

## **The Emergence of New Christian Religious Movements in Nigeria: Implications for a Depressed Socio-economic and Political Order**

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### **Abstract**

In this contribution, the main concern is to x-ray the emergence of new Christian religious movements in Nigeria in the context of a depressed socio-economic and political order. Although the emergency of these new Christian religious movements and their causes are global issues, the case of Nigeria is exceptionally a problematic one-the quest for materialism, increase in sickness, unemployment, demonic possessions, evil spirits attacks, witch-craft cases, barrenness, bad luck, led to common ability of human interests and constant efforts of human beings to seek solutions to the existential problems. This greatly contributed to proliferation and geometrical increase of new Christian religious movements in contemporary Nigerian society.

## Introduction

In most parts of the world today, the emergence of new Christian religious movements is a global issue, the fear, anxiety desperation and problems experienced by many people due to the depressed socio-economic and political situations paved way for proliferation of new religious movements. The desire for materialism and self-helped remedies created unfavorable conditions for the upsurge of new religious movements. Every major street, nook and corner of Nigerian society is promising miracles, healing and solutions for human problems, The manner at which these new religious movements operate and their geometrical rapid increase in contemporary times clearly distinguish them from the orthodox movements.

The aim of this write up is to examine the emergence of new Christian religious movement in Nigeria in the context of a depressed socio-economic and political order. The study limits itself only to new religious movements within Christian religion domain due to lack of available documentations on the subject.

Methodologically, the presentation begins with clarification of relevant terminologies. Secondly the historical overview of new religious movements in Nigeria shall be treated. Thirdly, the features of new religious movements in Nigeria will be examined. Finally the socio-economic and political environment in Nigeria since independent in 1960 which pave way for the emergence of new Christian religious movements

shall be discussed in order to curb the problem of proliferation of new churches in modern time.

## Clarification of Relevant Terms

In the context of this presentation, the following terminologies are understood as:

1. **New Religious Movements:** The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines "New Religious Movements" as "sets", Heresies", "unconventional fringe," "alternative", "non-traditional religions" or "intense religious groups". In modern usage, the term "New religious movements", is defined as "a collective phenomena or a pattern of religiosity which has become highly visible in both the west and African continent (Parlong, 1999).

Turner (1987), his experience from Nigerian religious scene defined new religious movements as: "an indigenous created religious organization starting from social and selecting and combining local and exogenous elements in diverse and dynamic way."

Layiwola, (2001), commenting on the newness of the phenomena in Nigeria notes that: the term "new" is used to describe these movements because in historical sense they are rather than either ATR or orthodox Christianity with which they are constant contact and because of the fact that they do not form an integral part on or identity wholly with the major

religious traditions of the area where they emerged.

Tasie (1988), coined the term "Iri-Iri church movements" to describe New Religious Movements in Nigeria. According to him, Iri-Iri church movements refers to: "a range of church starting from Church which are almost indistinguishable from the most westernized products of Christian missions to cults that are a survival of traditional pagan religions with no more than a few Christian glosses". While the term is a fitting innovation, their usages of the term "Churches" restrict its wider application to other New religious movements, which are not related to Christianity. Groups such as Eckanker and Hare Krishna (ISKCON) are not accommodated in this definition.

In the context of this presentation therefore, the phrase Iri-Iri church movements remains a useful term to describe New Christian Religious Movements in Nigeria. For our usage, New Religious Movements shall be refers to as: "religions that emerged as a result of the contact with African traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam without them been influenced by any of them.

2. **The Church:** The term "Church" denotes "an assembly or community of Christian faithful". In this sense, the term "Church" does not necessary imply a physical structure but the gathering of God's people at worship (Ekklesia). The mission of the church is to evangelized the

whole world.

### **Historical Overview of New Christian Religious Movements in Nigeria**

New religious movements in Nigeria have unprecedented history because of its global outlook and period emergence. The geometrical increase in the historical origins which seems to accompany the changing socio-cultural conditions of the west and the world at large where geographical boundaries are becoming less and less rigid, which give room to enhance cultural communication, make many people to perceived some of these religion movements as new in Nigerian society (Saliba, 1996). Some of the converts to new religions movements were first generation converts whose attitudes and beliefs were strange when conversion took place on the large scale.

Barrath (1968), outlined some of these new religious movements in Nigerian which emerged as a result of the contact with African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam, as earlier mentioned without been influenced by any of them as follows: Aladura, Cheribum and Seraphim, Zion, Jehovah witness, Shabbatean, Christian Science, Adore, Seventh Day Adventism, Spiritualism, Celestial, Universal Holy Sanctified, Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, Harrism, Shamanism, Hinduism, Zen Buddhism, Vodum, Shango, Xango, Cumina, Santeria, Edo National church, Mormonism, Cathars, Flagellants, Unity school of Christianity, among others.

