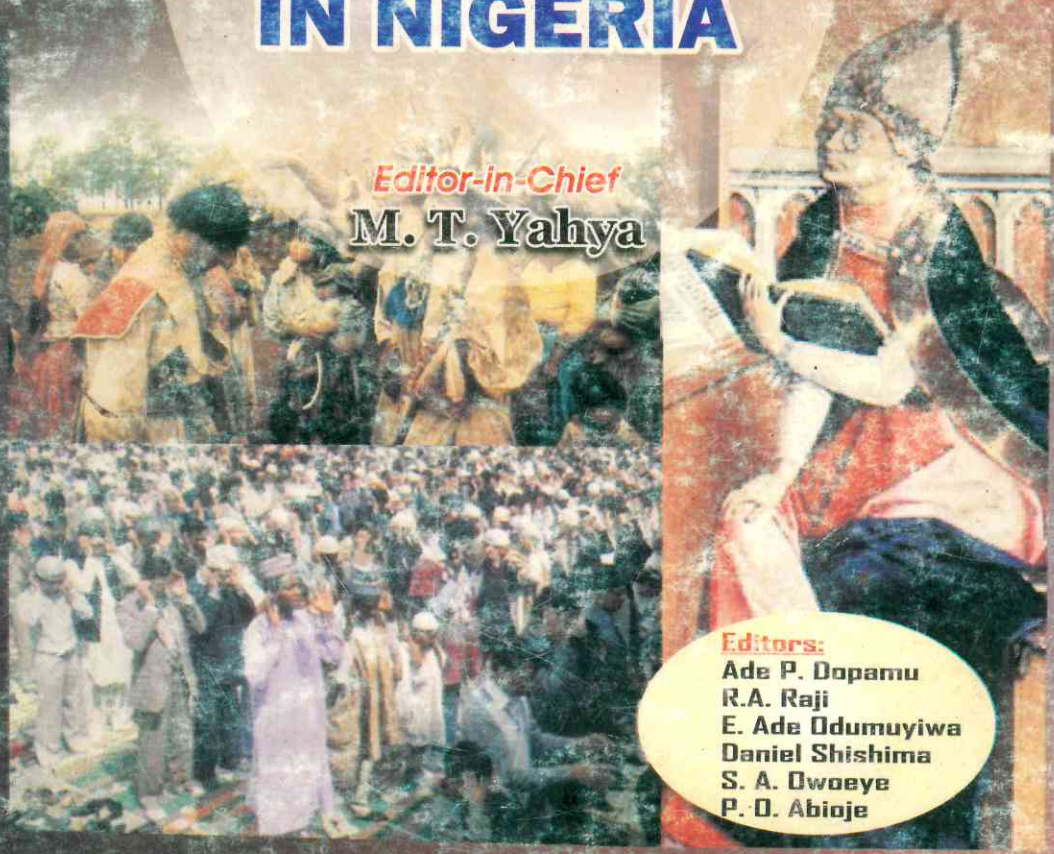
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ISSUES IN THE PRACTICE OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA



Editor-in-Chief

M. T. Yahya

Editors:

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Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (NASR)

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FOREWORD

This book articulates the results of research of various scholars from different religious persuasions. Therefore, the reader has the opportunity to look at a variety of approaches to the study of religions in Nigeria. The quality of these essays has presented religion in a general perspective, giving the reader a general view about the roles of religion in national unity of the Nigerian nation.

The theme of this book "Issues in the Practice of Religion in Nigeria" embraces all the problems confronting not only religion, but also the other aspects of social life in Nigeria. At forty-six, the Nigerian nation has failed to achieve the desired development due to lack of national ideology, on one hand and religious acrimony, ethnicity, corruption, nepotism and other social vices, on the other hand.

As each of the essays demonstrates, the various contributors acknowledge the various ills confronting the Nigerian society. For religion in particular, it is the key players who because of their selfish aims bring chaos and disunity in Nigeria, thereby making religion to perform dyfunctional roles.

However, as most of the writers have explained, despite all odds, religion is still playing its role of uniting the different nationals in Nigeria. Religion is capable of redeeming the Nigerian society from its ills. Religion stands the chance of improving the social and moral aspects of people's lives. In the nascent democracy, religion is capable of furnishing the politicians with insights that make them to be conscious of the sinfulness of their preoccupation.

