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DYNAMICS OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN NIGERIA

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INTRODUCTION

A survey of literature and a bird's eye view of Nigeria has shown that a wide variety of independent religious groups have either been breaking away from their main-line bodies or have been initiated by Charismatic leaders. This spiritual ferment has had a far-reaching impact on the life of the people. These movements have been variously designated in literature as: Messianic Cult, Millennial/Eschatological Movements, Ethiopianism, Zionism, Aladura, Separatist Churches, Pentecostal/Charismatic Movements, Prophet Movement, Sect¹ etc.

In 1976, H. W. Turner coined the term "New Religious Movements" to embrace these wide variety of religious Independence². This term, since its introduction has gained wide popularity in academic usage. It is an umbrella term for an overwhelming diversity of religious phenomena varied in content and practice. Consequently, the question arising from the term are enormously complex as there are considerable varieties among them. For the purpose of this essay, the term New Religious Movement is used to designate only the Pentecostal brands of this Independent groups.

The massive explosion of these New Religious Movements all over the world, particularly in the Third-World Countries, has startled both governments and traditional Christian Churches. It has attracted attention of academics and consequently enjoyed great popularity and deep scholarly interest. In recent times, it appears that no other portion of religious phenomena has had such wide coverage in academic circles as the New Religious Movements. But despite the studies and the enormous body of literature in existence, the phenomena is becoming more enigmatic and somewhat problematic as new forms keep emerging everywhere and every time. This situation calls for continuous research of their forms, the socio-religious and economic conditions that necessitate their emergence and their relevance to the

social life of their adherents and to the society at large. It is also of interest to note that the impact of the New Religious Movements on the society varies greatly across places, time cultures and the type of movement³. Their social significance can only be understood and appreciation within a known socio-cultural background. Due to the global spread of the New Religious Movements, presently, special International Research Documentation Centres have been created for the study of New Religious Movements: at Lima, Peru, by Kenneth Scott; at Durban, South Africa by G. C. Oosthuizen, at Birmingham, England, by Harold Turner⁴. The Melanesian Institute is giving the research of New Religious Movements a high priority on its broader agenda. In some universities⁵ a research unit for the study of the New Religious Movements has been set up to study the impact of these movements in the social, economic, political, religious, psychological and cultural spheres of life as well as studying the factors responsible for their emergence.

The pioneer scholars of the study of New Religious Movements such as Bengt Sundkler, M. L. Daniel, Dean Gilliland, Walter Hollenweger, Andrew Walls, David Barrette and Harold Turner argue that New Religious Movements must be taken seriously by different academic disciplines and particularly by missionaries and Third-World Churches⁶. The global interest in the study of New Religious Movements is partly based on that fact, it is well known among scholars of religion, sociologists and anthropologists that periods of rapid social change, whether positive or negative, have marked in many societies by the rise of these religious movements⁷.

The explanation proffered by most sociologists and anthropologists with regard to the emergence of the New Religious Movements cite some concepts: they are an answer to:

- (i) deprivation: that is the felt lack of desired economic and social goods;
- (ii) anomie: the absence of stable social relations and authority which is the result of enforced and abrupt social change⁸;

- (iii) The self-limiting nature of the secularisation process: Religion has been marginalised in modern industrial society to such an extent that a reaction set in, leading to its re-emergence, and one of the largest signs of this is the New Religious Movements⁹.

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. 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 life¹⁰. **Isomb** referring to the Nigerian situation, also identified the emergence and rapid increase of these movements in the context of the nation's depressed socio-political order. He further explains that Nigeria has been in a serious socio-economic and political crises for almost one and a half decades now, has led many of the people to seek various ways of coping with the prevailing situation they find themselves in. He argues that many of these people have found succour in the New Religious Movements, hence their proliferation. In other words, affiliation with these new movements has become a veritable coping mechanism for many people in situations of increasing insecurities of life and property¹¹.

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. According to him, there are theological and moral reasons why certain religious groups spring up at the time they do. He gives the example of the harsh demands of monogamy in the mainstreams and attempts to inculcate certain aspects of Christianity as being prominent in the scale of reasons for the emergence of some New Religious Movements¹².

Experts in different intellectual fields offer different explanations for the upsurge of the New Religious Movements. Some political scientists see these movements as emerging in reaction against colonialism and often associated them with nationalism. Some psychologists, on the other hand, see them as exemplifying stress and

adjustive phenomena. For the historians, they are significant popular Movements. Missionaries and theologians have also found these Movements to be special interest arising as a result of distorted theological outlooks¹³.

