

ECONOMIC DEPRESSION AND HUMAN RELIGIOSITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION OF THE PROLIFERATION OF CHURCHES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Man is a homo religious being who is deeply concerned about the unknown and makes frantic efforts to understand his origin, essence, task here on earth, the smallest planet within the milky-way galaxy and his final destiny. Thus, Kant observed that man is the only being that can ask and answer the four questions of what must I know? What must I do? What can I hope for? What is man? From these, it follows that man is a corporeal as well as a spiritual being, transcendent yet immanent. So being imbued with a dual nature he cannot but seek dual fulfillment. In this work, however the onus is to look into the problem of proliferation of churches and the attendant propagation and profession of faith in Nigeria by Nigerians which has not borne fruits of the spirit. There seems to be a correlation between this proliferation and the economic downturn which has made life miserably poor for the teeming populace who now seek comfort and bread of love from the churches and in the process, fall prey to the self acclaimed messiahs who shrewdly use comforting sermons and quotes to sap them of the little they have and thereby create in them, a greater yearning for spiritual nourishment. It is the submission here that the government has a lot to do to salvage this ugly situation otherwise a revolution will inescapably bring an end to both the politics of looting and the deceptive actions of our men of god.

Introduction

Religion is a necessary phenomenon in the life of man. This is because by nature man has a dual nature; he is spiritual yet immanent. As a result, it has been observed by many that it is not possible for man not to yearn for the supra-sensible for this will amount to his acting against his own nature. Some philosophers therefore, argue that if there is no God, it will be necessary for man to invent God. However the most recent emergence in the world, Africa and most especially Nigeria of a religious growth characterised by an unprecedented proliferation of churches is an issue in itself very grave and indeed perturbing. This trend comes with a new wave of Christian message sweeping through this country like a bushfire. This new message extols wealth rather than poverty, treasures rather than good deeds, prosperity and earthly comfort rather than patience in tribulations.

This has prompted the so called rise in evangelism which has meaning and serves, more beneficial purposes to the proprietors who have become evidence of Christianity's changing face, buoyed by a rapidly growing clientele and attainment of a high social status and swollen bank accounts.

Those who succumb to this new wave of Christianity usually do it as a result of crass ignorance, fear, despair, unemployment, social and economic difficulties and a belief that these churches. However more often than not, they find themselves a prey to the avaricious tendencies of these self acclaimed messiahs and spiritual patriarchs who cash on their ignorance and despair to strip them of the little they have.

This paper sets out to examine from the philosophical angle the phenomenon of the proliferation of churches with a view to discovering what exactly it is, its immediate and remote cause(s) and also highlighting its "economic importance" to the Nigerian society.

Statement of the problem

The question why the proliferation of churches in Nigeria at this juncture becomes very paramount especially in the face of Christ's prayer: 'Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou has given me, that they may be one as we are'(cf John 17:11). Does it imply that the world especially Nigeria is beginning to see the importance of religion? If so why is this only predominant in the practice of Christianity in the underdeveloped or developing worlds? How do we reconcile this with the ills that accompany this trend? What are the possible factors responsible for the

proliferation of churches? Is the proliferation of churches a response to economic depression, human religiosity or psychological relief from the battering of global suffering? What factors make this possible for the perpetuation of this trend in Nigeria since we seem to be worse off than other countries? Where does this prayer portend for the prayer of Christ?

Clarification of Terms and Concepts

Economic depression: No widely accepted definition of this expression exists but some descriptions have been proposed. For instance, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research of the United State determines ‘contractions and expansions in the business cycle but do not declare depressions’. This definition is culled from en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/depression. Depression is ‘characterized by its length, and by abnormal increases in unemployment, falls in the availability of credit, shrinking output and investment, numerous bankruptcies, reduced amounts of trade and commerce, as well as highly volatile relative currency value fluctuations, mostly devaluations’. This is the definition of this concept by Wikipedia.

