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New Religious Movements and the Gospel of Prosperity: The Nigerian Experience

Anthonia Essien

Introduction

In the past few decades, an interesting religious phenomenon developed in Nigeria. This is the emergence and unprecedented increase of independent religious groups commonly referred to as New Religious Movements. While poverty, disease, sickness, political and economic malaise on the one hand increased, in a kind of geometric ratio, these religious groups also increased in a corresponding ratio. The term new religious movement is an umbrella for an overwhelming diversity of religious phenomenon. In itself the term is very broad, embracing a large variety of religious experiences varied in content and practice. Therefore the questions arising from the new religious movements are enormously complex. There are considerable varieties among them, and at times, an attempt to group them altogether under a single label inevitably oversimplifies issues. Clarke commenting on the new religious movements said that scholars are often saddled with the responsibility of making distinctions between them. The Pentecostal brands of the new religious movements in Nigeria are however very numerous.¹

West expounds that the explanation proffered by most sociologists and anthropologists with regard to the emergence of new religious movements cite two concepts: they are an answer to: [1] deprivation: that is the felt lack of desired economic and social goods; [2] anomie: the absence of stable social relations and authority which is the result of enforced and abrupt social change.²

Referring to the Nigerian situation in particular, Disu argues that what has given credence to the upsurge of these movements is nothing more than the socio-economic insecurities which have crept into the lives of Nigerians of late.³ According to him, various kinds of frustrations and tensions are decisive factors, which have driven people to all these sects to seek compensation for what they have lost in their social lives. The emergence and rapid increase of the new religious movements in Nigeria is often seen in the context of the nation's depressed socio-political order. Nigeria has for the past two decades been in

¹ CLARKE, P. B, "New Religious Movements" in Ian Harris et. al, (eds). *Contemporary Religions: A World Guide*, Longman Group. U.K. LTD, [London:; 1992 (57-66)

² WEST, M. *Bishops and Prophets in a Black City: African Independent Churches in SOWETO*, Rex Collins, Johannesburg & London.

³ Disu J.A, "Ban on God- Talk in Nigeria" *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*-2 (1978) 67.

serious socio-economic and political crises; this has led many people to find succor in the new religious movements as a veritable coping mechanism.

Besides the search for socio-economic securities in the face of a disintegrating socio-political order, Ndiokwere has pointed out added reasons for the emergence and rapid growth of new religious movements.⁴ He gives the example of the urge to soften the *harsh* demands of monogamy in the mainstream churches and the attempts to inculturate certain aspects of Christianity as being prominent in the scale of reasons for the emergence of some new religious movements. Brockway explains that experts in different intellectual fields offer different explanations for the upsurge of the new religious movements: the political scientists see these movements as emerging in reaction against colonialism and often associate them with nationalism.⁵ Psychologists on the other hand, see them as exemplifying stress and adjustive phenomena. For historians, they are significant popular movements. Missiologists and theologians have also found these movements to be of special interest arising as a result of distorted theological outlook. Mbon notes that the reasons for their rapid growth are due to the positive services they render their members.⁶ These explanations, viewed singly as verified in the course of interviewing people for this write up are not sufficient in explaining a subject of such complexity as the new religious movements. This is because a number of factors come into play in the emergence of these new religious movements within a particular cultural milieu. No single theory can adequately explain their emergence and rapid growth.

In this present situation, when Nigeria is experiencing economic and social collapse and the political arrangement yet to take a strong footing; to these are added the problems of external debts, health, education resulting in a deep sense of insecurity and frustration on the masses. Since people must continue to strife in this situation, it is therefore not surprising that the doctrine of prosperity is popular. Copeland defines prosperity as "the ability to use God's power to meet the needs of mankind in any realm of life."⁷ He explains that there are different ranges

⁴ NDIOKWERE, N. I., *The African Church Today and Tomorrow Vol. 1: Prospects and Challenges*, Effective key Publishers Ltd., Onitsha, 1994, pp. 36-4 1994:

⁵ BROCKWAY, A.R., (ed). *New Religious Movements and the Churches*, WCC Publication, Geneva, 1987: p. ix

⁶ MBON, F. M., "The Social Impact of Nigeria's New Religious Movements" in Beckford J. A., (ed). *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social change* SAGE Publications, London, 1987, p. 177

⁷ COPELAND, K. *The Laws of Prosperity*, Kenneth Copeland Publications, Texas, 1974, p. 26.

of prosperity: mental, spiritual and physical. The physical prosperity relates to the acquisition of gold, silver, financial favour or power, political favour or power and social favour or power. This form of *prosperity gospel* is commonly preached everywhere in Nigeria particularly by the Pentecostal brand of the new religious movements. The purpose of this paper therefore is to assess the Pentecostals' *gospel of prosperity* in the Nigeria situation.

