

## **Religion, A Source Of Impoverishment Or Elevation Of The Poor: An Evaluation Of Religious Groups In Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

Religion serves the function of fulfilling peoples need for belief and worship. Nigerians are very religious people, however while most religious groups in Nigeria are growing, most of the members still remain very poor. This paper therefore set out to examine this paradox by first undertaking a conceptual analysis of religion and poverty, evaluating religious groups in Nigeria focusing on the extent they assist or impoverish the poor members. The paper contends that religious groups in Nigeria had abandoned their poor members and even exploited them in their poverty. The paper recommends a horizontal wealth flow from the religious groups and the wealthy members to the poor members in order assist them out of their poor conditions.

**Keywords: Religion, impoverishment, elevation, poor**

### **Introduction**

Religion, which ordinarily is the service and worship of God or the super natural is a very important and fundamental institution of society. Correspondingly, individuals fulfill their religious obligations by identifying and adhering to one religious group or the other, some individuals personally choose the religious groups to belong, while majority are members of a particular group, because they were socialized by the family to identify with the group.

However, because of the inherent elixir of life, inequality and difficulties in society some members of these religious groups are wealthy, while some are poor. The question therefore, is to what extent or otherwise do the various religious groups assist in changing the poor situations of their members and the society at large. This paper is a critical overview of the operations of the various religious groups in Nigeria. The objective is to highlight the extent to which the activities of these groups have either enhanced or mitigated the poor conditions of the members. Consequently, the religious groups were categorized into Moslem groups, Orthodox Christian Groups (OCG) and the New Generation Christian Groups (NGCG).

The paper started with the concept of religion and poverty. The purpose is to present the views of some notable scholars on the two major concepts that form the subject matter. Further, the paper highlighted the relevance of religion and the important position it occupies in the world. Also the various categories of religious

groups in Nigeria were examined in order to establish the extent to which they provide or do not provide for their poor members. Based on the above analyses, the paper arrived at some conclusions and proffered some recommendations.

#### **ANALYTICAL OBJECTIVES**

- To examine the concept of religion and poverty.
- To highlight the place of religion in the world.
- To examine the various religious groups in Nigeria focusing on the extent to which they assist or impoverish their poor members.
- To proffer some positive recommendations to enable the religious groups improve the poor conditions of their members.

#### **ANALYTICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

- Religion is viewed in terms of the function it performs for the individual and society.
- Poverty is viewed in absolute terms as operationalized in lack of material resources, basic human needs etc and any social exclusion arising from this condition.
- Religion is very important for the individual and society consequently, most individuals in the world belong to one religious group or the other.
- The various religious groups in Nigeria have abandoned their social responsibility, especially to the poor members.
- A vertical resource relationship presently exists between the Christian groups and their members in which the church is at the apex, and the followers at the bottom, and income flows constantly from the bottom up.
- Part of the solution is to adopt a horizontal flow of resources between the religious groups and their followers, especially the poor members.

#### **THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION AND POVERTY**

The foremost sociologist that recognized the critical importance of religion in human society was Emile Durkheim. Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (Schaefer 2005:351, Durkheim, 1961). He stated that religion is centered in beliefs and practices that are related to sacred as opposed to profane things. The sacred include elements of life that are mysterious, inspire awe, respect, reverence, and are separate from normal routine life while the profane are those ordinary commonplace and everyday elements of life.

The established conception of Durkheim gave rise to two viewpoints on religion. The first is to concentrate on the norms and values of religious faith by examining their substantive beliefs, rituals, sacrifices etc. The other direction is to examine or emphasize the social function that religion fulfill for both the members and society, like the provision of social support, reinforcing social norms and providing answers to the puzzles and problems of life and existence. However, the definition and distinctions of Durkheim seem problematic. There is the major task of being able to effectively establish a dichotomy between the sacred and profane. Religion in most cases involves elements of life that are both mysterious and non

mysterious, awe inspiring and commonplace, routine and not so routine. Both elements are also contained in religious teachings and practices. Therefore, while the distinction seems plausible at the ordinary level of analysis, it becomes very problematic at the practical level of reality.