Generally, depression periods are marked by a substantial and sustained shortfall of the ability to purchase goods relative to the amount that could be produced using current resources and technology. The term has the dual connotation of both a below level of economic output as well as a high level of psychological depression.

Human religiosity: This term is a quite difficult one to define since it is a merger of two terms ‘human’ and ‘religiosity’. This term as used in this paper, entails the state of belief in the teachings of a particular religion which in turn, affects the way and manner in which the adherent of this belief lives out his everyday life. In this particular paper the term is used to imply the point where belief in the tenets of a particular religion are so part of a person that it begins to exhibit itself in the person’s ‘*modus vivendi*’ (mode of living).

Proliferation of churches: This is the term used to define the practice by which new and hitherto unknown churches crop up and begin to practice the new brand of Christianity which Obiora (1999:15) observed is characterized by ‘proclamations of salvation, revivals and crusades where people are promised everything (including solutions to all problems under and above the sun), except one thing – FULFILMENT.’ This brand of Christianity in most cases has a peculiar characteristic, that its members have the Bible as their ever present companions.

Is this Trend of Proliferation of Churches Nouvelle?

At this juncture, it would be paramount to note that Christ is the founder of Christendom and that as its founder He founded only one church. However, it must be observed that this proliferation of churches is not a new phenomenon since the church founded by Christ himself has suffered many schisms even before and after the popular reforms of Martin Luther. For even in his lifetime some of his teachings sparked off schisms which both astonished and kept away a great number of people. For instance his claim that the text in the book of Isaiah ‘the spirit of the Lord is upon me..’ (cf. Luke 4:18 -19) was a reference to him had the rabbis and doctors confused for they could not comprehend what he was saying. The result was disintegration and desertation. (cf. Jn. 6:50 – 56, 57 – 66). Also his assertion that he was ‘the bread of life’ (John 6: 35, 41, 48 – 56) had his followers reacting violently for they mistook the sacrificial victim which he had implied by equating himself to the bread of life, with mere bread. The bread he meant was the free offering of his own flesh for the salvation of mankind. This becomes a gift of himself as a ransom so as to nourish men unto eternity. His listeners stubbornness of heart is shown in their embarrassment and response contained in John 6: 52 -54). This bread of life doctrine cost Christ dearly and led to the first ever recorded schism in the New Testament. The schism itself was as a result of many different understanding and interpretations and so was a question of hermeneutics. Even the interpretation of the doctrine of marriage was in itself a matter of contention between rabbi Hillel and rabbi Shamai.

How did We Get Here?

The profound and limitless causes of the upsurge and proliferation of Pentecostal and mushroom churches in the modern world are the concern of this part of the paper. Thus, this section will focus sharply on specific causes by taking stock of historical and anthropological perspectives to dig into the roots and genesis of the multi-fission of churches.

Historical antecedents show that through the centuries, rancorous divisions, muddled thinking and perverse loyalties engendered by heretical doctrines have enhanced and indeed, flowered the proliferation of churches. These culminated in the great schism of 1054 which parted Christendom into orthodox Catholic West. The thunderbolt which resulted in the momentous bang shattering to shreds the unity of Christendom, rewriting the history of mankind, redrawing the map of the world and changing, for better or for worse, the face of the earth was the protestant Reformation. This set the stage for the decimation and atomization of the church. Rapidly following at its heels, was an upsurge of churches both national and confessional culminating in the present trend where Christian denominations and factions have grown by leaps and bounds defying all numerical calculation.

Bringing it back home to Nigeria, the picture is quite appalling, abysmal and grotesque. This upsurge of mushroom churches is highly critical because of what Obiora (1999:6) described so aptly as the 'ominous factor in the African's search for spiritual succour, solace and rejuvenation'. The rift and wounds that exist between Christians in Nigeria are both rife and very deep-seated and have proved more difficult to heal. This split is so evident evading and pervades Nigeria's Christianity that inter-church relationships still bristle with serious problems.