New Religious Movements and the *Gospel of Prosperity*

The New Religious Movement espouses what has come to be designated as *Prosperity Gospel*. The founders of the New Religious Movement insist that God wants his Children to eat the best, he wants them to wear the best clothing, he wants them to drive the best cars and he wants them to have the best of everything. They are, in essence discussing the physical prosperity that should be associated with a believer in God. They teach that God has a law of prosperity, which, if one comes into contact will work for one. In other words, when a believer activates the law of prosperity, and claim prosperity in faith for oneself, one will reap handsome financial reward. Copeland writing on the laws of prosperity points out that faith causes them to function.⁸ Without faith in the word of God, no one can prosper. This belief is, however, based on the assumption that by his death Jesus Christ redeemed mankind from sin, pain and poverty. A believer or a *Born Again* Christian is therefore, expected to claim the riches wrought on the cross by Jesus Christ. The riches of the cross of Jesus Christ translate purely into wealth and health. It follows, according to the doctrine of the *Prosperity Gospel* that a believer who lives in poverty dishonours God, for he must be worshipping a poor God. Thus a poor believer; is abnormal: he is a failed Christian. Many of the New Religious Movements often appeal to biblical texts to buttress and justify their stand on the theology of affluence. They insist on claiming the *promise* of Jesus that "I give you my word, If you are ready to believe that you will receive what you ask for in prayer, it shall be done for you" [Mark 11:24, NAB]. Besides this, the text of [Malachi 3: 8-11] that insist on the payment of tithe is often emphasized.

It must be admitted that the stress on prosperity and wealth as the will of God for those who rely on him has stimulated members of New Religious Movements to shun indolent and to pursue economic ventures that have greatly improved their material well-being. The *Prosperity gospel* has therefore served as theoretical and theological framework for motivating the people to work hard for

⁸ COPELAND, K., *The Laws of Prosperity*, p. 26

their own socio-economic improvement and upliftment. Since being rich is seen as the will of God, people try becoming rich by sometimes adopting dubious means; being rich becomes an end in itself. The stance of the New Religious Movement on the theology of wealth and prosperity, present some undesirable social implication, besides the unwarranted presuppositions. The *gospel of prosperity* appeals to individual's greed and selfishness. The aggressive economic policies and practices of the new religious movements are justified by an appeal to the *gospel of prosperity*. To treat poverty as a curse, and regard the poor as accursed is unbiblical and unchristian. Gelin explains that the gospels and early Christians extolled evangelical poverty as a radical virtue of discipleship.⁹ It could be conceded that God is rich in all good things and would want his creatures to share in these good things of life. But sometimes, these good things of life are made an end in themselves rather than a means to the service of God and mankind. According to the standard of the *Prosperity gospel*, Jesus must be a failure for he was poor though he had the opportunity of becoming a rich person. To this faith movement, the apostle Paul is a failed Christian together with most of the members of the early Church. We must assert, parenthetically though, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about the cross of Calvary. Benefits accrue to the believer from the momentous event of the cross. To reject this cross is to reject the Lordship of Christ who says that any person who would come after him should take up his own cross and follow him.

The *gospel of prosperity* is creating a counterfeit religion in contemporary society. It is creating a *consumer religion*. Guinness defines *consumer religion* as "Religion shaped by the priorities and demands of the economic order."¹⁰ The economic exigencies of the society set the agenda for consumer religion. For the New Religious Movements, the unbridled pursuit of its economic programme make them a consumer religion. They may become an unholy amalgam of religious convictions and economic consumption. The *gospel of prosperity* creates for the New Religious Movements a theological justification for the clutching possessiveness and crass materialism of modern capitalist society. The *prosperity gospel* turns the New Religious movements into a crossless Christianity. Consequently, the New Religious Movements are gradually losing their prophetic voice in the society as a counter culture. The New Religious Movements will become a rat race for power, possession and prosperity.