Several scholars had also provided an insight into the concept of religion. Bronislaw Malinowski, (1954), in his field study of the Trobriand Islands off the Coast of New Guinea, sees religion as reinforcing social solidarity. He also identified the crises of life as the specific area of social life which forms the major concerns of religion like birth, puberty, marriage and death. However, this may not exactly be the case in today's contemporary world. Religion today does not only emphasize the crises of life, it also emphasizes peace, love, progress and the high points of life. Also, Talcot Parsons (1937, 1964, 1965a) asserts that religion provides general guidelines for conduct which are expressed in a variety of norms. Through the provision of these general principles as contained in morals and beliefs, religion help to build the consensus which is necessary for order and stability in society. With due respect to the views of Parsons, religion today is a major source of conflict, rancor, disorder and instability. Indeed, even in the past, religion had always been a major source of conflict and in some cases full scale wars between nations. Inherent in the norms and beliefs of modern religion are the principle of dichotomy, discrimination and division. Conflict and disorder also emanate from the true or false interpretation of the guiding principles of most religions.

Karl Marx and the conflict perspective rather conceive religion differently, they view religion as the opium of the masses which dulls the pain produced by oppression,(Haralambos&Holborn,2004). Religion according to this perspective fulfils this role through the promise of paradise or eternal bliss in life after death. Also, religion make a virtue of the sufferings of people, justifies poverty and make it more bearable by offering a reward in the afterlife. It conceives the social arrangement of poverty and deprivation as inevitable and divinely ordained. Consequently, religion is regarded as an instrument of oppression, because it discourages people from attempting to change their situations. The reality however is that in some cases, religion is an instrument of oppression, especially within a homogeneous group. However, in some other cases, religion could serve as an instrument of liberation. Nelson, (1986) pointed to a number of such cases in the USA and elsewhere. For instance in the USA, the activity of Rev Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the 1960's; the liberation theology of the Roman Catholic church in Latin America; the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the role of the Roman Catholic church in the fall of communism in Poland in 1989. This has also happened severally with the Jews in Israel and currently happening with the Hizbollah in Lebanon and also the Arab spring that started in Tunisia and spread across Egypt, Libya, and still raging in Syria.

Rather than adopt any of the above directions, Haralambos & Holborn, (2004) presented two broad approaches to the concept of religion, the first is the functional approach, and the second is the substantive approach. The functional

approach conceives religion in terms of the functions it performs for the individual and society. Based on this approach, Yinger sees religion as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life (Hamilton, 1995). On the other hand, the substantive approach emphasizes the content of religion. Robertson (1970) conceives religion based on this approach as the existence of supernatural beings that have a governing effect on life. Also, Spiro (1965) viewed religion as an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with superhuman beings. For the purpose of this paper however, we shall adopt the functional approach to religion. This will enable us to evaluate the role of religion in elevating or impoverishing the less privileged.

At this point, we shall dwell on the concept of poverty and social exclusion, which is the second strand of this subhead. Generally, poverty is a state of lack or deprivation of either material resources or other necessities for good living. Poverty can also be viewed in absolute or relative terms. According to Haralambos & Holborn, (2004), absolute poverty involves the absence or lack of basic human needs and is measured in terms of the resources required to maintain health and physical efficiency. The Copenhagen World Summit on Development gave an absolute conception of poverty as a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services (United Nations, 1995).

On the other hand, relative poverty emphasizes a situation of lack or deprivation that exists in relation to the standards specific to a particular society at a particular time. In other words, a situation that is considered poor in one society or place, may not qualify as a poor situation in another society or context. It also does not set a limit to what could be considered a poor situation. For instance, a millionaire may consider himself poor in relation to a billionaire.