The 1882 division among the Presbyterians in Nigeria was the most notable. According to Obiora (1999:6) this was hinged on the personal differences between two missionaries. Another occurred among the Baptists in 1888 in Lagos which arose from personal disagreements between Rev. Moses Stone who wanted religion-business and Rev. David who opposed the move. This resulted in Rev. Moses Stone leaving the service of the official Baptist church taking the name 'EBENEZER'. Then in 1891, the United Native African Church broke away from the Church Missionary Society while the Bethel Church broke away from the Methodist Church in 1917 all resulting from minor disagreements. It was from these experienced divisions that the so-called 'Independent African Churches' and other multi-fission of churches took their roots. This trend has continued to multiply through the length and breadth of this country in quite an alarming proportion and does not seem to be showing any sign of abating. In fact, all factors seem to be pointing to the direction that the sky may be the limit for the growth in the number of proliferating churches.

The Impact of the Proliferation of Churches in Nigeria.

It has succeeded in widening the economic divide between the haves and have-nots. This is made possible by the means whereby the pastors/priests appeal to the gullible spirit of their congregation with promises of business breakthroughs and prosperity if they would sow a seed, contribute to the upkeep of the 'prophet or man of God'. This in turn, leads the congregation to spend huge amounts of money in a bid to be beneficiaries of this spiritual bonanza. Another of such methods is the imposition of special tithes on selected rich men. These men must be millionaires and are made to accept to surrender one-third of their total monthly or weekly income to the Lord's vineyard. These men are so brainwashed that they believe their businesses would suffer setbacks if they fail to remit such money to the churches coffers with the resultant effect that most of them are unable to meet up with their responsibilities to their extended and sometimes, even immediate families. In defence of their nefarious activities, these so called men of God hide under such sweeping statements like 'I am serving a God of wealth and not a God of poverty or the lord will supply all my needs according to his riches in glory. (cf Philippians 4:19) In other instances, observed Obiora (1999:126) "the congregation is reminded that the whole world is owned by God and God is the God of riches. Christ is a king and Christ is God. We are the sons of God, princes and only the best is good enough for the children of God". Sunny Obadan the founding pastor of Christian ReachOut Church Inc. Lagos, is credited by Weekend Concord of May 28, 1994,5 (253:2) as having said the following in defence of prosperity:

Preachers of the past had what I can call poverty mentality...when Jesus was on earth, I believe He wore clothes made by designers of the time that

was why soldiers had to cast lots on who will keep his cloth after He was crucified. God is not a poor God and does not expect His children to be poor... The gospel is business but it is spiritual business.

This happens not be the end of the story as these so called men of God proceed to flaunt this ill-gotten wealth before their very members whose money they have used to feather their own nets by living ostentatiously; driving flashy cars, owning private jets and state of the art mansions furnished with the latest gadgets and equipments to make life easy. Unfortunately, most of this poor flock have yet to reap the fruits of the seeds they have sown. In fact, they are being expected to sow more seeds with the injunction that perhaps, they have not sowed the right seed. However, we know that whatever seed is sown should bear fruits the rightness or wrongness of the seed notwithstanding.

The economy of our country is unfortunately not what it is supposed to be. This ugly situation has led to the emergence of the school of thought economic downturn is directly proportional to the proliferation of churches. A proper survey will show that most of the pastors, evangelists, deacons, prophets or men of God either had a previous career or occupation in which they were not making a head way or were jobless and frustrated and one day suddenly received their 'call' to become 'men of God'. Obiora (1999:2) painted the picture more clearly and humorously when he wrote that such a man 'gets up one morning, taps his buttocks, clutches the Bible under his armpit and claims being sent by God to save the world'.

