

RELIGION AND CULTURE

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMISM OF FAITH IN AFRICA



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CHAPTER 5

Social Issues in Healthy Spirituality and Sick Religiosity: Towards Effective 'Fixing of Nigeria'

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INTRODUCTION

The inspiration to undertake this research came from the front page caption on the Special Anniversary Edition of the Newswatch magazine¹ which read: 'How to Fix Nigeria'. The scholarly and well researched contributions in this magazine were seven vital areas of Nigeria's experiences as a nation viz: the Nigerian Conundrum, the Economy, Education, Health, Corruption, the Judiciary and the Electoral Process. Reading through these articles, I realized that an important aspect on 'how to fix Nigeria' was omitted and that is: religion. Another article in the same magazine: '*In from the cold*'² justified my observation. The author of this article narrates how a Nigerian acclaimed Prophet T.B. Joshua re-united with her mother a young girl who was abandoned in 1996 at the age of nine over witchcraft allegations³. Most communities in Nigeria have experienced the problems of child abandonment or adults' castigation and killings that have connections with religious issues and organizations as narrated in the *Insider*⁴. On the other hand, religion has contributed immensely to the development of Nigeria since independence. Arthur Schopenhauer observed that: Religion has two faces; one the face of truth, the other the face of deception⁵. The two faces of religion has been experienced in Nigeria, therefore, the nations' religious scenario certainly needs to be 'fixed' properly religiously. This is because as Xavier elaborates: Religion-and its powers to help as well as to hurt- is by no means confined to the private world of the individual; it involves families, communities, and nations. Hardly a day goes by without the daily news informing us of tragic consequences from conflicts related to religion. On the other hand, the positive contributions of religion, although less often reported in the news, are truly great. Clearly, religion has individual and social dimensions, and the two intertwine...⁶

This paper therefore is an analysis of the social issues in healthy spirituality and sick religiosity inspired for the collaborative efforts 'to fix Nigeria' properly for sustainable development, progress and social integration. It is hoped that this paper will be useful to the government, religious stakeholders, law-makers, students of religion and for the entire citizens of Nigeria especially when dealing with issues of socio-religious significance.

Social issues in healthy spirituality

Healthy spirituality refers to the aspects of religion that allow the religious leaders and members to be peace-loving, responsible, creative, open-minded, understanding, disciplined, truthful, compassionate. Healthy spirituality has often led to societal integration, unity, sustainable development, patriotism and scientific growth. Numerous religious leaders and religious organizations in Nigeria have demonstrated in various ways the beauty of healthy spirituality. Many churches and religious organizations have engaged in excellent social works that have benefited the people and demonstrated the healthy side of religiosity. For instance, in the field-laboratory situation of this research⁷, healthy spirituality has been demonstrated in various areas of social life:

(a) Education: Religious groups have built many schools to give the citizens quality education. These educational institutions include:

- i. Holy Family College, Oku Abak,
- ii. Holy Child Girls' Secondary School, Ifuho,
- iii. Christ the King Nursery Primary School, Uyo,
- iv. Methodist Girls' Secondary School, Utu Ikpe,
- v. Union Secondary School, Itu,
- vi. Holy Trinity College, Mbiakong
- vii. Goodnews Community Secondary School, Abak

There are many other educational institutions too numerous to be listed here that show evidence of healthy spirituality.

There are many other educational institutions initiated by the various religious groups in the area of study. This is a show of healthy spirituality.

(b) Health: In the area of health, the religious groups in the area of study have also demonstrated excellent display of healthy spirituality by the building of hospitals and health centres for the health care of the people. Some of health-care centres initiated by the religious institutions include the following:

- i. Mercy Hospital and Mercy Eye Centre, Abak,
- ii. St. Mary's Hospital, Urua Akpan,
- iii. St. Luke's Hospital, Anua,
- iv. Methodist Hospital, Ituk Mbang.

Healthy spirituality is displayed in issues and endeavours that bring help and wellbeing to people.

(c) Social services: It is highly commendable that many religious groups have also focused on the area of social services. One of such social outfits is the St. Joseph Rehabilitation Centre located at Ukana Iba. This Centre has for many years done a lot of rehabilitations for the physically handicapped and have given them a sense of belonging and meaning in life. St. Louise Centre at Ikot Ekpene is another centre that caters for people with hearing disability. A Mentally Retarded Centre set up by a religious organization at Eniong Offot, Uyo which caters for the mentally challenged people in the area of study is a clear demonstration of healthy spirituality. There is also an orphanage at

Anua that caters for abandoned children. This too is initiated by a religious organization and shows a healthy side of religiosity.