Another approach of viewing poverty is to see it as a form of multiple deprivation that can have several facets, (Haralambos & Holborn, 2004). This view is in line with the concept of social exclusion which refers to a situation in which multiple deprivation prevents individuals from participating in important areas of societies activities like inability to find work, participate in leisure, active politics, etc. The view of this paper which incidentally is shared by Nolan and Whelan, (1996) is that the shift to social exclusion from poverty is regressive and deflects attention from solving the problem of poverty. Therefore, this paper would rather adopt the concept of absolute poverty operationalized in terms of lack of material resources, basic human needs, and other necessities required to maintain health and physical efficiency, and any social exclusion arising from these.

#### **RELIGION AND ITS PLACE IN THE WORLD**

According to Schaefer, (2005:353) and Hughes and Zanden (2002), “about 87% of the worlds population adhere to some religion and belong to some religious groups”. This means that only about 13% of the over six billion people in the world are non religious. It is apparent therefore, that most individuals in the world belong

to one religious group or the other. Consequently, it is reasonable to suggest that these religious groups could change the poverty situation of the world for the better if they can introduce effective programmes aimed towards the alleviation of poverty and the enhancement of the wellbeing of their members.

**TALBE 1: MAJOR RELIGIONS IN THE WORLD, THEIR LOCATION AND THE PERCENTAGE OF FOLLOWERS**

	<b>Faith</b>	<b>No of followers</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Location</b>
1.	Buddhism	364 (m)	5.9	S.E Asia, Mongolia Tibet
2.	Christianity	2,039(m)	33	Europe, North America, South America, West, South Africa.
3.	Hinduism	828(m)	13.3	Indians
4.	Islam	1.226(m)	19.8	Middle East Central Asia, N. Africa, Indonesia
5.	Judaism	14(m)	0.2	Israel, US, France, Russia (Jews)
6.	ATR	Not known		Africa

*Source: Schaefer, 2005:354*

From the above table, Christianity is the single largest religion in the world with 2.03 billion followers and about 33% of the world's population. The areas of the world that mostly practice this faith are also identified as Europe, North America, and South America. Christianity is also practiced in South Africa and some parts of West Africa. Islam with a population of about 1.2billion of followers is the second single largest religion with over 19.8% of the world's population as members. The major location of this religion in the world are the Middle East, Central Asia, North Africa and Indonesia.

Also, Hinduism with 828 million followers and 13.3% of the world's population is the third single largest religious group in the world. Majority of the followers of this religious group are from Indians who live at home and abroad. Buddhism is next with about 5.9% world population, and mostly practiced in Southeast Asia, Mongolia and Tibet. Judaism with about 14 million followers is the last, and is mostly practiced by Jews, either in Israel or in other parts of the world.

The inference from the above data is that about 27.8% of the world's population belongs to other minority world religions or do not adhere to any religion. It is important to note that the African traditional religion (ATR) is one of the minority groups. The ATR is practiced in almost all African countries by the indigenous populations. In Nigeria, there are three (3) major religious groups; Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR). The Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS, 1999) reported that about 45% of the Nigerian population practice Islam, 53% of the population are Christians, and 2% practice African traditional religion. The figure above shows that the largest population of Nigerians are Christians, while Islam is the second largest religion in Nigeria. Due to historical factors, the two major religious groups in Nigeria draw most of their followers from different parts of the country. The followers of

Christianity are mostly from the south, while most followers of Islamic religion are from the North of Nigeria.

### **RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND THE POOR IN NIGERIA**

The Christian religious groups in Nigeria are mostly made up of the Roman Catholic mission, Anglican Communion, Baptist church, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian, Christ Apostolic, Deeper Life, Living Faith, Redeemed Christian fellowship etc. The Islamic religious group is also made up of the An Sar udine society, the Sunni's and the Shiites, etc. However, we shall delineate two broad spectrums of Christian religious groups. The Orthodox Christian Groups (ORG) and the New generation Christian groups (NGCG). The orthodox group is made up of the relatively old missionary church groups like the Roman Catholic, Anglican Communion, Baptists, Presbyterians etc. On the other hand, the New generation groups are those that mostly emerged after the missionary activities, mostly from the 1970's. Some of these are the Deeper Life, Church of God Mission, Redeemed Christian Fellowship, Living Faith, Christ Embassy etc.

