

Christianity in Nigeria; 2022/2023 Experience: A Paradox of the Calvary Message

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Abstract

The Holy Bible is the main source and foundation of Christian tradition while other materials like the Apostolate writings are compliments and subservient to the Holy Bible during inconsistencies. Sub-divisions of the Creed (Pentateuch, Prophets, Writings, Synoptic Gospels and Epistles) all contain doctrinal tenets and historical events which are instructionally beneficial to the present world and remain ready document for instruction and teaching. Unfortunately, however, many Church founders and Clerics nowadays teach biblical stories with inexplicable exaggeration, misapplication, misrepresentation and perverse motives, parading fictitious and unattainable claims. This situation applied to the Nigerian state before, during and soon after the 2023 general elections where Church founders/leaders became seers, forecasting election outcome in favour of candidates of choice for financial gains. This study thus examined the subsistence of unregulated prophetic proclamations among Christian adherents in Nigeria at the time side-by-side the Calvary message of universal love and divine consciousness. Among other suggestions this work recommended that henceforth, Church activities in Nigeria should be streamlined by the government and violators of fake prophecy prohibition and regulatory Act should be promptly and severely punished to serve as deterrent on other intending culprits.

Key words: Calvary, Christianity, Election, Nigeria

Introduction

Arguments in support of Christianity still being a foreign tradition in Nigeria in the 21st century are no longer tenable by very many followers of the Religion. This is because of the multifarious dynamics that have engulfed the faith in recent times. For instance, not many Christian adherents particularly within Christian dominated religion of Southern Nigeria will welcome the old-fashioned liturgical methodology introduced into the country centuries ago by the faith Missionaries. At their time catechism and prayers were imparted to the recipients in sheer serenity while the impuissant converts claimed and maintained dependent reflection on the supersensible. What guided evangelization and conversion was the firm and unwavering acceptance of the assumption that Nazarene Jesus was the universal Messiah. That he was once crucified and buried though, but resurrected and ascended to the sky. Furthermore, that he will soon revisit the physical world of humans to take along his believers to “heaven”, the imaginary home of absolute bliss.

However, things have taken a radical turn-around from what was as pictured in our preceding paragraph above. Maybe one could now say that religion is no longer an opium, but cocaine or even heroin of the people (Ajayi, 2000). Worship centres are now more disorderly than disco halls while titles in the church are exorbitantly sold and bought by members. Emphasis on the supersensible has been replaced by mundane chieftains, just as the rhetoric on imaginary home of abundant joy, which has given way to material blessings in the immediate. The church is in body and soul Africanised. Put in other words, the church now speaks African language, sings African song and dances African dance. She eats African food and drinks African liquid (water).

This full-blown movement among practitioners of Christian faith did not spare the leadership cadre as emergence of purported charismatic leaders has become a common factor within the Christian community. A pastor who emerges today with a strong and mendacious claim to have met with God or Jesus in the dream, vision or trance who accordingly ordained him, can in the next fifteen days become a Reverend, a position higher in prestige. The same Reverend becomes Very Reverend and Bishop within a space of thirty days or less. Church founders or General Overseers as popularly called are counted in thousands among Christian sects and denominations in Nigeria today. As there are inhabited compounds so are there churches in Nigeria. This development accompanies serious adverse consequences on our vulnerably delicate society that is currently plagued by diverse ethnic nationalities, religious fragmentation and confrontation

The attendant blessing or curse that trail proliferation of Christian sects is the jostling and clamouring for space, power, recognition, relevance and control. Church leaders unmindfully desert the Holy Bible in pursuit of “worldly feats”, (accumulation of material wealth). This was the sustained ballgame in Nigeria shortly before, during and not long after the 2023 general election. For this reason, this study examines the sequence and tempo of Christian prophetic pronouncements on the presidential candidates of the four major contending political parties (All Progressive Congress (APC), People Democratic Party (PDP), Labour Party (LP), and New Nigerian People Party (NNPP), in Nigeria who participated in the elections on the one hand, and Calvary message, the substance of Christian tradition on the other.

Conceptual explanation

Religion: Efforts to provide all embracing definition of religion has not only been difficult but near impossible due mainly to individual or group perceptions and understanding. Generally speaking, definitions are propounded to meet or satisfy tentative curiosity. It is in line with this view that Bouquet cited in Ebhomielen and Ukpebor (2013) asserts that religion is "a fixed relationship between the human self and non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existence, the absolute or simply God". In the same vein, Ajah, Ettah and Nkanu (2023) assert that, religion is the maintaining of cordial relationship with the Deities and one's fellow humans. These explanations tie religion to Spiritual Beings and further affirm religion to have both corporeal and spiritual connections. To some however, religion provides answers to unsolved Problems. Iwe (1979) hints that religion is a spiritual pilgrimage, the quest for recognition of supra-power, acknowledgement of man's limitation and insufficiency and adoption and formulation of doctrines and moral in life as answers to fundamental problems of human existence. "... a residual means of repression and adjustment which explains what could be explained where other powers fail"(Ajah,2017). The later contributions also portray religion as a means of recognizing human finiteness and acknowledging the existence of a self-sufficient force capable of satisfying all human needs. This study works with the opinion that religion is a human created devise to unravel the super sensible in anticipation of providing tangible answers to human limitations.

