



# **GOD:** *The* **CONTEMPORARY** **DISCUSSION**

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## AN EXAMINATION OF POVERTY IN NIGERIA: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

*L. B. Akande*

### Introduction

Poverty either absolutely or relatively defined is one of the terrible vices faced by many Nigerians of various religions today, be it Christians, Muslims or Afrelists. Absolute in the sense of the inability of millions of people to satisfactorily meet their basic and elementary needs of life to survive, such as good feeding, clothing, accommodation, good health and education. This was the situation experienced by the widow of Zarephat; who has two major forces to contend with 1Kgs 17:8-16. She was not only poverty-stricken, but at the same time a widow. Her situation is similar to that of millions of people today, children inclusive, who lack all the resources needed to maintain decent living. Many are constantly experiencing hunger, as opined in the words of Marshall that:

One third to one-half of humanity are said to go to bed hungry every night. In the old stone age, the fraction must have been smaller. This is the era of hunger unprecedented.<sup>1</sup>

Akanmidu defines poverty as "a form of human suffering such as starvation or destitution."<sup>2</sup> He goes further to say that: poverty, in its true meaning is the state of lacking the means to exist adequately<sup>3</sup>. This in essence is to say that inability to have access to good food, good housing, and illness could all be leading to poverty. But Oderinde highlighted other causes of poverty as follows:

May be the result of sloth and laziness, drunkenness or careless living, folly, stubbornness, oppression and greed, deformity, old age. It might also be of calamity, plague, war disease, fraud and usury. Slavery is another cause of poverty.<sup>4</sup>



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Unfortunately, Nigeria, a country God endowed with abundant natural and human resources is one of the world's mostly affected with poverty. The world Bank report of 1999 showed that nearly 70% of the country's population of about 120 million are living below the poverty line<sup>5</sup>. Information from the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) also placed Nigeria among the 25 poorest nations in the world<sup>6</sup>.

However, despite all these disturbing and alarming rates of poverty in Nigeria, it is never in the plan of God that Nigerians be poverty stricken. He created man to be in wealth, to prosper just as the soul prosper<sup>7</sup>. Thus, in view of this, God has provided many avenues through the Government, religious bodies, philanthropist, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and other humanitarian organizations to deliver Nigerian, from the serious problems of poverty.

#### **Nigeria and Poverty**

The degree at which poverty has adversely affected Nigeria is alarming. Since independence, Nigeria has been experiencing an upward increase in poverty<sup>8</sup>. In year 2000, it was said that about 70% Nigerians are living below the internationally defined poverty line. Further reports have also indicated that almost all the states of Nigeria are adversely affected with poverty. The table below confirms this.

Table: Poverty by States including F.C. (1980-96)  
Source: A Blueprint for National Poverty Eradication Programme

STATE	1980	1985	1992	1996
Abia	14.4	33.4	49.9	56.2
Adamawa	33.4	47.2	44.1	65.5
Akwa Ibom	10.2	41.9	45.5	66.9
Anambra	12.8	37.7	32.3	51.0
Bauchi	46.0	68.9	68.8	64.2
Borno	26.4	50.1	49.7	66.9
Cross River	10.2	41.9	45.5	66.9
Delta	19.8	52.4	33.9	56.1
Ebonyi	12.8	37.7	46.6	51.0
Edo	19.8	52.4	33.9	56.1



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Ekiti	24.9	47.3	46.6	71.6
Enugu	12.8	37.7	32.3	51.0
Gombe	46.0	68.9	68.8	83.5
Imo	14.4	33.1	49.9	56.2
Jigawa	37.5	54.0	38.7	71.0
Kaduna	44.7	58.5	32.0	67.7
Kano	37.5	55.0	38.7	71.0
Katsina	44.7	58.7	32.0	67.7
Kebbi	25.4	45.8	37.9	83.6
Kogi	33.3	39.9	60.8	75.5
Kwara	33.3	39.9	60.8	75.5
Lagos	26.6	42.6	48.1	53.0
Nassarawa	49.5	49.5	50.2	62.7
Niger	34.0	61.4	29.9	52.9
Ogun	20.0	56.0	36.3	69.9
Ondo	24.9	47.3	46.6	71.6
Osun	7.8	28.3	40.7	58.7
Oyo	7.8	28.3	40.7	58.7
Plateau	49.5	64.2	50.2	58.7
Rivers	7.2	44.4	43.4	77.3
Sokoto	25.4	45.8	37.9	83.6
Taraba	33.4	47.2	44.1	65.5
Yobe	26.4	50.1	49.7	66.9
Zamfara	33.4	45.8	37.9	53.0
F.C.T.	-	-	27.6	53.0
All Nigeria	28.1	46.3	42.7	65.6

The above table is a clear indication that Nigerians are poverty stricken, which is not in the plan of God.