This book is recommended to the general public as an indispensable source of knowledge for personal conversion and growth. The book is particularly recommended to the Christians, Muslims and adherents of African Religion (Afrelists). It is also recommended to teachers and students of Religion, Philosophy and Political Science. If true unity, peace and progress can be achieved, this book is indispensable for all religious leaders in Nigeria.

We believe that this represents current analysis of the ills confronting the Nigerian society and the ways in which religion can solve same. The book sensitizes the reader to return to the path of good, to the truth, and to God. Thus, it represents the objective of the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions. In religious diversities, we stand to achieve unity and progress.

Professor D.I. Ker
Vice Chancellor
Benue State University, Makurdi
2003

PREFACE

Nigerians are known to take their religion very seriously. Although this seriousness about religion has found both positive and negative expressions in interpersonal and community relations, it remains one single phenomenon most nieriansd have in common. Places of worship of various shapes, magnitude and splendor are uncountable nation-wide. Opening prayers at official and unofficial occasions, intra-faith or inter-faith gatherings (including the football fields), are regular and normal features among Nigerians wherever they are. Inscriptions on commercial vehicles, houses and several oher objects, names that people bear or give their children, all go a long way to show that Nigerians take the believe in God and their various worship systems serously.

The need for the performance of designated rites as acts of worshipo is an integral part of the belief systems in the religions most popular in Nigeria, Christianity, Islam and African Religion. This is because the performance of these formal rites is one way in which the belief in God is demonstrated. Another wayh is through acts of good deeds.s the Scriptures enjoin virtues like good-neighbourliness, kindness, the spirit of forgiveness and so on, as parts of religius obligations and ways to win the favour of God. These two aspects of the worship of God are complementary to each other.

One important role of religion in the life of mankind is to serve as his constant reminder of his 'status' on earth, and a consistent link between him and his Creator. It is also to serve as the control for the whims and caprices of man. The way to achieve this is through constant link with God through acts of worship, and through the conduct of activities on earth in accordance with guidelines laid down by Him. For this reason, religion is expeced to reflect in the activities of man on earth and influence them positively.

From the point of view of religion, God has given man the thinking faculty. This privilege enables man to realise his duties and carry them out. It also distinguishes man from what we call "lesser animals". This same privilege is what qualifiesd man to be the vicegerent of God on earth and makes him accountable for his deeds. The measure of his deeds in this life then determines his fate in the hereafter. Religion teaches that as much as life in this world is important and worthy of living, life hereafter should be of greater importance to the believer, because it is going to last for a much longer duration.

Man however, has the tendency to give greater priority attention to matters of sustenance, material needs of comfort and conveniences over matters of the hereafter. Therefore, the proper practice of religion is often neglected. The question

of whether this priority is well placed or misplaced is crucial and needs to be answered in order to determine the role the practice of religion is supposed to play and the position it is supposed to take in the life of a human being.

The theme of the 22nd Annual Conference of our Association held in Calabar in September, 2001 was "Religion in Public Life in Public Life in Nigeria". One major observation we made in the communique at the end of that conference was that the practice of religion did not seem to have as much positive effect as it ought to, on both the public and private lives of many Nigerians. This therefore, partly informed the choice of theme for the Makurdi conference the outcome of which is this book.

The contributions in this book have discussed extensively various issues in the practice of religion in Nigeria. It is our hope that the book will serve as food for thought for all who, at lest feel concerned about the attitude Nigerians seem to have, to religion on one hand and to the need for a disciplined life, full of dedication and commitment to the service of God and fellow human beings, on the other.

Muslih T. Yahya
June 2006.

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COMMERCIALIZATION OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA: THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Caleb O. Ogunkunle

Religion and its Purpose

Religion is so complex in nature that it has no generally acceptable definition. In fact, Idowu mentioned one Leuba who collected forty-eight definitions from forty-eight experts and then added two of his own to make it the round figure of fifty, and yet religion has not been satisfactorily defined.[1] Part of the problems is that every discipline has its own definition of religion. For example, the sociologists stress the social dimension of religious ideas and therefore describe religion as the collective expression of human values. The anthropologists, describe religious beliefs and practices as they find them in living communities. The historians describe religion in terms of events resulting from beliefs.[2]

The Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged has seven different definitions of religion, two of which include "Belief in a divine or supernatural power or powers to be worshipped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe" and "the state of mind or way of life expressing love for and trust in God, and one's will and effort to act according to the will of God especially within a monastic order or community". The fact that religion is understood in different ways by different people has been rightly noted by Walter Holden Capps:

> For many people, religion is an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, practices, and worship that center on one Supreme God, or the Deity. For many others, religion involves a number of gods, or deities. Some people have a religion in which no specific God or gods are worshipped. There are also people who practice their own religious beliefs in their own personal way, largely independent of organized religion.[3]

E.B. Idowu's definition of religion is very comprehensive and helpful to our understanding of this subject. He states that:

> Religion results from man's spontaneous awareness of, and spontaneous reaction to his immediate awareness, of a living power, 'wholly other' and infinitely greater than himself; a power mysterious

> because unseen, yet a present and urgent reality, seeking to bring man into communion with Himself. This awareness includes that of something reaching out from the depths of man's being for close communion with and vital relationship to this power as a source of real life... Religion in its essence is the means by which god as spirit and man's essential self, communicate. It is something resulting from the relationship which God established from the beginning of (human) life between himself and man ...[4]

It is obvious from all the above definitions that every definition of religion has its focus on the Deity, the Creator and the Almighty who reigns in every situation in the life of man. It is also clear that man must equally respond to the Almighty God in reverence and worship. Furthermore, religion does not only deal with the relationship between God and man; it equally deals with the relationship between man and man. In other words, every religion has rules of conduct that guide the interaction of man with his fellow beings. In the Holy Bible for instance, Exodus 20:1-20 deals with the Decalogue, the apodictic Ten Commandments which every man must obey as he relates to God while Exodus 21:1-23; 33 deals with the covenant code, the casuistic laws which guide the relationship of man as he relates to his fellow beings.

People practice religion for several reasons. Many people throughout the world follow a religion because it is part of the heritage of their culture, tribe or family. And speaking of Africa it has been noted that:

> The richest and the most important heritage of Africa is religion. This heritage permeates the entire life of the African people. This heritage has dominated the thinking of African people to the extent that it shapes their cultural, social, political and economic activities. It has also shaped all aspects of African life to the extent that it becomes so difficult to separate what is religious from what can be considered secular.[5]

Another reason for the practice of religion is the fact that it gives people a feeling of security by a divine power who watches over them and protects them from every form of evil. Also, people get involved in religion because it brings a

sense of individual fulfillment here on earth on the one hand, and it promises them salvation hereafter on the other hand. Most importantly, several people are interested in one religion or the other because it provides them a place of fellowship with their fellow believers.[6]

Commercialization of Religion in Ancient Israel

The prophets of Yahweh in the Old Testament should be credited for standing against the commercialization of religion in the land of Israel. These prophets were closely connected with their society as noted by J. Carl Laney:

> The prophets of Yahweh were raised up by God from society (Deut. 18:15) and sustained a prominent relationship with society as political and religious leaders, preachers of the law, predictor of future judgement, watchmen over the spiritual life of the nation, intercessors for the people, and prosecutors against covenant-breakers. The prophets were concerned with international events and the future, while at the same time they were practical in dealing with the concerns of their own localities and generations.[7]

The motivation of these prophets was generated within their commitment to the fundamental laws of God in the Pentateuch. In other words, the prophets simply applied the Mosaic legislation to their contemporary situations. The prophets considered each citizen responsible to dispense justice (Mic. 6:8) and when the members of Israelite society failed to fulfill this responsibility, the prophets stepped in to intercede on behalf of those who had no intercessor.[8] It has been rightly observed that:

> The prophets of Israel were greatly concerned with social issues, both moral and religious. Indeed, for the prophets, social and moral concern lay at the very heart of religion. Repeatedly they rebuked idolatry, formalistic worship, failure to support temple worship, oppression of the poor, murder, usury, and dissipation.[9]

Our focus at this juncture is to examine some of these prophets and their view on commercialization of religion in the land of Israel:

Amos: Prophet Amos prophesied to Israel during the reigns of Uzziah (792-770 BC) and Jeroboam II (793-753BC). Both kings reigned concurrently and they brought stability, prosperity and expansion to the two kingdoms. But in spite of this material prosperity, Israel was in an advanced state of decay, socially, morally and religiously. Therefore, prophet Amos raised his voice in protest against the religious and moral corruption of his day by condemning the following sins: exploitation and oppression of the poor and needy (4:1; 5:11; 8:4,6), corrupt and degenerate religious practices (2:4,6,8; 4:4), corruption of justice and honesty (5:7.10; 6:12) excessive indulgence (6:4), and general disregard for the laws of God (2:8:8:5). The negative attitude of prophet Amos towards commercialization of religion came out in the clash between him and Amaziah who refused to acknowledge in any way the divine source of Amos' prophecies, but considered him as a political agitator. The fact that Amaziah and other priests in Israel had commercialized religion is indicated in his derogatory advice to Amos that he should go to Judah and earn his bread there (Amos, 7:12). To them religion was for making money.