Political space: The Nigeria political space has evolved with time coming through the pre-independence to date with sweet and bitter experiences. There was the Parliamentary system before opting for the American model of Presidential system. Severally, the military had intervened and interrupted the sequence of civil rule. May 29, 1999 marked the return of democratic governance in Nigeria which has endured to this date. Decrying the absolute lack of political culture in Nigeria, Tukar(1999) states that for nearly five decades, Nigeria has been experimenting with Euro-American inspired concepts, ideas and institutions in the regulation and management of its affairs. Yet the country is still in search of a system which will enable it to develop effective integration mechanism, responsible and efficient institution and a style of government which will facilitate the creation of a civil policy and lackingof socio-political and economic problems in a manner harmonious with the world view, way of life and temperament of the population. In fewer words, Nigeria political space is characterized by ethnic tension, political inconsistency, thuggery and manipulation and religious misappropriation. It is a condition of hopelessness of the masses lacking definite culture.

Christianity: Christianity is regarded by many as the offshoot of Judaism, the religious tradition of the Jews. These traditions more or less have same Creed, the Holy Bible as their sacred scriptures though segmented into Old and New Testaments. During homily, cross references are made which variously attest to illustrate senior and junior brother relationship. Christianity is a western religion exported to Nigeria by European Missionaries. Literally, Christianity connotes followers of Christ or those who behave like Christ. According to Felaye (2016), Christianity is a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interpret and respond to what they feel is scared and usually supernatural as well. It is somehow inappropriate to own up Christianity from the words of Felaye wholly which are rather generic. After all, African Traditionalists like their Islamic counterpart and some other world religions have beliefs and practices which presumptively connect them with the supernatural. All said,

practicality of Christian tradition in Nigeria recently has saddled scholars with additional challenges to proffer acceptable definition for the faith.

Substance of Christianity/Calvary message

Anywhere, anytime the word, Calvary is mentioned among individuals of any community that is predominantly inhabited by practitioners of Christian tradition like the southern region of Nigeria, what readily greets the air is the oddity of Jesus crucifixion. In a way, the word could recreate or reinvigorate the reminiscence of the passion episode about the Nazarene Jesus adumbrate in the four biblical gospels. The treatise portrays Jesus sinless personality but became a sinner vicariously haven taken upon himself the generality of "human sins". Quite mindful of the Calvary pangs, Jesus had delivered the cipher, popularly referred to as the "great commandment" centred on universal love. The Christian scriptures state, "...Love your Lord your God with all your heart...love your neighbour as you love yourself" (Matt.22:37-39). From the foregoing, one must expectedly love boundlessly preferring no man to another. This way Harkness (1957) expressly assertshow the Calvary message is epitomized in the Beatitudes;

Its primary qualities are a God-centred faith and love. Its derivative aspects are purity of heart, sincerity, humility, forgiveness, love toward enemies, mercy, charity in judgment, honesty in speech and action, sexual purity, renunciation of worldly aims with the preferring of spiritual to material treasure, compassion toward those in need. The good life is that of generous and self-giving service to all men and unbroken, unworried trust in the goodness of God.

Strict adaptation and applicability of the Calvary standard will unconditionally produce a world (society) devoid of religious discrimination and segregation, bigotry and manipulation for mundane wealth. The coveted society of absolute peace and love will also be free from ethnic rivalry, banditry, herdsmen/farmers clashes, minor and mass kidnapping and arm-robbery. Misappropriation, misapplication and economic depletion for self-aggrandizement will also be unheard of. Psychological derailment of congregations by Church leaders who mob economic fortunes in pretence to feed their hungry and lacking God will also cease. Solemn principle of Christian tradition as inferred from the Calvary message will enthrone an ideal society of no chaos but universal friendliness and sincere brotherhood.

Christianity in Nigeria; 2022/2023 Experience

The uniqueness of a particular faith, tradition or discovery is sacrosanct only when standards are upheld across lands and ethnic boundaries. Meaning that, as one is in the west, so it is in the south, north and east. Any noticed discrepancy automatically negates the purported unique attributes. For example, what makes death unique is the cessation of life. There is no exception, discrimination nor preference between language, colour, socio-economic status and all. This

poses the question of whether or not Christianity is one globally. Or do nations practice Christianity to befit the prevailing circumstances in the land at a given time? Put the other way, are individuals at liberty to practise Christian faith to satisfy their whim so long as the name Jesus is mentioned? This will lead discussion here with focus on how adherents of Christian tradition under variously innumerable sects and dominations propagated Christianity in Nigeria before, during and soon after the 2023 general elections for self-gains.