(d) Alternative Society: Religious groups also provide an alternative society for people who have cause to flee from real or imaginary problems in their homes or villages in order to be near the benevolence influence of the 'Holy Spirit'. The most popular of the religious groups that provide alternative psychological space for the people in the area of study are: The Goodnews Community (Gospel Village) and the Hutterian Brethren both located at Abak, Akwa Ibom State. At these religious centres, people are free to take up residence freely. This has helped people in coping with some problems that are psychological and social in nature.

Social issues in sick religiosity

Sick religiosity is simply the sick side of religion that makes some people hateful, clannish, alienated, fearful, arrogant, destructive, irresponsible, rigid, closed-minded etc. In the history of humanity, one of the greatest suicide-homicide that records a sick religiosity was occasioned by Jim Jones⁸, the founder of the People's Temple Cult in Jonestown, Guyana, USA. In this episode, 913 people died of cyanide given to them by the leader of the cult on 18th November 1978. This is a clear case of sick religiosity. A psychiatrist that analyzed the life of Jim Jones after his death discovered that:

He faked miracles with the conniving assistance of a few loyalists. Rotting chicken livers were used as cancerous growths he was removing from the victims of cancer...He was very vain: and always paid special attention to his appearance-he dyed his hair, wore nice clothes and boasted about his attractiveness. He had bodyguard carry a suitcase of make-up materials for him all the time, suffered from paranoid fear, largely ignorant about many things, had a fundamentalist mindset, hated anybody and everybody who stood in his way to power, hated government agencies, critical media, neighbours who complained and followers who questioned him. Being a sadist, he enjoys forcing emotional and physical pains on others. He was proud and greedy, he feared other people and government agencies, he even dreamt of becoming a big political leader. His secretary was said to be arranging for him to have sexual relations with whomever among his flock he chose...⁹

Sick religiosity often manifests itself when there is a psychological imbalance. If the psychological state of Jim Jones was known on time and same revealed to his numerous followers, perhaps not many would have gullibly remained with him to the end to be killed in the manner that they were. There are many other examples of this kind in the history of humanity.

In the Nigerian religious scene, Obiora gives detailed account of how people have used religion in the Nigerian context as instrument of manipulations for economic gains and means of deceit. The sick religious leaders are also noted for fake miracles, signs and wonders to deceive their unsuspecting followers¹⁰. Again, Enwerem in his book: *A Dangerous Awakening: The*

social ills with no parental care or support. Sick religiosity displayed in this episode is like a societal cancer that can destroy the very fabric of communal life. As it has been illustrated, sick religiosity has exposed children in Akwa Ibom State to vulnerability and deep social ills.

(c) Disintegration of family life

In family life, the sick prophets and self styled spirited children have caused untold problems that have led to the destabilization of families. I visited a young woman last month who expressed her unwillingness to attend the mother-in-law's funeral because her Pastor had said the deceased woman was a witch. Many families have been torn apart because of the activities of sick religiosity demonstrated by some religious leaders.

(d) Witchcraft talk

The phenomenon of sick religiosity often expressed in the 'witchcraft-talk' led me to interview the popular Evangelist Mrs Helen Ukpabio¹⁴ who incidentally seem overly concerned with 'witchcraft' eradication. She confirmed that witchcraft spirit abounds everywhere and there is urgent need to rid the society of them. She claimed she has spiritual powers to detect and exorcise witches but she does not support child-abandonment, child stigmatization and family disintegration on grounds of witchcraft allegations. I also held interviews with Ibong Abraham¹⁵ who broadens our horizon in the area of sick religiosity pertaining to witchcraft accusations and counter accusations. He is of the opinion that the incessant allegation by religious leaders and groups that so many people are witches are false as they do not have the technical-know-how on how to detect witches. In other words, according to him, many of the religious leaders and so-call spirited people who claim they can detect witches are fake spiritualists. Surprisingly, he claims that many Christian churches hire him from time to time to assist them in detecting witches through diabolical means. Be it as it may, the overindulgence in this witch-talk may well be a manifestation of unhealthy psychological nuance. Another problem is that the methodology of detecting witches is very subjective and not clear at all to the public. In this situation of too many religious bigotry and witch-talk, the observation of Professor J.U.J. Asiegbu is worth noting:

'...any society which can become overcrowded with so many churches, and so many mosques occupying almost every available space, even warehouses, dilapidated old buildings, lecture rooms, classrooms and football fields, must truly be suffering from too many man-made problems driving the citizens into the multiple dangers of pseudo prophecies, laced with deceitful promises of a utopia or other-worldly expectation'¹⁶.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is pertinent to conclude this work with the following recommendations focused on how to 'fix Nigeria' properly for **sustainable** development and integration.