⁹GELIN, A. *The Poor of Yahweh*, trans. Kathryn Sullivan, The Liturgical Press, Minnesota 1964, pp. 99-110

¹⁰ GUINNESS, O. *The Gravedigger File*, London: Houdder and Stoughton, p. 134

Furthermore the concept of prosperity is based on the Western concept of wealth and prosperity. The concept of wealth, according to prosperity is alien to the African culture. According to the prosperity, wealth is defined and understood in terms of Western Capitalist materialism. One is accounted rich and prosperous according to how much money one has in bank vaults or other tangible material possession as cars, houses, airplanes, etc. In the African societies wealth is understood in terms of human and natural resources, money alone does not make a rich man. But the prosperity gospel is changing all into accumulation of capital and consumption as a perimeter of prosperity. The Gospel message is receding into the background because of the economic preoccupation of ministers and pastors of the New Religious Movements. This current situation of the New Religious Movements makes Galen's observation important here: Prosperity makes the fulfillment of a religious vocation more difficult.¹¹ According to Martin much of the New Religious Movements' social and economic activities lack a "reference back to religion and the classical bases of Christian norms."¹² This is not surprising because when the agenda of a particular religion is determined by economic and social self-interest, the religion adopts the characteristics of secular organization in making its appeals. Consequently, the religion tones down its religious message to fall in line with its socio- economic interest. The heavy involvement of the New Religious Movements in property and business deserves urgent review in order to keep the priorities of the gospel in tact and in proper order.

The *Prosperity Gospel* and its underlying presuppositions of the theology of affluence reflect the materialism as comfort orientation of contemporary capitalist society. The essence of religion is not fellowship or theological doctrine or material success or even a moral code. It is, as Fichter maintains, the transcendental experience, a channel of contact with the sacred and the supernatural.¹³

Since prosperity is reduced to a matter of faith and generous giving to God first through his representative [the Leader of the new religious movement] being poor is seen as sinful or a sign of lack of faith. This theory ignores the causes

¹¹GELIN, A., *The Poor of Yahweh*, trans. Kathryn Sullivan, The Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1964, p.112.

¹²MARTIN, D., [1981] "Disorientation to Mainstream Religion: The Context of Reorientation in the New Religious Movements", in Brian Wilson, ed., *The Social Impact of the New Religious Movements*, Rose of Sharon Press, N.Y., 1981, p. 45

¹³FICHTER J. H., "Youth in Search of the Sacred", in Bryan Wilson, (ed). *The Social Impact of the New Religious Movements* Rose of Sharon Press, N. Y. 1981:32, p. 32.

of poverty in our society. The causes of poverty ranges from mismanagement of funds meant for the improvement of the lives of the citizenry, corruption that hinders the proper workings of systems, disorders of international relations that also lead to poverty. The *gospel of prosperity* which reduces everything to a matter of faith and generosity does divert attention of the populace from the actual cause of poverty and so preventing them from a massive uprising to fight those who perpetrate in these crimes against humanity. Nigeria for instance is a country blessed with natural resource, which if properly harnessed will help the citizens to live in conditions worthy of human dignity. In recent times we have known that there are so much corruption and embezzlement of public funds by few individuals and this has made many Nigerians to wallow in abject poverty. The proponent of the *prosperity gospel* needs to address issues that will get to the grassroots of the causes of poverty in our nation Nigeria.

Besides all these, the Nigerian society is pluralistic in more ways than one. The society has a wide variety of diverse and overlapping groups with diverse ideologies and creeds. Nigeria is culturally, linguistically, politically and religiously pluralistic. Of all these, religious pluralism is the most precarious and volatile to guarantee and maintain. Within Christianity itself, there is pluralisation of groups, belief and acts of believing. The *gospel of prosperity* that insists on the belief and faith in Jesus Christ seems to say that only Christians matter. By prospering, the Christians will be successful, have food, education, good jobs etc. The non -Christians are ignored in the *prosperity gospel*. This calls for a reassessment of the whole theology of this faith gospel.

Conclusion.

The founders of the new religious movements who propagate and preach prosperity need always to bear in mind their prophetic role and to aim at addressing the root causes of the ills of poverty in Nigeria. Reducing the issues of prosperity to a superficial matter of faith needs to be reviewed, the prosperity of a nation and the citizens goes beyond this. Accountability, discipline and honesty are very important virtues to be cultivated if we need to grow as a people. Nigerians should be trained on the desirable social conducts of accountability and honest transparency particularly in the use of public funds. This will prevent the masses being subjected to abject poverty. Massive uprising can also be arranged on a level of community involvement to make an outcry against mismanagement of public funds. There should also be active participation in governance by conscientious members to help correct the ills in the society that result in the citizens living in poverty. These challenges may make them unpopular but they

must hold on to their prophetic role as religious bodies to stamp out corruption in the nation.

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