Christian prophecies were given to heighten the hopes of political gladiators who anxiously splashed cash and other materials in exchange. This is similar to the situation that influenced Afolabi (2015) to asserts that, “Religious leaders are mishandling religion to get personal gains from those who hold public offices. Thus religion has been mostly used negatively in Nigeria ...” Christianity in Nigeria at the corresponding period was a fertile domain for political office seekers who flocked to swell the size of various congregations in the mornings, afternoon and nights. Also, they occasionally held clandestine and overt meetings with church leaders, prophets, prophetess and general overseers to negotiate on possible favourable messages concerning anticipated outcome of the polls. Spirituality, that is the soul of religion was at the time crucified on the altar of materialism. Rather than tarrying for God to bless and direct the affairs of the church congregation; conversely church congregational Superintendents celebrated their materialistic affluence and only request God to participate and share if He (God) so desires. Adeosun (2023), remarks clearly portrays the deplorability of the highly vulnerable religious clerics and their roles which are being reduced to inconsequential verbalization, typical of a drunk gallivanting Nigeria streets. He states that,

It is sad that clerics have proliferated prophecies and predictions during elections just as they have continued to raise laziness and false hope among the worshippers, men and women which will protect the sanctity of the pulpit have commercialized the scene with the perfidy of the god of mammon.

Christendom is compromised, thus losing its uniqueness.

Followers of the church no longer frequent in Churches to seek the ‘face of the divine’, but to attract material benefits. Church altars and pulpits were home to armed robbers, human traffickers, drug barons, kidnappers and conscienceless looters of public treasury who paid tithes and hugely donated to capital projects in the church. Jesus was regarded as a commodity and offered for sale to the highest bidder. Church leaders further legitimated their cankerous zeal for material acquisitions by representing Jesus triumphant entry to Jerusalem who according to them rode on the most expensive vehicle of his time. Therefore, there is no evil associated with General Overseers flying private jets now only if the name of Jesus is brandished.

What also occupied the centre stage during the corresponding period was what the research refers to as unhealthy scramble for space. It took little or no time between one prophecy from a church leader before another intimidating or fascinating message will emanate from another quarters all directed to the outcome of 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Tijani (2023) shares the following about prophecies of the period,

As you will also have noticed, a number of Christian leaders have endorsed Obi for president. Just last night, Pastor Paul Eneche of

Dunamis International Gospel Centre arguably the biggest Gospel Centre in Abuja, endorsed Obi for president..."Atiku is running on prophecy" Atiku has been told he would someday become president of Nigeria... For Bola Tinubu ... Just last night, TomiArayomi...said Tinubu will win the election.

So the polity became heated and tensed. Political office seekers suddenly transmuted to arch-enemies. Slander and libel became the order of the day, just as maiming and killing of rivals to get satanic advantage. All these are direct opposite of the solemn principles of Christian tradition as inferred from "Calvary" which encourages enthronement of ideal world of no chaos but universal friendliness and sincere brotherhood.

Among vary many prophecies were: Primate Elijah Ayodele who prophesied that Atiku of the PDP will win to effect four cardinal assignments from God. Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy said God showed him Obi of Labour party as next president of Nigeria. Emmanuel Chuckwudi of King of Kings Deliverance Ministry Worldwide prophesied that Atiku of PDP will win. Olabisi prophesied that he heard from God direct that Atiku will win. Jerry Nwackwu of Bible Based Miracle Assembly in Nkpor, Anambra State prophesied that Obi would win the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria (Sahara Reporters, 2023). The list is endless with majority of the foretelling becoming fake. This is because despite the numerous pronouncements by hired or volunteered individuals and groups, the umpire saddled with the core responsibility of conducting general elections in Nigeria, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) did the needful as required by law by declaring Bola Ahmed Tinubu, candidates of the All Progressive Congress (APC) as duly elected winner of the 25th February, 2023 polls in Nigeria after fulfilling the conditions as required by law. This singular perfect execution of responsibility laid bare the inordinate rampage of acclaimed Christian leaders in Nigeria thus opening a new era of reappraising and repositioning the church in Nigeria. An assignment which this study wishes to also fulfil.

