

## THE CHALLENGES FACING CHRISTIANS IN THE PRESENT CENTURY

*Rev. Eric Emeka Anozie*

### Abstract

This paper looks at challenges facing Christians with its devastating impact on the church and our society in general. Christians must not live like the 'heathen' but as children of God who have been delivered by the spirit of God from bondage. They must show their reverence to Christ through their obedience to God's commandment. They must recognize that they are in spiritual conflict against the powers of darkness. Today, the bulk of Christians is agonizingly poor in discharging this noble responsibility of our lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, they are not vibrant in faith. Many issues are responsible. They include the secularism of the present age, the influence of science and technology, the HIV/AIDS scourge, threat/incursion of other faith-sharia issue and the practice of occultism. Christians are no longer Christians. Based on these, this paper has responded to a timely call for proper analysis of this monster with the aim of finding a solution to the cankerworm so that Christians can respond genuinely to the gospel of Christ in our own time.

### Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity had posed a serious challenge to the contemporary Christians. The third millennium is around the corner. We are faced with all its excitement, uncertainties, possibilities, prospects, potentials and problems. Technological gadgets appropriate for the era are now being produced and distributed. Religious circle concentrate on the facts and implication for the global village.

It becomes imperative to prepare the entire church for this age, to help us to gamer all that is necessary for this life and witness as a believing mature community. We are convinced that God has given us social as well as evangelistic responsibilities in his world, yet the century of neglect has put us far behind in this area. According to Stott (1984:12) "we must understand that the church have a second commitment, namely to the world in which God has placed us". Indeed, Jesus called and trained the twelve disciples and commissioned them to evangelize the whole world. The prayer of Jesus Christ "Holy father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one (John 17:11) for all believers shows the inclusiveness of the call and commission. Osborn (1966:66) describe the great commission as the "one thing Jesus Christ left us to do, this is every Christians life work-his calling purpose-his ministry. He describes the Great Commission as a military command".

It is pertinent to note that some Christians who are faithful to the revelation of God respond without compromise, ignore the challenges of the modern world and live in the past. Others, anxious to respond to the world around them, trim and twist God's revelation in their search for relevance. The two worlds are in conflict, demanding the attention of faithful Christians. Christians are to participate in all areas of life in the society, which they live, for instance, they have no excuse for refusing to be part of politics in their time. Politics shall not be do or die, or being involved in murder. The Christian is not begging the people to vote for him in order to serve but the people are begging him to come and serve them. Christians of Nigeria must look at our nation as what we are called to transform and not something we are called to imitate.

Indeed, as the world remains the Christian's abode, socio-economic, technological and political events in every polity should attract the attention and response of the Christians. The challenge it poses calls for a sustained properly programmed and in -depth Bible study and theological reflection. Whenever Christians are asleep, charlatans parading themselves about as Christians flood the Christian population within their reach with strange ideas, heresies, and repugnant doctrines -which are often attractive to the ears for the enticing promises they offer.

The church cannot escape from that experience if it does not continually and committedly ponder on its history. Thus Hill (1995:21) reflectively opines that:

The church will never be able to satisfy the deepest longings of mankind and give a lead to secular nations or point the way to creative policies promoting health, happiness and the well-being of mankind until Christians recover an understanding of history.

In fact, this is a clarion call and a serious challenge to have an in-depth study on the challenges facing Christians in the present dispensation. The challenges of the time may be defined as those hazards issuing from politics, economics, sociology, religion, technology, innovations, upsurges, uphill tasks, adaptations, developments, acculturation and all phenomenon of change which make the world both perverse and crooked in the face of and against which the religion of Christ has to be taught, proclaimed and practiced. However, considering the scope of the work, the author will examine some of these challenges.

### **The Secularism of the Present Age**

The word, 'Secular' is derived from the Latin word "Saeculum" which means "world". There is no doubt that the church is becoming more worldly. People don't value prayer any more. Religion is seen as something practiced by frustrated people. The word secular has come to be used mainly in the negative. Sometimes it is used in the sense of a force that excludes God, living without God in the world. Martin (1978:21) describes secularization "as a process of beloved worldly. It is a movement away from the church to the world". In another development Ekpunobi (1991:77) reiterated "secularization may be manifested in emancipation from ecclesiastical tutelage and withdrawal from one's responsibility to the judgment of God". This philosophical and ethical systems, which was designed to interpret and order life without resources to belief in God, the Bible or a future life.

The influence of secularization in the life of Christians cannot be overemphasized. The life of people presently depicts as if God did not exist. People rarely justify what they do with an appeal to biblical teaching or church tradition. From the market place to the marital bed, activities are seldom judged in a Christian light. No wonder Odunze (1983:13) has this to say "Religion has no business in the laboratory or labour club, the office or the TV studio. The social space is shrinking which religion is supposed to survive".