Some of these new religious movements originated from the west in the twentieth century and have their background in the far East, especially in Shamanism, Hinduism and Buddhism. They are notably divine light missions, international society for Krishna consciousness (ISKCON), Christian oriented movements such as: the Jesus family of love, the unification Church, scientology, transcendental meditation and the ...people, worldwide church of God. Other new religious movements are myriads of cults which came as a result of the interaction of Christianity with the American/Indians and are often referred to as "African-American movements". They are: Vodum, Shango, Xango, Cumina, Winti, Santeria, Rasstafari, ijo Orummila, or Edo national church, the Arouse cult, and a host of others. Most of these New religious movements have found their ways back into African soil from where they originated. Take for example, the Rastafari and Winti movements (Hackett, 1987).

The phenomenon of religious movements in Nigeria can be traced on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Wallis (1991), observed that, one massive result more extensive in the Christian context than the Islamic, has been the emergence of a wide range of new religious movements, which draw on the local traditions and one or other of the introduced faiths to produce a new synthesis. He therefore, categorized the new religious movements in Nigeria into the following groups: Aladura (white garments churches), Spiritual churches,

indigenous African movements (Zionist and Ethiopian churches). Prophet Healing (Ecstatic Faith Healing churches), Neo-traditional movements (Ijo Orunmila, the arouse cult, Edo National church, Godianism) and prayer houses such as Brotherhood of the cross and star. Amore, Ekanker, the Grail message and Hare Krishna (Parlong, 1999). These religious movements have appeared on Nigerian religious scene with new philosophy and shallow theology of their own to win people to their groups. They operate social services where people alienated by the larger society can find follower ship. These services are so attractive to people to people that many Nigerians flocked to them.

### **Features of New Christian Movements In Nigeria**

The new Christian religious movements in Nigeria have common features which cut across the major groupings Marshal (1991), listed some of these characteristics as follows:

1. They all stress the importance of divine revelation from God, inerrant word, and scriptural knowledge as a central symbol of prestige within the community. The examples of such false claims of divine revelation from God were William Wade Harries, Ayigba Dawono and Pastor Samuel Bilewu Oschoff, the founders of new religious movements in Nigeria. Harris claimed that he had a divine revelation from God directing him to start a mission of spreading the new

faith for God. And that, the revelation he received gave him a divine mandate while he was in prison. Harris also claimed that, the Holy Spirit had come upon him three times with sound like that of a jet and asked him to form a church called Harrism, Equally, Ayigba Dawono, a catholic catechumen claimed that she had received a divine revelation during which Christ appeared to her and complained that the Christian rites practiced by orthodox churches were not in accordance with God's teachings, She therefore, left the Catholic Church and formed her own group in 1993 and named it "Deimacult". Similarly, Samuel Oschofa in 1947 founded his own church claiming that while he was in the bush looking for trees to use for his carpenter shade, he heard a divine voice calling him to evangelism. After this incident, his wife and he underwent a metamorphosis which led them to change their old profession in order to form Celestial church. He therefore, incorporated educated, mobile university graduates and school leavers who embraced charismatic doctrines which stressed experiential faith, centrality of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, faith healings and miracles associated with the Pentecost.

2. They placed emphasis on the importance and efficacy of prayer, prosperity in which the spiritual and

material fortunes of the adherents are dependent on how much they gave spiritually and materially to God or man of God. Their emphasis on the efficacy of prayer and human doctrines contradict the teachings of the Bible. The "born-again" syndrome, stubbornness, irrational resistance to the changing circumstances and literary interpretations of the message of God are fundamental characteristics known to them. The shallow knowledge of the scripture and high emphasis placed on materialism make these new religious movements to propagate dispensationalism, holistic salvation and polygamy as the major codes of their message which stress human dignity, potentiality, social responsibility, structural awareness and immediate end of the world (Vittorio, 1963). The attitudes which they exhibits make many people regard them as "fundamentalists", "fossilized Christians", and "traditionalists" who cringed to an imagined past in stubborn manner that opposed changes.

3. They have committed members that incorporate prayers and praises into practically every aspects of daily life. Their members believe in rudimentary prayer and are organized into smaller prayer groups to encourage each other spiritually and to assist those who are sick or faces with demonic attacks.

4. Many devotees who flocked to these new religious movements seek for "autonomous spaces" which defied power monopolies, economic exploitations and doctrinal indifference in their mother-churches..
5. Some of the devotees joined new religious movements for the articulation of strategies to create, exercise and legitimate new power relations and new opportunities for survival.

The above outline characteristics are fundamentally common among new religious movements and are aimed at attracting millions of "sapped members" into the churches.

### **The Socio-economic and Political Environment in Nigeria Since Independence in 1960**

Since independence in 1960, the socio-economic and political tempo of Nigerian environment has not been relatively stable. There are crisis, stress and rootless ness arising from the socio-cultural and political order which disrupts the nation's religious independency. Most of the religious movements that emerged seem to be protesting against one another. It is not an exaggeration to say that the socio-economic and political environment in Nigeria aggravated to the proliferation of new religious movements (Simpson, 1978).