Micah: He prophesied during the reigns of Jotham (750-731 BC), Ahaz (743-715 BC), and Hezekiah (728-686 BC). His ministry was directed to both the northern and southern kingdoms (1:1), Micah spoke against his listeners for their apostate life style. Their sins include: perversion of worship practices (1:7; 3:5-7), 11; 5:12-14), empty religious formalism (6:6-7), oppression of the poor and defenceless (2:2, 8-9), perversion of justice through bribery and dishonest business practices (3:11; 6:11; 7:3), idolatry (1:7; 5:13-14), and violence (6:12;7:2).

At the time of Micah, religious leaders were charged of commercialization of religion by serving the people because of the economic gain (7:3). Rather than serving and caring for the people as the shepherds of the nation, these false prophets were leading the people astray. It was said of these prophets that:

> These leaders were giving the people false hope by telling them they would not be punished by God, that there would be no calamity. If someone paid the false shepherds well, they would pronounce peace on him. In other words, they told a person what he wanted to hear for a price. On the other hand, if one did not feed them (i.e. pay the prophets their price) they were ready to oppose him (to wage war against him). The prophets were concerned with their own welfare rather than the nations' welfare. Materialism was their master.[10]

Micah 3:5-11 specifically contains the rebuke of the prophet Micah and the judgement of God upon the leaders and false prophets in Israel.

Ezekiel: Prophet Ezekiel started his prophetic ministry in 593 BC and he continued to minister to the exiles in Babylon for at least 27 years (29:17).[11] He was a contemporary of Jeremiah, who prophesied in Jerusalem, and Daniel, who ministered in the royal court of Babylon. Concerning the ministry of Ezekiel, it was stated that:

> Until the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel's ministry to the colony of exiles consisted primarily of preaching judgement against Judah. After 586 BC his ministry was one of consolation, predicting the future restoration of the nation with its temple and worship.[12]

The sins of Israelite society condemned by Ezekiel included spiritual apostasy and idolatry (Ezek. 5:11; 6:3-6; 8:3,5,10; 14:3; 18:15; 36:18), oppression of the poor, widows, and orphans (Ezek. 18:12, 16; 22:29), bloodshed (Ezek.22:3-4), false prophecy 13:2,16,23,22:28), and sexual immorality (18:11; 22:10-11). Prophet Ezekiel was particularly against the false prophets and prophetesses who were into the business of commercialization of religion. The prophet, having condemned the false prophets in 13:1-16, turned to the false prophetesses in 13:17-23. These false prophetesses were called the "daughters of your people who prophesy out of their own imagination" (v.17). These prophetesses sew magic charms on all their wrists and made evil veils of various lengths for their heads. The purpose of their magic charms and mysterious veils was to ensure people especially in times of uncertainty and turmoil. Therefore, they tell the future for a "few handfuls of barley and scraps of bread" (v.19), either as payment for the divination or as a means employed for divination.

In Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-18 and Luke 19:45-46, commercialization of religion got to its peak at the time of Jesus Christ as illustrated in the above passages where he expressed his indignation against the people changing money and selling doves in the temple. Usually, every Jew had to pay a temple tax of one half shekel a year. The tax had to be paid in one particular coinage which means that the Jews that came from all over the world with all kinds of currencies had to change their money with an exorbitant charge.[13] This made the festive period a busy time for temple authorities who were involved in the business of changing money rather than leading the people in the worship.

Also selling of doves became popular during the feast of Passover. Ordinarily, doves could be bought cheaply outside the temple but then the temple inspectors would be sure to find something wrong with them. And worshippers were advised to buy them at the temple stalls, though at an exorbitant price.[14] The Jews themselves were well aware of this abuse and commercialization of religion but then they were helpless.[15]

Summarily, Jesus was angry at the exploitation of the pilgrims by the temple authorities who were treating the pilgrims not as worshippers but as things to be exploited for their own end.[16] Also, Jesus rebuked the religious leaders for the desecration of God's holy place. It is obvious that worshippers had lost the sense of the presence of God in the temple as a result of commercial activities which were carried out in full scale. Indeed, commercialization of religion is a violation of religious ethics as there is no meaningful prayer and mediation in the context of buying and selling..