The Jesus' example: It is recommended that the religious leaders follow the example of Jesus in their dealings with issues of religious and social matters. Exorcism of children who are suspected to be witches should be after the example of Jesus' ministry:

..When the sun was setting, all those who had any that was sick with various diseases brought them to Him and he laid his hands on everyone of them and he healed them and demons also came out of many crying out and saying 'you are the Christ the son of God' and he rebuking them did not allow them to speak for they knew that he was the Christ...' ¹⁷. The ministry of Jesus is a challenge to Christian religious leaders who throw out children on the street on the allegation of witchcraft.

Encouragement of authentic religious initiatives: The positive contributions of the various religious groups in our locality cannot be overemphasized. Authentic efforts of religious endeavours should be encouraged so that citizens who feel attracted to particular authentic religious persuasions may be helped and prevented from getting into problems with leaders suffering from sick religiosity. For instance, schools, hospitals, trade-centres, orphanages, social centres, etc initiated by religious leaders should be supported by the government for sustainable development.

Intensification of interreligious dialogue with people of living faith in Nigeria: Inter-religious dialogue is highly recommended and encouraged as this will help to reduce incidents of religious suspicious that fan up psychological embers of sick religiosity.

God-talk preference: In a deeply Christian community as ours, witch-talks should be suppressed and God-talks encouraged among the people. Religious leaders would do well to encourage members to constantly engage in God-talk. If this is done, eventually, the society will be witch-talk free and progress and growth will be experienced. The power of positive thinking has been noted to do the magic and perform the miracles people are often imagining.

A Commissioned Ministry for Religious Affairs: A commissioned Ministry of Religious Affairs to help in checking cases of sick religiosity and encouraging healthy spirituality is highly recommended in our pluralistic religious milieu. It is obvious that the spirituality of many people in the area of study is 'witch-centred' instead of God-centred. This spirituality has torn families apart, caused children to be stigmatized and abandoned; old people neglected and suspected to be witches. Killings have occurred on the often

baseless accusation of witches. A Ministry of Religious Affairs can help immensely in tackling issues of sick religiosity and encouraging healthy spirituality due to the social implications of these two faces of religion. A child thrown out and abandoned on the allegation of witchcraft could be a *Albert Einstein* tomorrow.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that religion with its tremendous power to hurt and to heal cannot be safely ignored because of its impacts on the society. Religious issues delicate as it is should not be seen as a private affair and should not be ignored. The points raised above can go a long way to helping 'fix Nigeria's religious space' properly for sustainable development after 50 years of independence.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Newswatch is a Nigerian's Weekly Magazine. The edition referred to here is that of 6th October 2008.
2. Newswatch: 6th October, 2008: 50-51
3. Many children from Akwa Ibom State who have been accused of witchcraft have been rescued by CRARN (Child Rights And Rehabilitation Network) a Non-Governmental Organization that has rescued many children abandoned by parents on allegation of witchcraft. The head office of this Organization is located at Ikot Afaha, Idung Ukpa, Eket Local Government Area.
4. Nigeria's weekly magazine September 2003: No 35: 18
5. Xavier, N.S. The Two Faces of Religion: A Psychiatrist's view. Theological Publication in India. St. Peter's Seminary, Malleswaram West Bangalore, India 1989. P. iv
6. Xavier, N. S. 1989 : viii
7. Akwa Ibom State is the field laboratory situation for this research.
8. In his book on the Two Faces of Religion, N. S. Xavier, M.D gave a detail account of the life of Jim Jones which proved that he was paranoid in many respects.
9. Xavier, N. S. 1987 183)
10. Obiora, Fedelis K. Divine Decit: Business in Religion. Optimal Publishers, Enugu, 1998
11. Iheanyi M. Enwerem. A Dangerous Awakening: Politicization for Religion. PP. 217 -222 IFRA, Ibadan, 1995.
12. Helen Uwana Bassey at CRARN narrated this ordeal perpetrated by a sick prophet. Interview conducted on June 17, 2008
13. Imaobong Effiong John, a Primary Iv people narrated this episode at CRARN on June 17, 2008.

14. Interview with Evangelist Mrs. Helen Ukpabio, was held on 9th June, 2008.
15. Ibon Abraham claims his is a witch himself and has the technical-Know-how to detect witches.
16. Extract from Inaugural Lecture of Profession J. U. J. Asiegbu presented at the University of Port Harcourt, 2000.
17. Luke 4:40-41.