

THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH IN THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LIBERATION OF NIGERIA

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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 centred primarily on the prominent role religion, particularly the Christian religion, can play in achieving this noble project and pursuit of socio-political and economic liberation. By adopting the historical method of documentary analysis, these issues were discussed under three broad sections. The first section attempted a clarification of the key concept, 'Church' as used in the paper. The second section discussed the reality of the need for socio-political and economic liberation in Nigeria, tracing it from the global via the Third World situations. The third section dealt with the religious factor in achieving the desired socio-political and economic liberation in Nigeria. This was based on the radical potency and capacity of the Church for confronting and transforming the unjust social order. However, maintaining that the Church as a body should not get herself involved in partisan political activism, the paper outlined some possible functions by which the Church in Nigeria can contribute immensely towards the desired liberation. These included 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. The paper concluded 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.

Key Words: The Church, Injustice, Oppression, 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 the 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 or midway 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 signalling 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. This involves the consultation of existing documents to validate the claims made in the work. The discussion is divided into three broad sections. The first section attempts a clarification of the key concept, 'Church' as the paper uses it. The second section discusses Nigeria's unjust socio-political and economic system and the reality of the need for liberation. Since the Nigerian situation is part of a universal problem, the paper traces its roots from the global via the Third World situations. The third and final section 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.

1. 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 as the "formal organization that sets out to accomplish a specific purpose" (Van Reken 1999: 198). 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 (198).

It is from this perspective that Iwe (1979: 88) 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 1999: 198). 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. Based on this distinction, Van Reken goes further to distinguish between 'Church work' and 'kingdom work'. Church work, according to him, is the work that a Christian does as an agent of the institutional church, while kingdom work is the work that a Christian does in service of his Lord not as an agent of the institutional church but in his/her secular vocation or calling, whether as a plumber, a teacher, or a politician (Van Reken 1999: 198). This twofold meaning of Church reverberates in Jim Harris' view when he says: "By "church" I mean both the individual believer and the institutional entity" (Harris <http://thebigpicture.homestead.com/ChurchinPolitics.html>). 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.

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

a. The Global Connection

The situation of injustice in Nigeria today has global foundations and international connections. Experiences in the world today, especially in the Third World, and particularly in Nigeria, will leave no iota of doubt in our minds that our contemporary society is grossly unjust and needs social justice and socio-political and economic liberation. An index of the prevalence of injustice is the global quest for justice evident in the increasing clamour for socio-political liberation in societies of the modern world. This is vividly expressed in Richard Shaull's significant observation that:

... in each country, a struggle is taking place between those groups, races and classes who have awakened to their inferior position and those who are reluctant to make way for a new order.

Consequently, it would seem that social revolution is the primary fact with which our generation will have to come to terms (Shaull 1968: 234).

The reality of the global revolutionary struggle is just the reverse side of the axiomatic and indisputable experience of oppression, domination, exploitation, injustice, inequality, violation of human rights, and other forms of inhuman and dehumanizing trends in many societies of the world. Each of these societies shares its particular extent and form of these experiences. The imbalanced relationship between the rich and the poor within and among nations is a disturbing concern of every sensitive and progressive member of the human community. The age-long and ongoing world-wide struggle for social, economic and political liberation, justice and equity is, therefore, a direct response to and proof for the unfortunate social realities of our time. Today, we hear calls on governments from social activists the world over for the immediate review of their unjust and oppressive structures. Moreover, protests, rampages, riots, students' unrest, women liberation movements revolutionary movements, industrial actions, and so forth have become so frequent that our age has been identified as the age of revolutions. (Shaull 1968: 233). Shaull has rightly observed, in this light, the presence of what he describes as "a growing tendency toward the emergency of messianic movements dedicated to the liberation of man from all that enslaves and dehumanizes him" (Shaull 1968: 234). The universal attention which this drive towards a revolutionary struggle is acquiring in our age is very indicative of the urgent need for justice and socio-political liberation both at the international and national levels.

A brief description of the general characteristics of the Third World experience pictures this need more vividly. The basic condition of a greater percentage of the Third World population is generally characterized by institutionalized and routinized poverty and powerlessness. This subhuman condition of the masses in the Third World is not the resultant effect of their slothfulness, natural incapacitation, or lack of physical, mental or moral prowess and ingenuity. It is rather induced poverty and powerlessness caused by impoverishment, deprivation, exploitation, oppression and repression. The consequence of this is the tremendous concentration of economic and political power in a few hands and a sharp division between the classes of the haves and the have-nots.