Most of the founders and overseers are Nigerians, they are mostly former members of the orthodox churches, profess the principle of born again, deliverance and prosperity. Some observe rigid codes from the Bible, while others maintain loose laissez-fair codes. Most of them also claim to read, interpret and strictly adhere to the teachings of the Bible. They find favour in criticizing the doctrines of the orthodox churches.

The question therefore is to what extent has these religious groups functioned to alleviate the poor conditions of their followers?

#### **The Moslem Groups:**

Among the Moslem groups there are three major processes through which the poor could be assisted. The first is the Zakat el fitri (Lloyd,2003,Pillars of Islam, 2010). This is a strong provision in Islam which stipulates that wealthy or successful members should share a portion of their wealth with the less privileged. It is obligatory for all Moslems who are able to do so and is considered to be a personal responsibility for Muslims to ease economic hardship for others and eliminate inequality. There is also the system of Sadakar which permits the poor to seek for alms, and also mandates other Moslems to give, as this act of giving will earn more blessings to the giver. There is also the system of the madrasa or the almajeri system. In this system, children of the poor especially the males are put into institutionalized settings, where they are provided with food, moral guidance, and teachings of the Koran. Generally, the Koran encourages humility, mutual assistance and support of the less privileged or the poor. Indeed Islam demonstrates more than any other religious group that naked and empty we came and so shall man depart the earth especially in their mode of burial. However, the extent to which members practice these teachings and observe these provisions leaves much to be desired. The Zakat is not seen as an obligation by all. The sadakar is not also observed by all, and when they do, the alms are not sufficient to change the poor condition of the individual. Also, the almajeri system is neglected and very poorly

organized. Most of the children eventually end up on the streets as street urchins. Indeed, the rich tend to constitute themselves as the privileged class and are more concerned with the maintenance and perpetuation of their status, rather than the reduction of poverty among their poor Moslem brothers. The consequence of this is the huge array of poor individuals that are abound in the predominantly Moslem northern Nigeria.

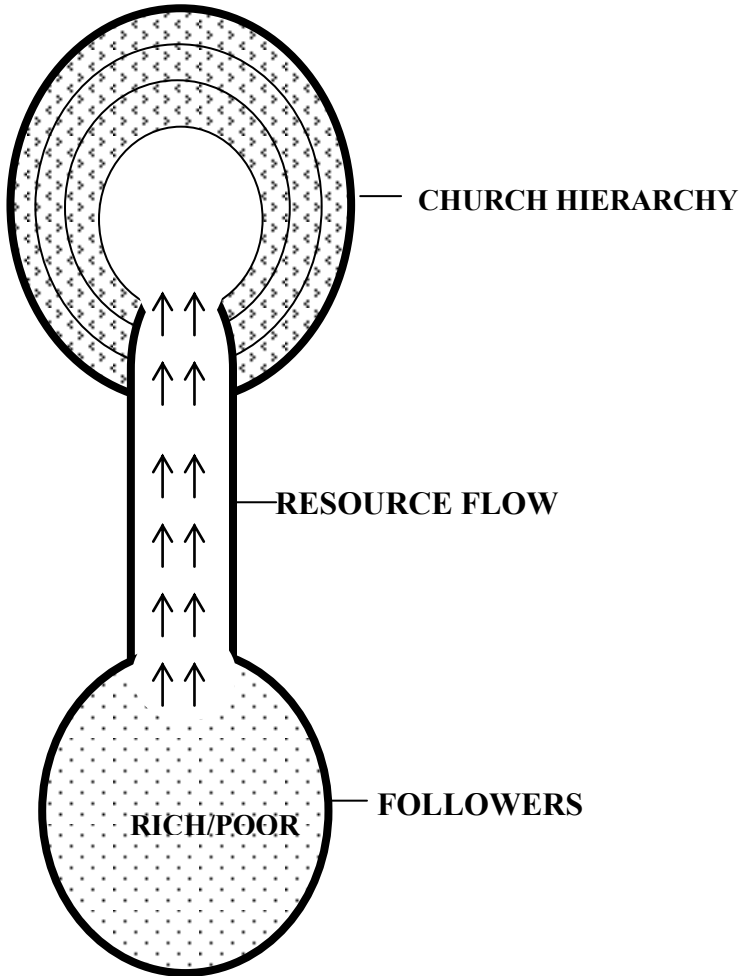
### **THE ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS GROUPS (OCRG)**