Our society is decaying, changing from moral and social values to capitalist values. Christians have been overwhelmed by material values. This is a situation where every other value like love, charity, justice, obedience etc is sacrificed on the alter of material wealth because of worldly desire and influence. Ebo (1994:11) has shown that "materialism has become the spirit of our age, this acute sense of materialism has created a moral vacuum".

Another form of secular outlook involves according religious devotion to someone, something or some processes, which at first glance has little to do with religion as conventionally conceived. Unlike oil and water, which refuse to mix, the sacred and the secular merge with each other in a most confusing way. Indeed the complexities of secularization abound.

### **The Influence of Science and Technology**

The tremendous expansion of scientific knowledge in the modern era has had a profound and tremendous influence upon Christian belief and practice. The sciences have cumulatively established the autonomy of natural order according to Odunze (1983:13):

Science has done a lot to improve the lots of mankind. Scientists are discovering many things almost everyday. Science has given credence to most sophisticated modern inventions. Electricity and power are other wonderful inventions. Computer and electronics have both battled and excited people who are ordinary consumers. Surely man has and is doing a lot of wonders with his power of the brain.

Today, man has improved a lot in the field of agriculture. There is test-tube babies. Laboratories have been built and scientists are busy working day and night to produce living beings. All these technological gadgets need caution. According to Keeley (1989:15).

The new technology presents dangers as well as promise, Especially when it is set within a global context and when social cost is set beside economic gain. And modern men and women are increasingly succumbing to the temptation of deity, the new technology into an idol

that enslaves the spirit.

In the light of science and technology some churches instead of taking a stand for what the Bible teaches, they gave in to the pressures and compromised on such fundamental articles of faith as creation by God and the authenticity of the Bible. As a result church began to lose credibility, and many people began to lose faith, with effect that they question the very foundation of religion.

Science and technology emphasizes objectivity and the collection of empirical data, to the detriment of faith, belief and revelation, without knowing that there are certain things you cannot measure or collect like “God”, Holy Spirit”, “evil”, “paradise”, “hell fire” etc. In the light of the above gullible members of the society lose faith in their religion.

The tremendous scientific and technological achievements, and sometimes advances of the modern time have given man a great sense of power to manipulate the world and also power of security. Without knowing that there are limits to what we can do, with effect that all problems of mankind are reduced to technical dimensions and can thus be resolved with technological fixes. This created communication gap between man and God in the world of religion.

Indeed, science and technology have threaten Christians and also attack them from right, left and centre. “Miracle” and “divine intervention” in human affairs also came under suspicion. All of a sudden, God and religion seemed outdated to many, and some of those who considered themselves up-to-date quickly turned their back on God and flocked to the worship of the sacred cow of science and technology.

### **The HIV/AIDS Scourge**

The God of peace has always intended that man he created in his own image will perpetually know peace and live in peace. Jesus Christ who is the head of the church being conscious of this prayed for the peace of the church and wished above all things that his people shall be in good health even as their souls prosper. This peace and good health is eluding man on daily basis due to the emergences of strange omens and epidemic diseases. The scourge of epidemic such as HIV/AIDS is currently on the verge of throwing the world into stupendous crisis. HIV/AIDS is terminating the life of men and women and youth of our society untimely, if this monster ravaging the real life of people of our society is not given due attention and controlled, the world will soon become meaningless and eventually collapse. According to Lewis (2002:3):

AIDS is a disease which is passed from one person to another. It is caused by a virus called HIV. We cannot see this virus with our eyes... When a man or woman is infected with HIV, it gradually destroys the body's power to fight sickness. The body is left like a country without soldiers to protect it. The person easily becomes sick with many different illnesses. Then the disease is called AIDS.

Indeed AIDS is a global problem that need global attention. Many Christian families suffer tragically because of the actions of fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. Many in our churches were affected, many children left as orphans, having their hopes for the future ruined, losing their chance for education and a happy life. No wonder Garland (2003:221) reiterated that “All over Africa children are caring for dying parents with AIDS. Many households are headed by children caring for their younger siblings. Caring Christian adults can make an enormous difference in the lives of these children. God loves these children more than we ever can. His love for them is inexhaustible “. The church is challenged to prevent this tragedy, and also prevent the emergence of an orphan generation that will suffer greatly.

### **Threat/Incurison of Other Faith-Sharia Issue**

The recent Islamic resurgence in some countries has made things hard for the churches, reducing their freedom to evangelize. But sometimes the hard legalism is fundamentalist Islam makes people to look at the Christian gospel as liberation gospel. Since 1982, there have been strategies for

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the total Islamization of the African Continent (Onaiyekan, 1987). President Gaddafi of Libya who visited Nigeria after the Buhari coup declared a jihad against Christianity in black Africa and accused the Christian church of “being false, infidel and irreligious”. He proudly declared in Rwanda “Africa must be Muslim, Christians are intruders in Africa, and agents of Colonialism, we must wage a holy war so that Islam will spread in Africa”. The ambition of Sheikh Abubakar Gumi to make Nigeria an Islamic state is well-known.