The impoverishment and underdevelopment of Africa as a part of the Third World, is a combination of both the external western forces and the internal forces of existing local regimes and oligarchy. Through the vehicles of colonialism, imperialism and racism, three dimensions of impoverishment and underdevelopment of Africa emerged in which the urgent demand for social justice and liberation is indisputable. These can be clearly and neatly delineated as: (i) the political dimension, (ii) the economic dimension and (iii) socio-psychological dimension

The political dimension of impoverishment is in keeping with Walter Rodney's description of how Europe underdeveloped Africa, which reveals that the present underdevelopment of Africa is directly resulting from, and perpetuated by the past negative and fundamentally destructive experience of European colonialism. As cited in Adegbola (1984: 64), Rodney explains that by taking over political power, Europe took over all that Africa had and thus, impoverished her. He shows that colonialism did not end with the flag of independence, but that after the Western colonial masters left, neo-colonialism took over. Africa today is still under this kind of local or internal colonialism – the ceasing of power and political domination by the local powerful few.

The economic dimension is the second dimension of impoverishment. The present state of affairs in the world market and international politics illustrates the issue at stake here. This is a commercial politics whereby Europe and America constitute themselves into an exclusive circle of economic control and determinism to ensure that the wealth of the Third World is transferred to the developed world (Adegbola 1984: 64). Charles C. West is right to have observed, in this perspective, that these international structures play the tune to which the poor nations dance. According to him, it is world markets and local oligarchs that determine the society economically. By lending support to the existing local regimes in the Third World countries, the international commercial system are able to undermine traditional values, influence and control and suppress all democratic aspirations and endeavours. The consequence of this situation, according to him, is that it creates a new kind of imperialism within the local commercial relationships of the nations in which injustice is perpetuated by the local regimes through their exploitation of the masses (West 1969: 23). This shows that

imperialism creates and maintains that form of human existence characterized by 'the survival of the fittest' from which a kind of selfish, inhuman and dehumanizing pursuit of wealth ensues.

The third dimension of impoverishment is the socio-psychological dimension. This reflects the employment of racism as a vehicle of underdevelopment. In the exclusive and more specific sense of the term, 'racism' describes conditions akin to those of the black Africans in former apartheid South Africa, Angola and Mozambique. This is a situation in which a particular group of people have been assigned or made to acquire or accept a false, substandard, in fact, sub-human image and identity imposed on them just because of their racial or ethnic group, contrary to their true human worth and essence. This false mentality and psychological stereotyping eventually determine the actual socio-political and economic relationships that exist in such a situation. This situation indubitably characterizes almost all Third World countries in one form or the other. Racism in a more inclusive sense and for our purpose here, however, would include tribalism, ethnicism, nepotism, classism, and so on. When possession of or access to political and economic power and privileges becomes the prerogative and exclusive reserve of particular groups on the basis of their ethnic group identification or other cleavages and at the expense of unity and equity, proficiency, competence and efficiency, impoverishment and underdevelopment are perpetuated.

Today, we should go a step further from Rodney's tragic account and begin to talk more of how Africa underdeveloped Africa than how Europe underdeveloped Africa. It is in line with this realization that Kofi Ellison writes:

The late Walter Rodney, the Guyanan historian wrote a book... titled:

"How Europe Under-Developed Africa". This is no longer absolutely tenable. The reality of the matter is that the major culprits of the destruction of Africa today, are AFRICANS themselves. To wit: our corrupt leaders and their bands of sycophant, President does-no-wrong minions. Major corruption in African officialdom continues to cause degenerative under-development on the continent. African countries have become the personal estates of official criminal gangs whose avowed aim is not the development of their countries, but rather the siphoning off of national resources into foreign banks.... Official corruption siphons off money intended for the development of Africa. Apart from making a lot of profit on the interest on investments accruing from Africa's stolen money, Europeans turn around and loan such money to Africa at exorbitant rates. Thus, in nearly all African countries today, we spend more money to pay the interest on such loans (not on the debt itself) than we do on Health and Education! In effect, African countries are played like a football. Whoever has the ball kicks it until it is near deflation! It is then pumped up by some foreign loans, and the process continues. Such has been our lot since independence (Ellison 2000: 1).

