SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LIBERATION OF NIGERIA: A PARADIGM OF THE CHURCH.

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Abstract

*This paper sought to point out the glaring and undeniable need for socio-political and economic liberation in Nigeria. It centered primarily on the prominent role religion, particularly the Christian religion, can play in achieving this noble project and pursuit. By adopting the historical method of documentary analysis, these issues were discussed under three broad segments i.e, the "**Church**", the need for socio-political and economic liberation in Nigeria, and the religious factor in achieving the desired socio-political and economic liberation in Nigeria. The paper outlined some possible functions by which the Church in Nigeria can contribute immensely towards the desired liberation. The paper concludes that a combination of the task of spiritual and social liberation enhances the Church, more than any other institution, to influence the socio-political and economic life of the Nigerian society so positively as to restore justice, equity and peace.*

Keywords: *The Church, Socio- political, Injustice, Oppression, Economic liberation*

Introduction

A controversy whether or not the Church should involve herself or play any role in the socio-political and economic affairs of the society often arises. While some have argued on one hand that much involvement may jeopardize the Church's spiritual status as the *ecclesia* (the called out people of God), others, on the other hand, have shown that being too distant calls into question the Church's self-understanding as the light, salt and moral beacon on the earth (Callaway 2011: 1). It will seem more appropriate to take a reconciliatory position that while she is not expected to become a political organization, the Church has a substantial role to play in politics by acting as a principled guide, moral watch dog, spiritual counsellor and conscience to the society. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to establish the fact that implicit in the sacred and sacramental mission of the Church is her social ministry as an instrument of justice in an unjust socio – political 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. The paper argues that participation in the process of socio-political and economic 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 level of social injustice currently prevalent in Nigeria is reaching alarming proportions. The overwhelming upsurge of militant and resistant groups in Nigeria these days such as the Niger

Delta Militancy, OPC, Bakassi vigilantes, the Boko Haram episode 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 amongst the citizenry. That is why Nigeria has been chosen as our focus for proper analysis of cases of injustice in the socio – political system.

The historical method of documentary analysis is adopted in the paper. The discussion is divided into three broad segments. The first segment attempts a clarification of the key concept, 'Church' as the paper uses it. The second segment discusses Nigeria's unjust socio- political and economic system and the reality of the need for liberation. The third and final segment deals with the liberating role of the Church in achieving the desired justice in the socio-political life of Nigeria. It is maintained in the paper that the Church's socio- political 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 more 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.

The Church: A Conceptual Clarification
To pursue the objective of this paper, we need some working conceptual clarification of the term 'Church'. For a proper understanding, we need to make a distinction between two senses in which the term 'Church' is used in this paper. 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 (2009) as the "formal organization that sets out to accomplish a specific purpose". 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 (*Van Reken 2009*).*

It is from this perspective that Iwe (2014) understands the term 'Church' to mean an organised people of God, a spiritual and moral force to be reckoned with. The Church as an organism refers to "the church as the body of believers, the communion of believers" (Van Reken 2009). 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. It therefore means that in discussing the role of the Church in the pursuit of justice in the political 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.

Nigeria's Unjust Socio – Political and Economic System and the Need for Liberation

A careful consideration of the socio-political, situation of Nigeria reveals that she is faced with the characteristic problems of injustice, corruption, inequality and other such like oppressive and exploitative vices. Whatever may be the peculiarities of the Nigerian experience, her condition reveals the same factors and dimensions of impoverishment and underdevelopment in Arica as a whole. At the first level, it is common knowledge that politically speaking, Nigeria has had and is still undergoing a painful experience of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The role of the external western colonialism in Nigerian political experience and its effect and impact on our contemporary political structure remain an indelible monumental experience in our political history. Nevertheless, it is common place knowledge that since independence in 1960, Nigeria suffers from "internal colonialism" worse than it had suffered from the external western colonialism many decades ago.

Today, a small group of rich and powerful fellow Nigerians maintains its power and wealth at the expense of the misery of millions of the population (Uchegbue, 2009). That is the fact that more than two thirds of the Nigerian people are poor, despite living in a country with vast potential wealth. As Adrian Hastings confirms:

> The coming of political independence did not bring any effective transfer of power into the hands of the masses, but into those of small elite. The masses remain exceedingly poor, mostly illiterates, probably even more remote from the mechanism of even local power than in colonial or pre-colonial times
> (Hastings 2000).

This statement reveals how undemocratic and unpopular the Nigerian government has been. In fact, what we normally call elections in Nigeria are a mere travesty and rape of democracy and institutionalized robbery of the people's franchise. This truth is epitomized in the popular June 12 episode, when the incumbent military regime under General Babangida refused to install the winner of the presidential election, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, as the democratically elected president of the country. This situation is further exacerbated by the dominant presence of ethnicity, election rigging and thuggery, intermittent but frequent military interventions and perpetuation of totalitarianism, despotism and dictatorship in the Nigerian political scene. Let us briefly consider each of these factors.