Another economic importance of these phenomena is that it has led to the modification of crime and fraud for how else can one explain the recent belief in the principle of the end justifies the means which has led some pastors to declare that 'it does not matter how the wealth is acquired provided it is used to start a church. You can dupe. You can commit any atrocity, and some of them after duping will present themselves as "those who put their trust in the Lord that lack no blessings"' Obiora (1999:157)'. The number of pastors who started churches by committing various crimes and atrocities, by one means or the other in order to guzzle out money from the masses is, as yet, known to God alone. Today, a lot of '419' ministers exist who use their organisations to defraud foreign ministries and tarnish the country's image by travelling abroad often to seek financial assistance from individuals, churches, organisation etc. by the means of one lie or the other only for them to return to the country and buy flashy cars and build exotic mansions. Others use this money solicited for to engage in business by acquiring goods such as clippers, baby wears, computers and other merchandise which they come to sell at inflated prices in the country.

Weekend Concord of April,26,(1997:9) has observed that 'the phenomenon continues in a more advanced level with some pastors going to the extent of running a prostitution ring; exporting Nigerian girls for commercial sex'. Others go out of the country and flaunt fake paraphernalia of office as in the case of a Nigerian 'pastor' who went to the famous Haggai Institute in Singapore and introduced himself as the Oba of Yoruba land. Unfortunately, his bubble was burst by another Nigerian 'pastor' who informed them that no such title existed with the effect that the institute constituted a committee charged with screening of Nigerian ministers visiting the institute.

This trend of proliferation of churches serves as a source of income for government with the revenue generated from the 'registering' of such churches. This income generated from the practice of registering churches is the reason why there are a multitude of churches with all sorts of names from the absurd to the most humorous, with different and varying mission and vision statements. These so called registered churches as a result of their registration must pay a certain amount of money as tax. This consequently, leads these churches to try to raise both the money for the payment of the tax and also to try to recoup that amount they have paid as tax. The advent of prosperity prompted the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) to implore the government to desist from registering churches indiscriminately. In Obiora (1999:163) we gathered that " the campaign for punitive action against dubious churches reached its height in 1996 first, because of the ostentatious lifestyle of the more visible new-wave church proprietors exemplified by the purchase of private jets by three popular preachers." The indecent and vulgar show of wealth by some self-appointed ministers of God was the next reason that led to this development.

The most profound impact that the proliferation of churches has had is that it has led to the commercialization of religion by the sale of religious items and even such things which Christ himself did for free. The practice of commercialization is evident everywhere around us with the same articles

(sometimes such articles are not spiritual) costing less outside religious and worship centres and more in such places. The height of this practice is seen in the sale of religious articles and materials at very exorbitant and escalating prices. Among the Catholic circle, the most highly commercialized articles are the ones with stickers of one miracle ministry or the other. For instance, a rosary bead could be sold for 100 naira ordinarily, but at such places where miracles happen, the same rosary could be sold for as much as 10,000 naira or more. Among the proliferating churches, this practice has been taken to its logical conclusion with the sale of perfumes and incenses of various smells and fragrance with the claim that they have the potency to perform miracles. This trend has reached an unprecedented height with the commercialization of miracles by charging people who ask for special prayers, healing or miracles very high prices. Another means of this commercialization is the collection of exorbitant consultation fees. All these are in flagrant disregard of the divine injunction by Christ 'you received without charge, give without charge' (cf Matt. 10:8).

Evaluation

From the whole picture painted by this presentation, one will observe that the trend of the proliferation of churches is not on the verge of abating anytime in the near future for all the pointers seem to concur this. The most perplexing feature of this trend is that it promotes either the picture of a Cross less Christ or a Christ less Cross. They thus show men the easy road which contradicts the Biblical injunction to 'enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to perdition is wide and spacious...' (Matt7:13 -14).

More often than not, people now lose sight of the salvific values of suffering sometimes and the result is cataclysmic in the sense that the pursuits of wealth in both licit and illicit ways have become the creed of many religionists.

Religion today has employed the Machiavellian tactics where the end justifies the means. Religion has become a business-oriented glossy venture concerned with the satisfaction of the entrepreneurs, executives and investors who hide behind self-made pastors whose main aim is building fortresses and empires out of it. Through these means, they further their own nests and theorize that ghettos would disappear if and only if men joined their fellowship.