The demand for justice and socio-political and economic liberation from the disadvantaged sectors of African nations in recent times is the direct effect of the conditions of injustice, oppression and exploitation created by these three underdeveloping factors. This general situation in Africa and the entire Third World provides a fitting background from which we examine the Nigerian experience.

b. The Local Condition

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 1989: 206). The result of the 1991 census puts Nigeria's population at 88,514, 501, while the 2006 census, fifteen years after, puts it at

140 million (Anonymous 1997: 7. See also BBC NEWS <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.uk/2/hi/africa/6246057.stm>: 1). Of this teeming population, the 2004 publication of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) reveals what it describes as “a startling paradox” (NEEDS 2004: xiii). 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 1976: 78).

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 P.C. Lloyd 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 ethnic groups (Lloyd 1972: 1-13. See also Adejumo 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 31). 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 (Adejumo 37-39, Dudley 1973:132, and Okafor 1997: 3).

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 their number and many lives were lost in feuds between thugs of opponent political parties. These feuds arose over the election of a Governor from the National Party of Nigeria (N. P. N.) whom majority of the people in the Unity Party of Nigeria (U.P.N.) dominated state did not vote for. Reflecting such a situation, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the presidential candidate of the U.P.N., is quoted as condemning that controversial 1983 general election as “the worst rigging ever in any elections in Nigeria” (Daily Times Publication 1984: 44). Rejecting the Federal Electoral Commission’s announcement of the victory of the incumbent President, Shehu Shagari of N.P.N. in the 1983 presidential election, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the presidential candidate of the Nigerian People’s Party (N.P.P.) is cited to have described the whole election as: “...an inglorious victory ... a pyrrhic victory ... a debacle ... unfairly maneuvered to enable an unpopular but powerful political party exercise power at the expense of the silent majority of the electorate of Nigeria” (Daily Times Publication 1984: 42). Addressing members of the diplomatic corps in Lagos after taking over power from Shehu Shagari, Major-General Muhammad Buhari recaptured this general view of the 1983 general election as:

... shameless rigging [and] widespread perversion of the electoral process [which] could not have been said to have produced a government of the people by the people ... [it is] a mixture of political thuggery and bribery [resulting from] the rape of democracy (Daily Times Publication 1984: 18).

Moreover, the long period of military rule totaling about 30 years on the whole (Anonymous <http://www.africanaction.org/resources/ejournal.php>: 2), from the beginning of the regime of General Aguiyi-Ironsi to the end of the regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo (1966 - 1979); and from the beginning of the regime of Major General Muhammadu Buhari to the end of the regime of General Abdusallam Abubaka (1983 - 1999), promoted rather than proscribed social injustice, oppression and corruption in the country. According to Okon Uya, these long periods of military administration were: marked by frustration and precipitous decline of Nigeria's once vibrant civil society, stunted political, social and economic growth, collapsing health, educational and infrastructural services; stark poverty; and pollution of values evidenced in massive corruption, indiscipline, moral decadence and resurgence of dangerous ethnicity (Uya 2000: 2).

The Babangida's and Abacha's regimes served as the epitome of despotism and dictatorship in Nigerian politics. The killing of Dele-Giwa, the popular Nigerian journalist by a mail bomb in his home on October 19, 1986 during the Babangida regime ("Dele-Giwa" Wikipedia), the arrest and long detention of M.K.O. Abiola during the regimes of Babangida and Abacha, the mock trial and awful execution by hanging of Professor Ken Sorowiwa and the other eight Ogoni leaders and activists on November 10, 1995 by General Sani Abacha (CNN http://www.cgi.cnn.com/WORLD/9511/nigeri/index.html_cached_sender: 1), and many other such cases, bear an eloquent testimony to their dictatorship. It is in the light of this that Sam Oyovbaire describes the Sani Abacha regime as the "most vicious dictatorship of military rule" (Oyovbaire 2000: 22). In a statement made while in South Africa during his historic visit to Africa in March 1998, the U.S. ex-President, Bill Clinton, recognized Late Sani Abacha as a military dictator transforming himself into a civilian president. He described him as "the most brutal despot in Nigeria's history embarking on a course to 'civilianize' his dictatorship" (Anonymous <http://www.africanaction.org/resources/ejournal.php>: 2.). 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 demi-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 1976: 78) It is a situation where we have "A few rich and many very poor people" (Hastings 1976: 78). We can put the ratio of poor and rich Nigerians at 7:3, respectively based on the information from the publication of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) that 7 of every 10 Nigerians live on less than \$1 a day (NEEDS 2004: ix). Although revenues from crude oil have been increasing over the past decades, our people have been falling deeper into poverty. In 1980 an estimated 27 percent of Nigerians lived in poverty. By 1990, 70 percent of the population had income of less than \$1 a day...(NEEDS 2004: xiii). These statistics support the claim that:

The majority of Nigerians can be classified as marginal citizens who have learnt to accommodate themselves into the culture of poverty ... No democratic system can function where the majority of the people are illiterate and their primary pre-occupation is that of how to survive on a day-to-day basis (Adegbola 1987: 70 - 73).