Ethnicity, for instance, has played a central role in the political history of Nigeria even before independence in 1960. Hostility among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria has been exploited by the political elites and this has led to various political crises in the country since then. As Lloyd (1972) points out, most problems in Nigeria, in large measure, derive from the tensions arising between the large ethnic groups. According to him, it is not ethnic differences in themselves that are responsible for the hostility, but competition for wealth and power among the political elites from these ethic groups (Lloyd 1972: 1-13. See also Adejumobi 2001:37-39). This was the root of ethno-regional politics in Nigeria following the division of Nigeria into three regions by the colonial government before independence and the formation of regional political parties such as the Action Group (AG), the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), and the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) to reflect the Western, Northern and Eastern regions, respectively (Olukoju 1997:31). These regions and their corresponding political parties reflected the three major ethnic groups in the country: Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, respectively, while the

Mid-Western region later created in 1963 after independence reflected the Edo-speaking minority ethnic group. As Olukoju comments, "The foundation was thus laid for the future pattern of regionalist politicking that was to ground the ship of the Nigerian state" (Olukoju 1997). Ethno-regional conflicts and the minority group politics in Nigeria were the major causes of the first military coup and the counter coup in 1966 and the aftermaths which culminated in the 1967-70 civil war (Adejumobi 2001).

Apart from ethnicity, Nigeria's politics has often been characterized by election rigging and thuggery. The tragic political situation of the Second Republic as epitomized in the 1983 elections with the attendant killings, wanton destruction of properties and sufferings, illustrates this fact. In Ondo State, for instance, houses and vehicles were burnt in large numbers and many lives were lost in feuds between thugs of opponent political parties. The indiscriminate arrests, detentions and imprisonments, by the Government, of those who hold contrary world-views reveal the sudden evolution and consolidation of a status quo turned into an irresistible and unchallengeable semi-god or "leviathan."

At the economic level, we cannot gainsay the fact that Nigeria, like other third World countries, is a 'poor' country in the sense and for the fact that majority of its population live in abject poverty and penury. Although, originally, and to a very great extent, we can trace the characteristic poverty of Nigeria to the external forces of international commercial imperialism, as noted earlier, the true nature of her present economic condition is, nonetheless, more directly to be interpreted in terms of the internal forces and activities of the politico-economic oligarchs. Nigeria's poverty "is no more the poverty of people within a poor society but the poverty of people within a rich society" (Hastings, 2000). It is a situation where we have "A few rich and many very poor people".

At the socio-psychological dimension of impoverishment and underdevelopment, it is not an overstatement to assert that certain forms of socio-political apathy and segregation at both national and local levels have been entrenched into the socio-cultural structure and psychology of our existence and relationships. At the national level, there is institutionalized ethnicism and nepotism, especially in the areas of power sharing, employment, scholarships, admission to higher institutions, and so on. In keeping with this observation, F. U. Okafor notes that: "Lop-sided power sharing has led to the complaint that certain ethnic groups in Nigeria have a monopoly of political power" (Okafor, 1997).

The very recent years, however, appear to indicate the feasibility of power shift to the South, with General Olusegun Obasanjo from the Yoruba ethnic majority group and Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan from a minority Niger delta group being democratically elected presidents consecutively. Notwithstanding, the increasing spate of violence in the Muslim dominated North that has greeted this development is a bold demonstration of this wrong philosophy that some special groups in Nigeria are born to rule the rest.

Another dimension to the problem of discrimination in Nigeria today is citizens of the "One Nigeria" are made to work on contract basis in their "own native land" in order to reserve opportunity for the yet unborn members of the "superior" and privileged ethno-religious groups. In the Editorial article of a recent edition of the Guardian Newspaper, Reuben Abati deals with

what he refers to as "the crisis of indigeneship and settlership" in Nigeria, which challenges the section on the rights of citizenship in the Nigerian constitution. Among other things, he rightly observes that some states of the Federation employ Nigerians from other states as "expatriate staff" or in more civilized situations as "contract staff", and the moment there is an indigene, even a less qualified son of the soil to fill that position, the alien from another state of the federation is promptly sacked (Abati, 2009: 3).

From our analysis, we can agree, therefore, that the issue of social injustice and the demand for socio-political and economic liberation are not to be associated with the situations in the former apartheid South Africa alone, but of equal relevance to the many similar conditions of oppression, exploitation and inequality in Nigeria. This challenge of our time is not to be thrown out solely to social or human rights activists as those whose job alone it is to take leadership in this direction. There is need for the Church to be involved in dealing with the problem of injustice and oppression and the quest for socio-political and economic liberation.

The Church and the Liberation of the Nigerian Society

Participation in the process of socio-political and economic 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. Christians are to take positive actions to destroy all forms of oppression and injustice wherever they are found (Hastings, 2000). This does not mean, however, 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 socio-political and economic order without jeopardizing her more 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 programmes 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.

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 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. 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, 2000).

Promoting Programmes of Raising Social Consciousness among the Masses.
This is a social educational programme 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 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 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.

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 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 programmes 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

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, 2011). 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, 1989). Christians should belong to one political party or the other and possess the Nigeria permanent voters card (P.V.C).

Conclusion
From the foregoing discussion, it is very glaring that Nigeria, like many countries of the world today, is in great of socio- political and economic 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 lofty goal. What is needed, the church urgently needs to enhance her effectiveness in fulfilling this aspect of her mission therefore, is a balanced form of theological orientation which is both spiritually oriented and socio-politically and economically relevant. This is the 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 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, 2011). 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 (2014) 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, 2014). It is indisputably conclusive, therefore, that a combination of the task of spiritual and social liberation enhances the Church, more than any other institution, to influence the socio-political and economic 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 Nigerian society. It has the mandate, message and method which can contribute greatly to the attempts to solve the socio-political and economic problems of the country.

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