However, as a result of the state of poverty of most Nigerians, the Federal Government, some Non-Governmental Organizations and religious bodies have put in place many schemes or programmes, aimed at eradicating poverty in Nigeria. Among such programmes established by the Government to alleviate and eradicate poverty in Nigeria are: Family Economic Advance Programme (FEAP), Federal government Poverty Alleviation Programme (PAP), National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and National Directorate of Employment (NDE). All these programmes are arranged to eradicate



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poverty in Nigeria. Youths are mainly involved. Through these governmental efforts many have been able to set up their businesses and become self-employed, thus reducing the number of those searching for jobs.

In addition, religious bodies too are not silent about the poverty situation of their members. Most churches have a welfare unit that caters for the needs of members considered as less privileged, like widows and orphans. In most cases, members in this category have been assisted to set up businesses.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) too like "Women in Neighborhood Ventures" (WONEV), are known to give training especially to women in the neighbourhood, in the art of soap making, tailoring, pomade making, and Kampala. With these programmes, many women have been economically empowered to cater for their family and earn their livelihood.

Based on the above, Government should realize that it is not enough to formulate programmes. It must ensure that such programmes are well co-ordinated, implemented, monitored and evaluated so as to achieve the desired results.

#### **The Plan of God: Christian Perspective**

Poverty as occurred in the Old Testament several times is a situation whereby one lacks material goods and other necessities of life<sup>10</sup>. God delivers the poor from trouble, (Psalm 9:18-19, Isa. 215:4), and so enjoins Christians to help fellow brothers (Deut. 15:7; 24:14) by responding to the needs of others. In His infinite love and support for the poverty stricken widow of Zarephath, God sent Elijah to her and changed her situation to that of plenty (1 Kings 17:8-16).

Jesus has a prophetic concern for the poor and mercy to debtors (Lk. 1:51-52; 7:41) in addition to his concern for the sick. Sickness is a form of poverty, but Jesus delivered many from their sicknesses. Among such cases are: healing a centurion's servant of paralysis (Lk. 7:1), healing Peter's mother-in-law (Matt. 8:14, Mk. 1:30), healing two blind men (Matt. 20:30, Mk. 10:46), and healing of the hemorrhaging woman (Matt. 9:20), Mk. 5:25)



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From the aforementioned, it can be clearly said that God's plan and interest in providing for His children still continue today. He provides for material, spiritual and emotional needs. God's concern and plan for His people could also be seen in the life of the Israelites wandering in the barren wilderness for forty years, where there was little or no food or water. They grumbled and complained in their fear of poverty stricken situation. But God felt concerned, proved His trustworthiness and faithfulness, and made abundant provision for manna, quail and water<sup>11</sup>. Hence, manna, in the wilderness became for Israel and Christians today a powerful reminder and symbol of God's provision for daily needs both physical and spiritual. In the Lord's prayer, the petition "give us this day our daily bread", the feeding of the multitudes (John 6:1-13), and Jesus teaching on the bread of life (Jn. 6:31-58) all build on the fact that our God does not support poverty in any form.

It is paramount that we observe that at the moment the Israelites came into the land of Canaan to settle, the supply of manna stopped, because they could now feign for themselves by planting their own food (Ex. 16:35, Jos. 5:12). The jug of oil also stopped running when the drought was over (1Kgs. 17:14). All these point to the fact that God does not expect that we sit idle and watch our food drop from heaven. Human beings still have to work hard to earn their living by the "sweat of their brow" (Gen. 3:19).

Apostle Paul in many of his epistles, encouraged the principles of hard work (1Tim. 3:1; Eph. 6:5-8). His admonition to the idle Thessalonians that "if any one will not work, let him not eat" (II Thes. 3:10) still stands. The apostle set for himself an exemplary attitude that despite being a minister of the word, he had his profession as a tent-maker thus working day and night (1Thes. 2:9). He so much stressed the dignity of labour in good percentage of his epistles, that no particular work is menial.

Emphasis could also be laid on the twelve disciples who all had their profession. Most of them were fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James and John. Luke, the Gospeller, was a medical doctor. All these imply that if our God could provide the sun, rain, fertile soil and miracle of growth, He expects that we lay our hands on the plough, take care of God's rich earth and teeming seas. We also need to share with the poor and needy, as did widow of Zarephath.