This corroborates the sad and sobering picture presented in the online article "Nigeria; This House has Fallen" which says:

At the turn of the century, Nigeria was home to approximately sixty million youths under the age of eighteen, seething with frustration over the lack of academic and job opportunities that just three decades before appeared to be within reach of their parents. They represent Nigeria's equivalent

to what South Africa calls its “lost generation”, that huge army of frustrated youth who lack the tools to face the demands of a modern economy. In South Africa they were the products of the apartheid system ... In Nigeria the blame for its lost generation falls squarely on the shoulders of its people’s leadership – corrupt military dictators and their civilian accomplices – who over the past quarter of a century have humbled a once proud nation through outright incompetence and greed (Anonymous <http://www.africanaction.org/resources/ejournal.php>: I.).

It is quite unfortunate that in spite of the vast human and material wealth with which Nigeria is endowed and which could have given her a place of honour in Africa and the world, the country continues to face constant economic regression from boom to doom (Achebe 1983: 19). The root-cause of this is not unconnected with the unabated open and shameful official corruption, which has been characteristic of the country’s leadership since the Second Republic. Usually, it is the poor masses of the society who suffer the sad effects of the corrupt and unjust economic system of the times. Inadequacy of food at reasonable prices, poor health services, constant deterioration in the educational system, unemployment, et cetera, are among the deplorable conditions of the people which Late General Sani Abacha pointed out during his radio broadcast announcing the military take over of the government on December 31, 1983 (Daily Times Publication 1984: 3. See also Max Siollun’s Website : 25). Ironically, these conditions became worse by many hundred percents during his regime and have even become worst today. It is reported that Sani Abacha’s eight bank accounts totalling 600 million U.S. dollars were frozen by Officials of Luxembourg, a tiny European principality (Ellison 2000: 1). We will then agree with Adegbola that Nigeria’s “culture of underdevelopment” and “culture of poverty” is only a “culture of exploitation of the masses” and self-induced poverty (Adegbola 1987: 60).

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 1997:5). In support of this observation, E. U. M. Igbo provides a convincing statistics of the monopoly of power by the north which, in his opinion is one of the most controversial issues among the major ethnic group. According to his study:

Of the 35 years of political independence [that is 1960-1995] the north has been in power for 31 years: Alhaja Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (1960-1966), General Yakubu Gowon (1966-1975); General Murtala Muhammed (1975-1976); Alhaja Shehu Shagari (1979-1983); Major General Muhammadu Buhari (1983-1985); General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993); and General Sani Abacha (1993 to date). The only exceptions where Southerners have occupied the seat of power were ‘circumstantial’ as in the case of (1) Major-General J. T. Aguiyi-Ironsi (January-July 1966) after he hijacked the military coup by young army officers, (2) General Olusegun Obasanjo (1976-1979) after some military officers assassinated the Head of State, General Murtala Muhammed, and (3) Ernest Shonekan (1993) after General Ibrahim Babangida stepped down from power (Igbo 1997: 211-212).

This situation is the result of the doctrine that only men of one particular race or ethnic group are destined or divinely ordained with the right and command to always rule the other ethnic groups in a collective or federal set-up like Nigeria (Ogunmodede 1987: 231). This kind of doctrine is reflected in a quotation in *Tell Magazine* attributed to Alhaja Maitama Sule, a one-time presidential aspirant, that “Everyone has a gift from God. The Northerners are endowed by God with leadership qualities” (Igbo 1997: 212). This implies, therefore, that political rulership in the country appears to be nothing more than an internal handover of power arranged among a specially constituted ethno-religious feudal class of Nigerians. In this case, sections of the population are, either on ethnic, religious or economic class grounds deprived of their political rights of being elected into the rulership of their own country. This is a situation where “one’s group gets too much cheated out by another group in a union which all groups are supposed to be equal partners” (Okafor 1997: 5). It is such a discriminatory manner of appointments to public offices that tend to aggravate ethnic tensions and the

rise of ethnic based militia groups, which are now a thorn in the nation's flesh (Ogunmoded 1987: 232).