Platvoet (2003), also noted that the socio-economic and political

environment in Nigeria has contributed immensely to the upsurge of new religious movements in the country. He opined that this was perceived as an alternative solution to the corrupt rule of colonial masters who took no keen interests in religion but in sapping the economy of Nigerian people. Most of them made a way with a lot of Nigerian money in the name of religion. The depreciating state of Nigeria socio-economic and political order make many people to seek various ways of coping with the prevailing situation and so find succout in establishments "many founders of these new religious movements strongly believe that the time has come for them to better their deteriorated socio-economic and political conditions created by the colonialists. Hence, they seized the opportunity to exploit devotees in the name of God. Thus, the intended blessings leading to the proliferation of new religious movements was to bring to Nigeria devotees which turned up to be a curse in disguise. A good example of this exploitation of members is Samuel Bilewu Joseph Oshaffa, the founder Celestial church who after his death left behind two point two billion naira in his assets. Looking at this figure, one wonder whether he established the church to enrich himself. This however, has placed the Nigerian society on the top index of human sufferings and socio-economic depression.

The political instability in Nigeria resulting to military rule further compounded the problem. This shifted the

nation's economy from agriculture which formed the basis of economy in the 1960s by the colonial and post-colonial government's industrialization. A few production enterprises were set up to assemble consumer goods and were largely depended on imported raw materials. Most of these factories and plantations were owned by colonialists and foreign businessmen, while indigenous Nigerians were relegated to the position of middle-men wage workers and primary producers of crops whose prices were determined by the colonialists elsewhere (Plavoet, 2003).

The period of economic boom in Nigeria began around 1970s with the oil boom. This was greatly accelerated by the commercial exploitation of crude oil which made the government to embrace an ambitious projects development such as: infrastructures, education, social services and industries. Unfortunately, agriculture suffered serious neglect so that its contribution to Nigerian economy declined drastically from seventy percent in 1962 to about five percent in 1985, while crude oil increased from five percent in 1965 to ninety percent in 1976. However, by the end of 1970s, the "oil boom" was effectively over and the economy went from a situation of surplus to decline and the government had to resort to borrowing from international banks to meet up with its obligations. Austerity measures were first introduced by the government of Shehu Shagari and later widened by the military regime of General Muhammadu Buhari. The austerity

measures did not halt the rate of education of the economy and so by 1986, the country had no alternative but to adopt a structural adjustment programmed designed by the World Bank and the IMF. Others measures were also introduced by subsequent governments to check the imbalance in the depressed socio-economic and political state of affair in Nigeria. All these attempts turn out to be total failures.

Thus, Marx (1944), was essentially correct in his observation that: "once we understand what economic constraints of a society are or how the society produces goods to meet its material needs, or how the goods are distributed and what type of social relations arise from the organization of production, we have come a long way to understand the culture of that society, its laws, religious system, political system and even its mode of thought". Although Marxist position may be discredited by many Nigerians as a direct consequence of the recent events in Nigeria, it is easily validated by the manner in which the socio-economic and political environment in Nigeria has affected almost every aspects of human life. Simpson (1978), explained that, the bulk of Nigerians are poor and lack political power. Thus, through the formation of these new religious movements, many devotees will make fruitful efforts to reduce sufferings, combat meaninglessness of their lives and overt injustice.

Turner (1991), on the other hand sees the causal factor in the emergence of new religious movements in Nigeria in

historical and cultural experience of the people and the desire for spiritual and religious independency. He is behind the school of thought that sees the emergence of new religious movements in Nigeria as basically religious devices toward the attainment of a satisfying religion. His position was backed up by Barreth (1968), who collated from literature various scholars' views relating to causation, ethic, religious, non-religious and theological factors. From his analysis, no single factor could provide a simple explanation to the emergence of new religious movements in Nigeria.

Thus, it is illogical to conclude that the depressed socio-economic and political order in Nigeria is the prime factor for the emergence of new religious movements in recent times. Other factors such as: historical reasons, sociological, ethnological, political, psychological, non-religious, religious causes and theological interpretations have to be taken to considerations. All of these factors must prove a whole complex of causes and local application of universal significance to valid explanations of the emergence of new religious movements in Nigeria.

### Conclusion

From the forgone discussion, it is clearly seen that the emergence of new Christian religious movements in Nigeria have both positive and negative impacts on Nigerian society. While many scholars see the depressed socio-economic and political state of affairs in Nigeria as a

major causal factor for the emergence of new religious movements, others considered multi-dimensional factors such as materialism, cultural, psychological, historical and ethnological as been responsible for the upsurge of new religious movements in Nigeria. In contemporary time, however, no single factor as far as the problem of the emergence of new religious movements in Nigeria is concerned can adequately provide enough explanations for the causes of proliferation. Hence, one will be tempted to argue that whether the emergence of new religious movements in Nigeria is a healthy development or not, whether it is a way of acquiring wealth or not, whether it has created economic hardship or not, whether it has satisfied the emotional, psychological and cultural yearnings of the people or not, whether it has foreign or indigenous origin, one fact remains that it has added a positive values to the life of Nigerian devotees and as such cannot be ignored by weaving of hands.

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