divine healing. In fact, almost all of them do claim the power of healing. It is a factor that has made the Churches to attract many members of the mission Churches.

2.4. Religious Corruption in Nigeria

Corruption entails dishonest gain. Corruption is defined as the use of public office for private gain, or "the abuse of public office for private gain" in accordance with the World Bank definition (Bhargava, 2006). According to Myint (2000), examples of corrupt behaviour would include: (a) bribery, (b) extortion, (c) fraud, (d) embezzlement, (e) nepotism, (f) cronyism, (g) appropriation of public assets and property for private use, and (h) influence peddling. Religious corruption entails the extortion of followers of a faith by their religious leaders, embezzlement of church fund by religious leaders, and nepotism in the appointment of church leaders.

In Nigeria, the rate of which religion is being used to get dishonest gains is alarming. One of the strongholds of religious corruption is prosperity gospel. Femi (2015) explains that the

prosperity gospel is also lucrative for selling books. The Christian book market is full of "get-rich-quick tipsters" and "one-minute-solution merchants. The prosperity gospel says in order to receive from God the followers must first have to first give money to the church. Take another look at the special programs and outreaches organised in the churches and you will discover the emphasis is not on righteousness or the kingdom of God, instead, banners, posters, handbills and radio jingles proclaim "Unceasing Showers of Blessing," "Twenty-four Hour Miracles;" or "Stupendous Breakthroughs." Conrad (2017) puts that everywhere, especially on radio and television, almost all you hear is this message about how God in Christ wants us to be physically healthy and materially prosperous. You hardly ever hear sermons about sin and repentance. So salvation has now become deliverance from sickness and poverty. Nangayi (2016) laments:

> This business of pastors sending invitation letters to flocks with instructions on how much money they should give in church is real robbery,... If you tell people to sow in order to prosper, are you a magician to ensure overnight riches?... It is nothing new that some preachers in Africa are using the Bible through its scriptures to coerce their audiences to pay lots of money, saying whatever they give, will be given back to them,... For some preachers, the more money you sow in church, the more blessings you get, but this is done because many innocent church followers think God speaks through these pastors and they have to obey God's voice.

Religious corruption has resorted in the increase in the number of churches on the streets of Nigeria. Nkem, Onuegbu, Duru, Ebirim, Edukugho and Anibeze (2014) observe that todays church is an epitome of modernity operating from state–of-the–art, imposing edifices fully air-conditioned and complete with evolutionary

camera, klieg light and other stage facilities for a live broadcast from the pulpit. Yet poverty ravages the same establishment.

Apart from the fact that religious corruption, as evidence in prosperity preaching, has led to poor followers and rich pastors, there is the existence of unethical lifestyle among members. This is because the members are not being taught on living a moral life as against divine provision embedded in the how much money someone brings to the minister of their particular religious entity. Femi (2015) says that prosperity preachers strengthen the hand of evil-doers by promising them God's blessings instead of reproving their sins and they give the wrong impression that God is satisfied with Christians, ensuring that we do not repent of sin.

Also, there are instances where preachers preach on television and post their account number for followers or listeners to credit their account so as for them to receive the blessings of God. Dale (2015) explains most Christian programs on television or radio spend a lot of attention on heart-wrenching pleas for offerings, and if you subscribe to Christian periodicals or send donations to various radio or television ministers, you're probably used to receiving their numerous monthly appeal letters.

Furthermore, there are child abuse cases that have perpetrated by these prosperity preachers. Usman and Aham (2016) reveal that the general overseer of Tongue of Fire Ministry, Shogunle, Lagos, Pastor Chukwuma Nkwocha, was arrested following a report of three teenage girls. It was alleged to have been sleeping with the girls who are all members of his church, with a promise to feed them and pay for their Junior and Senior Secondary School Certificate examinations. Apart from child abuse these prosperity preachers impregnate indiscriminately members of their congregation. In a report by Uzodinma (2014) reports that Timothy Ngwu, General Overseer of Vineyard Ministry of the Holy Trinity,

located at Ihe/Owerre, Nsukka in Enugu State who was arrested by the police impregnates married women and young girls in his ministry, and claims the Holy Spirit ordered him to have sex with them.