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. Worse still, since after the Nigerian Civil War, the Igbo who constituted the bulk of the defunct and defeated Biafra seem to still be paying dearly for their revolt through calculated marginalization, despite General Yakubu Gowon's policy of 'No Victor No Vanquished' and Reconciliation, Reconstruction and Rehabilitation". Sanusi Lamido Sanusi aptly captures this picture in his paper presented at the National Conference on the 1999 Constitution. Discussing the need for justice, he maintains that the manner of handling what he describes as the "Igbo marginalisation and the responsible limits of retribution" and "the Niger-Delta question" (Sanusi 1999: 12), is among the key issues that will determine to a large extent the success or failure of our ideal Federal Structure. He writes:

Igbos (sic) have more than paid for their foolishness. They have been defeated in war, rendered paupers by monetary policy fiat, their properties declared abandoned and confiscated, kept out of strategic public sector appointments and deprived of public services. The rest of the country forced them to remain in Nigeria and has continued to deny them equity. The Northern Bourgeoisie and the Yoruba Bourgeoisie have conspired to keep the Igbo out of the scheme of things.... Now, with this government, the marginalisation of the Igbo is more complete than ever before. The Igbos (sic) have taken all these quietly because, they reason, they brought it upon themselves. But the nation is sitting on a time-bomb.... If this issue is not addressed immediately, no conference will solve Nigeria's problems (Sanusi 1999: 18 - 19).

Another dimension to the problem of discrimination in Nigeria is that today also, 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 settlers" 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.

3. 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 1976: 91). 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

(i) 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. She can provide an "alternative voice" through the establishment of a more reliable, intrepid and independent media for the dissemination of her prophetic messages to the nation. 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 1987: 93).

(ii) 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.

(iii) 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

comfortable”), but also includes the alleviation of the miserable and painful condition of the victims of the system (“comforting the afflicted”). This will necessitate practical concern with economic programmes for the improvement of their conditions, since the callous bureaucratic system would only frustrate the hopes of the helpless masses for such projects if left in their hands. This goes beyond mere charity works for the provision of subsistence needs. The Churches can embark on practical socio-economic projects such as we see in some Latin American countries. This can include building of hospitals, establishing co-operative bodies for joint venture, scholarship funds for students from poor families, educational programmes for those who are disadvantaged by the government’s educational system, organizing training programmes in business and technological skills just like the Church Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) in some African countries, and the “Village Polytechnic” pioneered by the churches in Kenya.

The Church’s Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) are religious Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Two outstanding examples of such PVOs are Christian Care (CC) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS). While the former is Protestant, the latter is Catholic as the name implies. Christian Care was formed by the Protestant Churches in Zimbabwe through the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) during the liberation struggle. The initial aim of forming this Christian NGO was to provide welfare assistance to those who were being persecuted during the liberation struggle, especially to care for political activists who were put in jail during the liberation struggle. In addition to ministering to the detainees, it was also concerned with the welfare of their families. However, now, after the period of the liberation struggle is over, Christian Care, along with many other PVOs in the area, is working with communities in programmes of rural development. It often engages in long term projects lasting between two and ten years. It works very closely and collaboratively with local churches, merging with the activities of local rural churches that seek development projects for their congregational communities (Bomstein 2003: 102-104). The overall goal of the organization is, therefore, “promoting the Christian mission of helping the needy” (Bomstein 2003: 104).

The second example of the Church’s PVOs, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), is the international humanitarian agency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops which operates in more than one hundred countries around the world. As a Catholic faith-based organization, CRS represents the Catholic Church’s extensive grassroots network in Africa. It also serves as an effective medium of extending the impact of U.S. foreign assistance into remote areas where most international donors and many national governments are not able to reach otherwise. 96 It aims at the reduction of poverty, alleviation of human suffering and provision of hope to the coming generation. Its work in Africa includes food security, responding to the HIV and AIDs pandemic, and microfinance. Consequently, “through its hospitals, schools and social service outreach, the Catholic Church provides approximately 25% of the care and treatment for persons with HIV and AIDS worldwide, especially in Africa” (O’Keefe <http://ers.org/newsroom/testimony/entry.cfm?id=1713> :1).

CRS has often supported projects in 42 African countries through which it has given attention to health and education and conflict resolution within some countries. It has also paid attention to the problems of underemployment and unemployment in growing cities, especially among less poorly educated youth. Equally, it has effectively combined the short term goal of meeting immediate needs through food aid and the long term goal of establishing complementary livelihood support activities through cash support. CRS has also been in the Vanguard of the war against HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa through which more than 390,000 people living with HIV are reported to be receiving care and support services with about 145,000 of them enjoying life-saving antiretrovirals. The most changing thing about CRS is that as Bill O’Keefe explains, it targets “the most marginalized and underserved communities” as well as “the poorest of the poor, and the most vulnerable members of our human family” (O’Keefe <http://ers.org/newsroom/testimony/entry.cfm?id=1713> :1- 8).