Church proliferation in the Nigerian religious firmament is spreading with the speed of lightning under the toga of business armed with religion. Everywhere, one turns one's sights are assaulted by the spiritual stench of leprosy and paralysis. If these are not enough, the fact that the proprietor-preacher never stops hectoring people about the inevitability of joining their own church for salvation by employing various somersaults and strategies from the 'holy of holies' becomes reminiscent of the discarded catholic doctrine of "*extra ecclesia nemo salvator*".

From the foregoing, it is obvious that the most recent fad in the Nigerian religious landscape is to use the name of God to shore up a looming profitable venture. This trend is simply hinged on the fact that economic depression has led to the scenario where money is the basis of all things. The eruption of this instinct in the character of Karl Marx father led the young Marx to view religion as nothing but the opium of the masses and a sedative for the rich. On his part Hegel's () disparagement of religion was born out of the abuse of religion by the people who claimed in his days to be the champions of religion and morals. Fredrick Neitszche's () announcement of the obituary of God was not a result of solitary reflection but an attempt to register his disillusionment about Christianity's double standards of morality which has led to the obituary of this God in the minds of men. The force with which some Nigerians crave to establish family business churches is in line with the economic principle of inflation which arises as a result of too many people chasing too fewer goods. The question yet to be answered is whether the proliferation of churches has in any way imparted on peoples knowledge and understanding of God and neighbour? The answer to this question seems to be negative in every inch.

Philosophically, we know that man is an insatiable being. His insatiability rests on the fact that he is a physical as well as spiritual being, immanent yet transcendent, located within space and time yet transcends space and time in his thought. As a result, man's deepest yearnings are for things spiritual. He yearns to be close and united with the Creator who not only created him but has above all, constituted him a co-creator. Perhaps, it was in consideration of this that Augustine of Hippo () said "you created us for yourself oh Lord and our souls are restless until they rest in you."

Conclusion

The phenomenon of religious commercialization is an offshoot of the proliferation of churches and has made religion appear to be a form of trade with a lot of traders. This lucrative business of soul is spreading to the nooks and crannies of the capitalist world where money worship is a form of religion. But this is business of the absurd, by the absurd and for the absurd. Without the accompanying social status, comfortable living and unbridled acquisition of wealth and choice properties by pastors, these unending floodgates of new churches and ministries would crumble and fold up. This is because this trend is built specially on deceit.

This trend of the proliferation of churches which has divided Christendom is a misnomer, a gross scandal and misguided missile; a high water mark of unqualified calamity. Thus the trend when one establishes his own church today only to go to the media the next day and call on Christians to stop the incessant sprouting of churches. This phenomenon is tantamount to the kettle calling the pot black. This phenomenon can be summarized in these words, the proliferation of churches – the further splintering, disintegrating and shattering of the church into mushrooming and pseudo-churches is a hobnail scandal. It works against the fulfilment of Christ's prayer for the coming together of one flock under one shepherd. This submission is an indisputable truth depicted to posterity and which will always stand the test of time.

The most painful aspect of the proliferation of churches is the fact that it fails to yield fruits, that is, it takes the individual to that state where the teachings and belief of his faith fails to permeate his lifestyle and as a result, we have houses of worship without true worship, sermons without a true message and 'belief' without 'faith'. Little wonder it is often said that Nigeria is the most religious country in the world with a lot of churches and worship centres but this same entity called Nigeria also happens to be among the most corrupt in the world. What an irony!

As a panacea, it is highly recommended that government has an arduous role to play in order to abate this spate of proliferation of churches in Nigeria. The first task of government is to set the economy right and thereby provide a congenial environment for human and humane living to thrive. Next is to control the registration of churches as family business and to monitor the activities of those who call themselves men of God with a view to ensuring that all of them have honest means of livelihood other than the church. Government can as well enforce the payment of taxes for all companies and business outfits belonging to the churches as well as private individuals.

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