We should mention again the human anatomy. This is another plan of God to enrich man. He creates us a complete being with two hands, two legs to walk, two eyes to see, and brain to think well. All these are for the benefit of humanity. Many who became very wealthy in the Bible really worked for it and God supported them. King Solomon requested for wisdom to govern, but God gave him not only wisdom but riches and honour (1 Kings 3:10-15). Throughout his reign, poverty was not heard of in his kingdom. He was the richest man ever known in history. On this note, Howard further comments that:

Then the God of the "superabundantly above" granted Solomon what he did not ask for: riches and honour greater than that of all other contemporary kings. From what we know of the rulers of contemporary Italy or Greece or Egypt or Assyria or perhaps even China, for example, it seems that Solomon does came our on top of the heap.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, in the contemporary Nigerian society, this writer has come in contact with so many successful and wealthy Christians who acknowledge God as the main source of their wealth. Among such are re-known ministers of God, many of whom will top the list of well-to-do Nigerian men and women.

Additionally, eradication of poverty should not only be seen from monetary value alone. An examination of the human health services is equally important because health they say is wealth. It is perfectly healthy individual physically, emotionally, spiritually and mentally, that can move about to earn a living, thus eradicating poverty in their lives and the society at large. To this effect, God greatly supports that we are perfectly fit. It is His plan for us to prosper just as our soul prospers as recorded in the Epistle of John that:

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in health, I know that it is well with your soul<sup>13</sup>.

Having discussed the plans of God for mankind to live in perfect health and prosper, what then does God expect from us? God expects that individual should live a decent life, and be obedient to all His



commands. After all, when God says "Do not do this or that", it is mainly for the benefit of humanity at large. God also expects that we trust in Him, make efforts and pray. Whatever little effort we make would be crowned with brilliant success.

### **The Ways Out**

To eradicate poverty in Nigeria, every hands must be on deck. The task must be carried out by all and sundry. The government, religious bodies, NGOs, and even individual need to wake up to the challenges ahead. For the government, whatever programmes are initiated should be such that will have enduring benefits to the citizens. The benefits should not be short-lived, because poverty eradication, as opined by Faseyi:

requires a vision-long run planning than make-shift objectives aimed at solving instantaneous problems that continue to linger<sup>14</sup>.

The idea of giving out financial aids to citizens should be redressed by the government. Financial assistance should be rendered only to those genuinely in need of it, probably to start a business. Such assistance needs not be given to an averagely well-to-do political party faithfuls who will only consider it as his/her own share of the national cake.

Whoever is trained by the government on any skill should be properly monitored, and ensured that his produce is well marketed. This will encourage the trainee to be fully committed to his/her job. Adequate assistance should be given to farmers so as to be sufficiently empowered to sustain farming operations. Government in its yearly budgeting should always have in mind the interest of the widows, orphans, and the aged, arrangements on a monthly basis should be made for them as welfare packages.

Tackling the problems of un-employment must be paramount to the government. The number of youths graduating from various institutions every year is alarming. If they are left un-employed, wallowing in poverty, they could constitute very great risk to the



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society because "an idle hand is the workshop of the devil". Government should therefore, be sensitive to the poverty, hunger and suffering situation of her citizens.

In addition to the above, individual's role in eradicating poverty in Nigeria is very vital. It is important that every worker be up and doing, and be honest with his/her job, be it a farmer, messenger, mechanic, carpenter, or lecturer. God has provided all it required to live a poverty free life; it is now left for individual to manage these God-given resources well for his/her own benefit.

Sacrificial giving is another important way of eradicating poverty. This is a practice that individual should imbibe as strongly affirmed by Alokun:

The fastest escape route from the danger of poverty is to give and give and give continuously. Giving as a key unlocks the heavenly treasury for blessings to be released to eradicate poverty from individual's life<sup>15</sup>.

Religious bodies too are not left out in the task of eradicating poverty in our society. Welfare unit or department could be set up to cater for the needs of their members. They could also set up businesses like Computer/Photocopy Centres, Day Care Centres, and other Educational Institutions where the interest of qualified members are first catered for. By the time all religious bodies embark on this project, the issue of poverty especially among her members will scarcely be heard of.

### **Conclusion**

Poverty in Nigeria is no longer news. The vices have been with Nigerians from time immemorial and at the same time, the good plans and thought of God for individual and the nation remain unchanged. It is now left for individual to re-examine his/her life and walk out of poverty. Unemployed youths need not continue to wait fruitlessly for government job. They must be determined to be relevant to their environment by laying their hands on any worth while ventures and take good advantage of any available opportunity provided by the Government.



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NGOs too should be ready to assist in rendering financial aids or vocational training to Youths and other less privileged ones. Youths must persevere, be patient and realize that it takes time to get to the top.

If our government will strictly adhere to the aforementioned ways out, then poverty in Nigeria will to a reasonable extent be a forgotten issue.



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