These explanation, viewed singly as verified in the course of the field work, 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 and accurately explain their emergence and rapid growth. It is of importance to note that while many scholars have agreed that the reasons for the explosion of the Movements are due to the outcome of the positive services they render to their members¹⁴. Others have dismissed them as purely economic ventures in the hands of resourceful entrepreneurs-incapable of addressing the socio-economic problems of the people. Furthermore, they have been viewed as inconsequential heresies appealing to the religious neurotics on the fringe of the society who have been thoroughly brain-washed and who go about brain-washing others. Consequently, they see the New Religious Movements as basically irrelevant in the society.

This essay expounds the dynamics and social relevance of the New Religious Movements in Nigeria.

THE DYNAMICS OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

The total situation of Nigeria today is one that is experiencing gradual but steady collapse of different fabrics of society. The social structures, economic and political system as in other places are rapidly depreciating, tottering on the verge of imminent collapse. The present situation is breeding social alienation and anomie. Consequently, belonging to the New Religious Movements is like moving into an alternative society.

Here, members feel accepted, known, appreciated, made to matter, contribute ideas, play a part, have a voice and exercise responsibility. They find security, stability, support, assurance and, to some extent, certainty and spiritual meaning of their existence. As the social support system has collapsed, the importance of entering a new family cannot be over-emphasied. In traditional society, the family functions as a crucial contact of meaning. The family helps its

members to make meaning of their experiences in life and helps them to survive in the wider society, giving them necessary identity and support to fall back on during great social uncertainty. They function as alternative and distinctive Christian family with a tremendous support for its members to survive in the large society. They give their members a distinctive identity of brothers and sisters, thus fortifying them to cope with daily social and economic stress.

They create a powerful community where the mass of believers see themselves as brothers and sisters and actually address themselves so. The founders are fondly called Daddy and Mummy by their members. This naturally creates a strong bond of unity among them. The problem of unconcernful attitude in the large society is minimised here.

Sociability is particularly important in the New Religious Movements. The members make friends within the community, visiting and contact are widespread. The movements are important as reference and supportive groups. Members are able to feel at home, and are secured in their standing. The basic insecurity of any person may not necessarily be from poverty but from the feelings that no one cares. These Movements help restore a sense of identity and gives even the most humble person an opportunity to feel that he matters.

They offer leadership opportunities, outlets for release of traditions, healing, flexibility and the mixture of Western and African tradition. The issue of fraternity is also very important among them. The members within the group are encouraged to regard one another as siblings. This can be seen clearly in the use of the terms "brother" and "sisters" regularly and widely between members who are in no way related. They are encouraged to act as a family, and to support, and if necessary, sympathise with fellow members. A good example of this, of course, is the emphasis on visiting the sick and assisting any member who may be in need. This impinges on the factor of sociability.

Part of the security offered to members is in terms of protection. The leaders are important for the advice and assistance they offer their members in their daily affairs. There is also supernatural protection to members through ordinary membership and attendance at

services and also through the activities of the spiritual guides. In the area of social controls the Movements play an important role in making the youth conscious of their calling in life for a fruitful and beneficial apostolate. In a sociological sense, each one is a total society.

Certain norms are emphasized: proper marriage ceremonies, absolute monogamy, prohibition of the smoking of tobacco, the consumption of alcoholic beverages, membership of secret cults and societies. These rules are strictly enforced both by general opinion within the community and if necessary through disciplinary action by the leaders of the community.

In an era when many people are becoming addicted to tobacco and alcoholic consumption, resulting in many deaths and chronic illnesses, it is significant to note that the position taken by some of the Pentecostal Movements is worth commendation. In this respect, in the view of Baum in his *Religion and Alienation*, the New Religious Movements not only function as alternative society, it also raises a prophetic voice as a counter-culture to the prevailing mass culture¹⁵.

Through their structural organisation, everyone is made to fit into one group or another. There is a place that can accommodate each and every person with his individuality, gifts, talents, and inner burdens, thus giving the person a sense of belonging. Participating in the Community's spiritual and social exercises opens one up to the possibility of gradual but steady total reorientation and reformation. Each person finds the necessary support to live above drifting whims and caprices of lonely individuals in a crowd.

Another phases of the dynamism of the New Religious Movements is the political area. The modern political structure in our country, as Ohaire analyzed, was set up by the colonising power largely to serve its own interests and not that of the people¹⁶. furthermore, Amuwo notes that after the nation's independence, many of the political structures were not reformed but merely adapted to serve the interests of the emergent elite who replaced the departing colonial administrators. These new elites turned the political system into a somewhat personal affair with almost total unaccountability and have rigorously pursued their own power and wealth, emasculating all institutions and individuals that attempt to retain independence or

challenge the hegemonic hold on national life. The new post-independence political actors effectively established an economic and a political hegemony over the super-structure of the nation and tried to limit popular participation in national affairs.