2.5. Achieving a Conservative Religion

In order to achieve a conservative religion, religion must be focused on human life. From the researchers' thesis and perspective, this focus on human life must take into consideration these factors which are germane for healthy Christian religious practice

- Human dignity and conscience
- Morality
- Religious freedom
- Respect for truth

Human dignity and conscience moderate the way of life of man. Human Conscience abhors good and negates evil. Everyone is given a sense of morality ("Human", n.d). Conscience is the psychological faculty by which we aware of and responds to the moral character of our own actions (Christine, n.d). Religious leaders should endeavour not to kill their conscience. Religion is supposed to be the conscience of the common man. Religion is supposed to be a balm to the oppressed and not the other way round of being used to psychologically extort from the ever-expecting followers. Baha (2014) puts that religion can enrich our understanding of human nature in a way that goes well beyond the narrow conception of human beings as mere consumers, economic units, individuals bereft of community, or as entitled citizens.

Religious leaders should endeavour to snow that religion deals with man relationship with the supreme-being and his relationship also with his follow man. Hence, religion has both

vertical and horizontal dimension. One aspect must not be emphasized at the detriment to the other. Religious leaders should teach about moral living. When there is morality in the land there is bound to be prosperity and social justice. The emphasis on prosperity preaching without mention of its moral implications has not served the ethnos of which religion is supposed to profess.

Man is said to be a free moving being, hence, man has the choice of anything he wants. Religious leaders should not try to format religion to suit their selfish aim at the detriment of their followers. Religion should be allowed to reveal itself to an individual so that he or she could appreciate the importance of religion got himself or herself.

Respect for truth is a core feature of religion. Respect for truth cuts across all aspect of life, be it in the secular or religious sphere. Religious leaders as a matter of urgent response should put truth in their mouth when dealing with issues of life instead of the contemporary sugar coated preaching of telling a thief that God will bless him if he continually pays his tithe from the stealing he made. Religion will maintain its nature of projecting truth if politicians and those at the echelons of power, be it in education or economy, are made to know that bringing money that has been pilfered to the house of God is a curse, rather than the praise singing that is seen amongst ministers of the gospel to those that be in the society.

Academics should on their own part contribute towards ameliorating this problem of ethical collapse in religious atmosphere. This they can do by establishing non-governmental organizations saddled with the responsibility of prosecuting Clergies found wanting, especially in cases related to child abuse.

Man in general should not lose sight of the fact that religion still plays a very needful role in man's existence. The activities of

prosperity preachers, child rapist, and sexual molesters, as seen in churches should not be used as a yardstick in measuring the ethical stability of God, which is embodied in this ministers of his. Amongst all this problems, there are still men that have ethical control and these men are through this research work encouraged to hold put and restore the lost image and dignity of religion.

3. Conclusion

Religion is a medium through which man communicates with the supreme-being. Religion as an aspect of culture provides succour to a man, both in this world and beyond. The activities of religious preachers and leaders have not gone down well in recent times. Religion in Nigeria has now been used as an avenue in amassing wealth from mostly the poor in a religious congregation. This is more painful that the poor are made to believe that without giving their offering, big offering, there would be no God's blessing to them.

The paper discovered that due to the fact that these evils are being witnessed in the church, especially amongst men of God, so many people have lost faith in religious practices and in the integrity of those that call themselves Christians. This is a clarion call to all and sundry, especially religious leaders, that religion should be projected to be what it really is. The fact that contemporary literature are calling for a progressive religion should not be an avenue in progressing religion from a spiritual activity to a psychological and mundane activity. Religion being conservative is suppose to maintain its place of regulating man behaviour, culture, values, worldview and human solidarity, unity and the oneness of the human family.

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