From the beginning of Christianity in Nigeria to the period before the Nigerian Biafran civil war, the major orthodox churches were mainly engaged in the fulfillment and provision of social responsibilities as a major plank of their missionary duties. They established primary and secondary schools like Methodist high school Afikpo, Christ the King college (CKC) Onitsha, Hope Wadell college Calabar, Holy Ghost college Owerri, Madonna High School Etiti, Stella Maris, Port Harcourt etc. These schools which were mostly established in southern Nigeria, served as the pivots of education in Nigeria at the time. They also sponsored most pupils within their various groups to go to school, and in some cases sent them abroad to pursue further studies.

These orthodox churches also pioneered the establishment of health institutions in their areas of dominance like in Iyielu, Amaigbo, Afikpo, and Calabar. These educational and health provisions changed the poor status and positions of most of their followers to high and better positions. Most of the beneficiaries emerged as lawyers, medical doctors, Engineers and reverends. There was also a high level of social solidarity, cohesion and cooperation among the various followers. This made it possible for most of them to get jobs and placements in the colonial and post colonial services and agencies.

However, with the end of the civil war, most of the foreign missionaries were forced to leave the country by the exigencies of the war. The federal and state government forcefully seized and took over all the missionary schools and hospitals. Consequently, the orthodox churches were forced to jettison the social responsibilities which firmly anchored them in the straight path of endless service to their followers, while attending to their spiritual needs. The period after the civil war also marked a transition process from the foreign missionaries to Nigerian leaders and priests. From then onwards the direction shifted drastically to building of churches and spreading of parishes rather than assisting and alleviating the poor condition of members. Presently, the social relationship between members and the church especially in relation to resources is purely vertical, with the church at the apex and the followers at the bottom. Also income and resources flows constantly from the bottom up.

**FIG 1: VERTICAL RESOURCE FLOW CHART**



The churches continuously make demands on members without taking any concrete action to improve and enhance the resource of these followers except the promise of higher rewards in haven. Consequently, the followers of these churches are continually impoverished. Several groups and organizations are created through



which members are levied and taxed to execute various projects in the church. Curiously enough, non of these levies or taxes are established to assist members who are in need. The church hierarchy also establish special relationships with the wealthy members for special donations and contributions. In some of the churches, the poor who are not financially up to date are denied certain privileges. However in comparative terms, the level of cohesion and intra-follower cooperation and integration seem to be higher among the Anglicans than the Catholics.

### **THE NEW GENERATION CHRISTIAN GROUPS (NGCG)**

These are mostly in the shape of sects evangelical or fellowship groups (Hughes, Kroehler and Zanden, 2002). Their leaders, and even the bulk of the followers are usually breakaways from the orthodox Christian groups. They usually start as a small group, but with evangelism and demonstration of the ability to perform signs and wonders, and with emphasis on prosperity and deliverance, they begin to spread and gain followers.

These NGCG'S are also sources of impoverishment and exploitation of members rather than alleviating their poor conditions. They adopt several means like demonstrating the ability to perform signs and wonders, casting out demons, treating the sick, organizing crusades, emphasizing prosperity and payment of tite offering (giving 10% of your earnings to the church). Some of them attract foreign donations or are affiliated to some new generation groups in America and Europe.