The more recent of the incursion of other faith was the issue of Sharia, according to Nzomiwu (1989:117).

Literally the word 'Sharia' connotes “the clear path to be followed” but it is at times technically referred to as the Canon Law of Islam. It is a compendium, of rights and duties whereby man fittingly conduces his life in this world and prepares himself for the future life, it is because of this that many scholars of Islam refer to Sharia as a “way of life”. Every aspect of Muslim life is more or less regulated by Sharia.

In its religious application it means the total way of life as explicitly and implicitly commanded by God. Sharia is called ideal and transcendent law. The Muslims view life as a journey, and Sharia is the clear path or road to be followed in order to go to Allah. Some of the Sharia laws are very obnoxious for instance.

1. If you steal, your hand will be amputated.
2. You will not carry a woman on a motorcycle.
3. A man and woman will not sit together for example in the bus.
4. If you get too close to a woman in Purdah, you will be killed.
5. Every man should marry.
6. You should not shake a woman, talk less of embracing her.

#### **This is Only in Tip of an Iceberg of the Laws of Sharia**

Christians did not cherish the law because they love to live together in fellowship of Christ. It is expedient to note that in emphasizing, amplifying and re-echoing the laws of Sharia in Nigeria it had led to serious wars in areas like Kaduna, Zamfara, Jos and some other States with negative concomitant effects on Christians. Indeed, all the system of Islam from beginning to end is anti Christ.

#### **The Practice of Occultism**

The deficiency in Christianity had led into occultic practice. Satan is ever ready to satisfy Christians. In the definition of occultism, Freeman (1974:245) stated concisely that “it signifies participation or involvement in any way with fortune telling, magic practices, spiritism, or false religious cults and teaching. The term ‘occult’ means that which is hidden or secret”. The scripture warns that there will be a great increase in occult activity in the last days, ‘now the spirit speaketh expressly, that in the later times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons’ (1 Tim. 4:1).

There has never been a time in history when the warning against the dangers of occultism were more vocal and necessary than in the present. There is no doubt that our society is littered with the occultic practices. The most regrettably, Christians are also involved thereby, becoming ensnared in the diabolical web of occultism, which is under the influence and control of the powers of darkness.

It is pertinent to note that the practice of occultism whether done innocently or not, was condemned by scripture without reservation. With the practice one has open door to the oppression or bondage to the power of darkness. In fact all forms of fortune telling, spiritism, magic practices and involvement in the cults and their teachings are absolutely forbidden.

Indeed we live in the pluralistic world, and it is syncretism that give rise to it. Peter lived in the pluralistic world but still he said there is no other name which person can be saved except Jesus Christ. But for ‘African’ a dual personality characterizes the African Christian. There is one foot in Christianity and one in traditional culture. This comes out more clearly in the major happenings of the African life, periods of joy, peace, illness, anxiety, distress, trial or barrenness. In the light of the

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above truth is now relative instead of being absolute. This is a serious challenge to millennium Christianity.

### **Recommendations**

In the study of challenges facing Christians in the present century, the author wishes to make the following recommendations.

1. Christians should realize that Christianity is a monotheistic faith and should pursue that vigorously.
2. Christians of this time must look at our nation as what we are called to transform and not something we are called to imitate.
3. We should realize that the day of reckoning must eventually come and it is imminent.
4. The advancement of science and technology and other fields should be appreciated as something that comes from God, and most importantly there are limits such development can take us to.
5. People should be versatile in scripture in other not to be a victim in the emergence and resurgence of divergent philosophies.
6. Christians should participate in social transformation through “participation in detachment”.

### **Conclusion**

In the foregoing, attempt had been made to examine the challenges facing Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium like secularism, science and technology, occultism, HIV/AIDS and incursion of Sharia. They are distinct problems of Nigerian Christianity. People are called to witness as believing mature Christians, and engage in the movement of transformation and happiness despite the influence of the aforementioned monsters on the ways of Christians.

All in all, in the meantime, it must be emphasized that the various challenges facing Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century/third millennium touched upon in this paper could each form by itself, the subject of a full length discussion, which any interested investigator could undertake with great profit. Indeed I cannot claim to have presented an exhaustive coverage of the topic, but a cursory glance at our subject such as has been conscientiously attempted, hardly fails to inspire some appreciation of the remarkable complexity and profundity of the challenges facing Christians in the present century.

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