The Nigerian Situation

Having examined religion and its commercialization in Ancient Israel, it is appropriate at this point to consider the cause of religion commercialization and how it is being carried out in Nigeria. It should be said without mincing words that the main cause of commercialization of religion in Nigeria is poverty, which has been defined among other things as "lack of opportunity to develop our abilities and to control our own lives because of economic deprivation".[17] The effect of poverty is felt in the life of every Nigerian.[18] Poverty has come upon our nation as a result of several factors. For example, Samuel Waje Kunhiyop while writing on "Poverty: Good News for Africa" identified some factors that have contributed to poverty in Africa. These factors include: overpopulation, inadequate health care, illiteracy, war, ethnic strife, drought and corruption.[19] Augustine U. Nebechukwu, in his attempt to identify the underlying source of poverty, argues that:

> Poverty is not the result of chance, destiny or fate; it is even less the will of God. It is the bad will of men and women rooted in social, political, religious, economic and cultural injustice.[20]

While all the above listed points are valid sources of poverty in Nigeria; we would like to suggest that unemployment is also a source of poverty in our nation. In fact, unemployment has contributed greatly to the commercialization of religion in Nigeria, especially as people try to find solution to their predicament. There are

many cases of well-educated and hard-working young men and women who have graduated from various Universities for years and yet they have no job and the possibility of getting one is nil. It seems obvious that some people go into pastoral work today not because they are genuinely called and commissioned by God but it is simply a means of livelihood. Consequently, some of them that are well gifted in speech and administration end up starting a ministry which usually metamorphose into Church and thereby become founder and General Overseer within a very short period of time. It is this matter that has led to proliferation of churches which has reached an alarming rate in recent years. The country has been regarded as "the highest number of churches per capital in the world".[21] Churches spring up at an unprecedented rate in every available space, shop, and uncompleted building particularly in our major cities.[22]

Another possible cause of commercialization of religion, which is still connected with poverty, is the poor condition of service in many of the churches in the country, in other words, ministers in several churches find it difficult to live on their monthly income. Coupled with this fact is that several church members do not know how to appreciate the services of their hard-working pastors by taking good care of them. Therefore, some of these poorly paid pastors fall into the temptation of commercialization of the gospel by introducing various gimmicks into the worship services with the purpose of enhancing themselves economically.

The intriguing question is: how does the minister of the gospel in our contemporary society commercialize religion? Usually, the prosperity gospel preachers are deeply interested in big programmes, such as, citywide crusades, during which special offerings are collected. Some of them use big and attractive titles, such as "God's formula for success and prosperity, "Living in Divine Prosperity", etc. as themes of their messages also with the purpose of enticing people to follow them.[23] These ministers come up with big posters to advertise them and their programmes. Furthermore, some of them are involved in the printing of newsletters with exaggerated news and stories mainly to solicit for money from both within and outside the country; the method which neither Jesus Christ nor any of his apostles used in their days. Invariably, several of the prosperity gospel preachers who are in the business of religion commercialization are involved in twisting Bible passages to squeeze money out of the pocket of their members. Most importantly, it has been discovered from the empirical research carried out on the use of imprecation in some selected churches in Nigeria that false prophets in our contemporary society use imprecatory Psalms as threats to their clients primarily for their selfish, material and financial gains.[24] The level of poverty in our nation has given birth to several false prophets who have resorted to the practice

of divination. Such prophets see delusive visions for their clients and they impress it upon them that the only way out of their problems is to have special prayer sessions during which candle and other materials will be used.[25] And just like the temple officials were making money at the time of Jesus Christ, so also these false prophets are making money from selling special candle and other items.

Conclusion

We have been able to establish the following facts in the course of this paper:

(1) Religion, which is an important aspect of our cultural heritage in Nigeria is connected with the recognition of a Deity who must be honoured and worshipped.

(2) Commercialization of religion was practiced in Ancient Israel, as well as in our contemporary society. This was strongly condemned by true prophets of Yahweh and Jesus Christ.

(3) The main cause of commercialization of religion in our society is poverty which is closely connected with unemployment. It is believed that commercialization of religion will cease in Nigeria the moment job opportunities are made available and proliferation of churches will be reduced drastically. This means that the Government of Nigeria needs to come up with concrete plan and scheme that will make life comfortable for common people.

(4) Church members should learn to appreciate the services of their hard-working pastors who are poorly paid. This will help such Pastors to work faithfully without commercializing the gospel.

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