Generally, they are mostly founded by individuals who operate them like their family business. The groups are incorporated in their names, or the names of their wives and children. They are the accountants, the overseers and chief executive officers (CEO's). Also, the property, assets and finances are in most cases, in the name of the founders and owners. Leadership succession also runs along family line either from husband to wife or to children. Some of the founders and pastors who lead these groups own private jets, exotic cars, choice properties, banks and live in opulence while most of their followers are dying in poverty. They exploit the general social and economic problems in the society, which propel most people to seek for solution in the churches. Individuals go to them for solutions to their health, social and spiritual problems. They take advantage of the general poverty, frustration and sick condition of the people. Some of the pastors even engage in exorcism, going to homes to uproot and exhume charms for a fee. Sometimes they will recommend fasting and prayers, and collect money from the members to do it on their behalf. The existence of these groups has given rise to fraudsters and dupes operating in the name of religion.

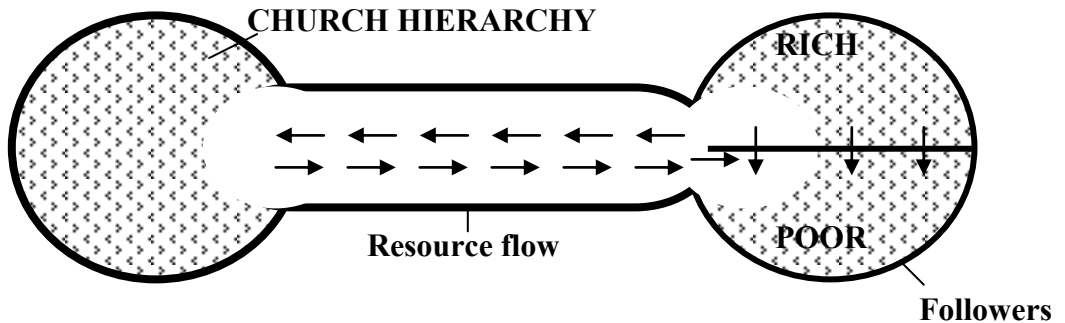
In conclusion, both the Moslem, orthodox Christian and New generation Christian groups have either abandoned their poor followers or have impoverished than change their poor conditions. It is a situation of the poor gets poorer, and the church gets richer.

### **CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is the view of this paper that though religious groups are supposed to be funded and sustained, the poor members of these religious groups should be assisted

to escape the clutches of poverty. The churches must once again, embrace their social responsibilities to their followers and communities. The spiritual uplifting must be accompanied with the enhancement of the material wellbeing of the followers.

**FIG 2: HORIZONTAL RESOURCE FLOW CHART**



There should be a horizontal flow of resources between the religious groups and their followers. The rich members should give to the church, and also assist their fellow members. The church hierarchy must assist their poor members who will in turn be in a position to contribute to the church. Some of the donations and offerings that are collected every week could be dedicated to helping the poor. Also, the proceeds from annual harvests and bazaar which sometimes run into millions of naira can be used to set up special funds for the poor. The proceeds from the collective payment of tites can be redistributed to the less privileged members of the church. The poor could use these funds to start a business, learn a craft or sponsor their children to school. Both Moslem and Christian groups should emphasize the importance of education. The madrasa or almajeri system in the North should be modified to include academic curriculum. Also, scholarships and funds should be established to sponsor the children of poor members to schools. Some of them should also establish schools and make existing one affordable to people. This is because, knowledge is power. According to ones of the great minds of the information age, Philip Emeagwali, “poverty is not an absence of money, rather it results from an absence of knowledge”, (emeagwali.com.2008).

Religious groups should use their position to engage with government for the benefit of their members and not just for the benefit of the church and their leaders. It is not right for a religious group to embark on a multi million naira project when most of the members can not feed themselves. A situation where a pastor or evangelist owns private jets, exotic cars and lives in opulence when most of the followers can not afford the shelter of one room apartment is not acceptable.

The churches and religious groups can organize their members into self help cooperatives and attract micro credit for members to start a business or engage in small entrepreneurship. Finally religious groups should come out of their apathy and self enrichment, and re-engage their followers. They should promote and embrace horizontal engagement with their members, rather than vertical engagement which only favour the church to the detriment of the poor members.

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