The village Polytechnic in Kenya was formed in 1966 by the National Christian Council of Kenya (NCCCK) as a solution to the acute problem of finding a place in society for young people after leaving school. The increasing number of primary schools in Kenya and the growing rate of primary school leavers became a problem to parents. Government and other concerned institutions because these school leavers had very few job opportunities and lacked the necessary skills to take such jobs. It was this situation that led a joint Working Party of the Youth Department of the National Christian

Council of Kenya and the Christian Churches' Educational Association to begin to innovate on the further education, training and employment of Primary School Leavers as was published that year in the pamphlet". After School What?" Their studies revealed that,

Only one tenth of school leavers at Primary Standard Seven every year got secondary education or employment. More and more young people every year are therefore faced with the hard fact that there are no paid jobs to absorb all of them and there are few chances for further education" (Wanjala <http://cdj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/pdf-extract/8/2/104>: 2).

In their effort to discover what to do to help some of these unfortunate young people, the Village Polytechnic Movement was launched by the National Christian Council of Kenya in 1966 with the acceptance of the member churches to become the main sponsoring bodies. In his explanation of what a Village Polytechnic is, E. A. Wanjala writes:

It is not just another school. It is not- as the name might imply – a College with sophisticated equipment and a high powered staff. One might rather compare it to an apprenticeship scheme or a low cost training centre for rural occupations, aimed at meeting the local needs for primary school leavers. Such needs may lie in improved methods of agriculture or the establishment of small rural bakeries. In another area there may be a big building boom and therefore a need for the training of masons and carpenters. In yet another place the introduction of a water supply scheme may call for plumbers. By teaching the knowledge of poultry-keeping you might not only give the young people a chance of earning a little money through the sale of eggs but you will improve the supply of protein, in a certain area. Similarly if you teach a girl dress-making, she may start a little business and produce shirts and dresses for sale. But even if she does not do it commercially she will be able to look after her family better than without this skill (Wanjala <http://cdj.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/pdf/> 2).

Although some of these projects have been undertaken by some churches already, their lack of liberating tendencies is obvious when we try to answer the question, which category of people benefit from them, the poor or the rich members of these churches? In addition to this, the Church must also seek for ways of influencing public policies to favour the improvement of the poor and powerless masses, since she is their last hope and place of refuge.

(iv) 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 – both 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 1974: 169). 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 1985: 99).

(v) Personal Conversion of the Ordinary Man

The Church's liberating mission in Nigeria goes beyond commitment to mere philanthropic activism or welfarism, protesting against social injustices and motivating and mobilizing people for active participation in social transformation. Religion essentially sets a transcendental goal by helping us to realize that life is more than the satisfaction of immediate material needs of hunger and poverty (Luke 12:15; Matthew 6:25). As Douglas Webster is cited by Norman Autton to have rightly pointed out, the human tragedy is sin and not hunger while the worst privation is ignorance of God rather than social inequality. Therefore, though poverty, exploitation, oppression, and so on seem to be the

prevailing problems of our day which provide the Church with “the context for mission”, the “contents” of her mission are not determined by them. In the final analysis, the Church’s mission is ultimately and supremely concerned with God (Autton 1972: 226-227). According to him, though “Man does need bread”, he needs God above all (Autton 1972: 227). Thus while the Church seeks for socio-political and economic liberation to provide a more just system in Nigeria, it must relentlessly and without distraction seek for the spiritual liberation of the people – a change in the personal man himself. If social changes are to bear lasting fruits, a deep-seated conversion and fundamental spiritual transformation of the individual members of society – the oppressed, the oppressors and the liberators are of indispensable necessity. The reason is that the ordinary, normal, usual or average man is inherently corrupt. History has proved that the revolutionary of today may become the reactionary of tomorrow and the progressive of today may become the conservative of tomorrow unless they are inwardly transformed themselves. How can one under the iron shackles of evil and wickedness change an evil and wicked system? This reflects the picture of the hypocritical liberators presented by the Apostle Peter in his Second Epistle where he writes, “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage” (2 Peter 2:19 KJV).

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 Edmund 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 1964: 275). 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 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 1979: 161). 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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