This situation has caused alienation which produces apathy and, sometimes, limited participation or involvement in politics on the part of the majority of the people. This situation has caused political alienation. Alienation produces apathy, and sometimes it is the source of violent cathartic outburst. Many people have experienced the political state as unrepresentative, exploitative and oppressive. Many, too, have totally ignored political issues and debates.

In this situation, some New Religious Movements play an important role. The members see themselves as conscientious people who ought to be in the helm of power to rule the nation with equity for the common good of all. Members are encouraged, during sermons, to participate in the country's political affairs and debates. The pulpit is often used as an avenue for political mobilisation of the community. Some members of the New Religious Movements are very political, they have been thus motivated. Presently, in the national political arena, they could be said to be still marginal, but they are making strenuous efforts to go higher in the political ladder. Their official position is that they must get seriously involved in politics.

The relatively low social status and corresponding low standard of living among the Nigerian masses are due partly to the rapid economic decline in the nation ushered in, in the 1980's. The result of the economic decline being unemployment, beleaguered infrastructure and inflation which followed the drop in international oil price in 1981. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) initiated in 1986 brought about more austerity, not only in urban centres, but in the villages too. These together with external factors like the oppressive burden of external debt and the manipulation of commodity prices, have crippled life in the rural area. Many of the youth are ending as house-keepers. Job seekers have no future to look up to in the system. Everything seems to be on the verge of collapse - no jobs, no money, no food and no personal dignity: Life is gradually grinding to a halt as it has become "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" as Thomas Hobbes observes¹⁷.

The New Religious Movements emphasize personal renewal, hope, and a new life in Christ that offers strength and purpose in the face of life's difficulties. The Christian vision provides for the individual a coherent and ordered moral universe which makes sense out of the chaotic and seemingly arbitrary nature of suffering and pain being experienced in the society today. Another source of hope for the individual is the "prosperity gospel" preached by these movements. The sermons emphasize the possibility of overcoming the present apparent senselessness of life.

In this respect, their preachings fulfil the standard functions of Christian sermon, which, according to Herbert Smith "must inform, form, reform, and inspire the faithful to believe, celebrate and like the Movement¹⁸."

The doctrine of prosperity is particularly useful in the case of Nigerians. The Prosperity Gospel is an integral doctrine of Contemporary Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity. The doctrine has its root in the Faith Movement. The Gospel of Prosperity include teachings on healing, positive confession and prosperity. The Faith Movement teaches that God has a law of prosperity which as one comes into contact with, and is a believer in Jesus, it will for the person. The believer who articulates the law and who claims prosperity for himself or herself will reap handsome financial and material rewards. By insisting that God wants His children to have the best of everything in life, the members are psychologically conditioned to undertake lucrative business ventures even at very small levels for a meaningful self-support.

They also provide institutional support, both formally and informally in areas of economic pursuits. The New Religious Movements has stepped in where the nation failed and offered practical help to those with the least access to the nation's patronage. Most of the New Religious Movement members are enterprising. They are in opposition to poverty and wish all her members to escape its traps. The well-to-do members are often encouraged to help the weak ones to be self-supportive. Wealth is seen as part of God's blessings on the individual. The entire members are encouraged to be actively involved in meaningful economic pursuits.

Conscious of the fact that what has led to wide spread poverty among the people is not unconnected with corruption and mismanagement of public funds, the founders of the New Religious Movements often fearlessly and openly attack those with such inclinations. According to their teachings, those who persist in such attitude should be fished out within the Movements and should be decisively dealt with, because a very common attitude in the Nigerian nation is that honesty is irrelevant if people ever have any hope of progressing economically.

Furthermore, the New Religious Movements have made worship very participatory. Everyone takes part and there is total involvement. The services are characterised by testimonies, miracle stories, tales of divine encounter and prophecies. This is an important aspect because people who count for nothing in the larger society now have occasion to express themselves and rejoice with others even if their hope is anticipatory. Crucial issues like healing, wholeness, supernatural intervention, the problem of evil, agent and remedies are treated as important. These issues are never relegated to the background.

CONCLUSION

The social relevance of the New Religious Movements hinges on the place it occupies in the lives of their members, the functions they perform in the lives of these members as they try to make sense of their experiences. In an increasingly anonymous and mass society, plagued by social, economic and political dislocations, the New Religious Movements provide an alternative society, recreating the microstructures of social relations of family and friendship.

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