Furthermore, Nigerian political scene at the time can in a way be likened to a football stadium that is massively occupied by spectators during football tournaments. Players in the pitch of play vigorously urge their fans for resounding chant of praises and solidarity songs which they envisage will continually boost the morale of player for effective and efficient performance, and in a converse hope demoralize the opposing contenders whose fans may not be available to march the roar. In the same vein, politicians in Nigeria buy religious prophets (Christian prophets) the same way they buy crowd for occasions to deliver recurrent predictions in their favour about the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Church homilies were transformed from "Calvary Jesus" to Jesus who bless abundantly with material wealth. The internet, particularly the social media was inundated with fake messages. The print media also had a share of the hooliganism. It was common for General Overseer "A" to announce candidate "C" as potential winner while prophet "D" on the other hand presented candidate "B" as sure winner of the polls and so on and so forth. The sovereignty of the Supreme Being (God) was however not negotiable as the date, February 25, 2023 came and subsequently lapsed into history. Otherwise, one wonders what would have been the fate of Christian tradition in Nigeria to this day if the election had unduly lasted.

Conclusion

The corpus on Christianity in Nigeria political space, 2022/2023 experience: A paradox of the Calvary message, is a painstaking compendium reflecting on the new strand and development that characterized Christian tradition in the corresponding period. Though this study is a summary, suffice it to say that if all Christian prophecies in Nigeria at the time were put into a single volume, no human alive has the capability to carry. This abridged work provides the needed knowledge on the status of Christian tradition in Nigeria where church leaders and prophets vigorously clamoured for relevance and superiority. In doing so, they publicly proclaimed that, their unregulated messages were direct products from God having had "physical and/or spiritual" encounters with God. The veracity of their predictions were to them not negotiable. They were infallible and second to none. Their claims were similar to what Kamball(2002) regards as "absolute truth claims". However, most of these prophecies turned out to be fake.

One other perspective is that either as individual or groups, Christian adherents in Nigeria at this period devoted most concern to services of "worldly favour". What this connotes is the enormous challenge on the practicality of Christian ethics. What are the basis of Christian ethics (what Christian ought to do and ought not to do)? Harkness (1957) recap the words of Jesus as contained in the scriptures thus, "Sons of the world are wiser in their own generation than the sons of light"(Luke 16:8), and suggests that as they go out into a wolf-like world, they should be "wise as serpent and innocent as doves"(Matthew 10:16). Materialism and quest for fame were bait on Christian followers who irresistibly succumbed to the murderous antics. Christians misconceived and misapplied Christian faith either as individuals and/or groups. They manipulated Christian tradition to match up with contemporary challenges. In reality, Calvary message of universal love, non-discrimination, mortification, and so forth both in theory and in practice which are strict standards for all who profess Christianity were subjected to colouration and sacrilege at least in Nigeria at the time.

Recommendations

Having come a long way with the alien faith in this part of the earth, this study urges all practitioners of Christianity to strive for near perfect understanding of the basic tenets that hold the belief system. This will forestall irrational digression and tergiversation.

Christian leaders and all other acclaimed Christians should strengthen their belief on the capacity of "Calvary vows" to deliver and satisfy the needs of believers. This according to the scriptures will come to those who patiently and committedly wait upon the second coming of Christ. Since God does not fail the "just", He will not afford to fail Nigerian prophets now.

Nigeria Christians prophets and other acclaimed Christians alike should for the sake of the sanctity of the pulpit and sacredness of the God-head control their quest for material gains. While they aim for better life they should carefully apply moderation which is key to achieving eternal bliss and the anticipated home (Heaven).

Nigerian Christians should take out a moment everyday for self-assessment. They should individually re-appraise their spiritual development vis-a-vis the Calvary standard. And for the

fake prophets who deliberately wish to deceive the public they should not be unmindful of the Biblical fact that all liars shall have their place in "hell fire".

The acclaimed charismatic Christian prophets should respectfully shield pride and take up other lucrative ventures to put food on the table. This is necessary because sole dependence on the "work of God" with insufficient income as it is the case with many prophets, can lure one into indecency. Christians "prophets" should embrace petty trading, farming and many other dignifying ventures which also edify spiritual component in man rather than thriving in deceit.

The apex Christian organization in Nigeria, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) should be up and doing to uphold her aims and objectives which include: acting as a liaison committee for members to consult and make common statements where necessary; be watchdog over spiritual and moral development of members and the States; promotes understanding among the various people and strata of society in Nigeria (Nwanaju, 2005); and ensure that no practicing Christian under whatever guise, subvert the goodwill of the Association for free. CAN should bark and bite to effectively regulate the conduct of her members.

The government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria should promulgate legislations to regulate Christian prophecies emanating from among church organizations. Like it where in Nigeria, the trend and sequence of prophecies created bitter rivalry, division, distrust, hatred and panic among the citizenry; a situation that has not been ameliorated to this day. Therefore, any prophecy that is confirmed fake, the source from where it emanated (prophet and organization) should be severely sanctioned. The prophet should be prosecuted before a court of competent jurisdiction and committed to prison if culpable. The church organization on the other hand should be sealed and property confiscated to the government of Nigeria and auctioned to the public appropriately. This may serve as a deterrent to others.

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