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The Link between Religion and Poverty in Nigeria: A philosophical appraisal

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Abstract

While many instances support the case that religion contributes to poverty at both individual and national levels, other cases suggest the opposite, encouraging a more balanced view. Establishing a causal link between religion and poverty, therefore, requires a careful study of all relevant facts. This is the main aim of the current paper. Drawing from St Augustine's "doctrine of two cities", it demonstrates that there may be a link between religion and poverty. However, this connection does not mean that religion impoverishes people (its abuse however can). Instead, a more logical conclusion is that people are not poor because they are religious; rather, they may be religious because they are poor. In the face of helplessness caused by poverty, people turn to God for assistance. Understanding this antecedent is necessary in any authentic fight against poverty and economic development.

Keywords: *Christianity, Human dignity, Justice, Pentecostalism, Poverty, Religion*

Introduction

There is a belief that is almost a theory that religion is a major cause of poverty. Certain observations seem to give credence to this assertion.

The 2023 Pew Research revealed that Afghanistan, followed by Nigeria, are the most prayerful countries in the world. While 96% of the Afghans pray, according to the findings of the named study, 95% of Nigerians do the same. Other prayerful countries on the list include Algeria (88%), Senegal (88%), Djibouti (87%), Iran (87%), Iraq (87%), Niger (87%), and Indonesia (84%). On the other hand, countries like China, the United Kingdom (UK), Switzerland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Estonia, France, and Denmark rank low on the prayer scale (Ariana News, October 14, 2023). This study towards the end of 2023 received global attention, and the general observation is that the most prayerful countries are the poorest countries in the world. If prayer equates religiosity, could we say that the most religious countries are the poorest in the world? Though not without critique (Akinwale, 2005), a similar study was carried out ten years ago (in 2014) by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), in which Nigeria, followed by Indonesia, ranks as the most religious country on earth (BBC News, February 26, 2004). Once more, the question of whether religion plays a role in the poverty rate of some countries keeps on raising its head.

Many young people today, especially in the blogosphere, believe that religion contributes a lot to making people poor, especially in the southern hemisphere. Because of this and other factors, religion and religiosity have been under severe attack recently, especially Christianity in its various forms. For some of them, religion robs people of their right thinking, indoctrinates, extorts, and leaves them vulnerable. For others, religion is an instrument of oppression used by the powerful (religious leaders) to dominate the weak (Kasaro, 2019). All these assertions are not new. It was attributed to the Stoic philosopher Seneca to have said that religion is regarded by the common as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful (*Lucius Annaeus Seneca Quotes*, accessed May 8, 2024). At the dawn of the industrial revolution in the 19th century, Karl Marx was said to have claimed that religion is an opium of the people (Rogers & Konieczny, 2018). The Nigerian Afrobeats singer Fela Anikulapo Kuti, known for his biting critique of religion and politics, once sang that the pastors live in the best of houses and wear the best of clothes while the congregation lives in slums and could not afford soap to wash their own clothes. The question then arises: if religion impoverishes the masses, what should we do about it? Should mankind be emancipated from religion? Should religious people be considered as deadly viruses eating deep into the economic fabrics of the nations? For a country to develop,

should the citizens be taught from scratch to avoid anything that has to do with religion? Should a serious campaign be launched against religion and its possible tenets? The questions are many and vary.

Another question to ask ourselves is whether the assertion that religion is a clog on the wheel of the development of a nation is true or false. Is there really a causal link between religion and poverty? Could we make a distinction between religion and religiosity, between religion and its abuse? Is it possible to banish religion from human society? Is it true that religious nations are poor?

To address the above questions, the analysis in the paper is drawn from **St. Augustine's Doctrine of the Two Cities** (Fortin, 1979). This theory, developed by Augustine of Hippo in his seminal work "The City of God," posits that the earthly city (the City of Man) and the heavenly city (the City of God) are interwoven but distinct. Drawing on this, the study acknowledges that human institutions, including religious ones, can be corrupted by individuals, people, and other agents. In fact, it can be misused. However, this corruption does not undermine the ultimate truth and goodness of God's purpose. In other words, religion may be abused by individuals or institutions for selfish or malevolent purposes, but the divine truth it represents remains untainted and effective for those who seek it genuinely.

Methodology

Moved by the above-discussed questions, this paper has attempted to study the intrinsic links (if any) between religion and poverty, using Nigeria as a case study. In addressing the question, attention is paid to the conceptual understanding of both poverty and religion, as well as their different forms. As a working approach, religiosity is presented as an external expression of piety, which in many aspects is interdependent on the being on a higher being. Having demonstrated this, a kind of interface between poverty and religion, being represented by Christianity and Christian bodies, was easily created. This was further narrowed down to its impacts on the prosperity gospels in Nigeria. These intelligent x-rays provided a springboard for a positive response to this trial of religion at the court of economy and critical analysis in the study.

The above approach to studying the intrinsic link between religion and poverty is rooted in systematic philosophical conceptual analysis (King, 1998; Glock, 2016), within which a direct relationship between

two social phenomena (in this case, religion and poverty) can be ascertained through rigorous logical appraisal. With such an approach, a given theory on the impoverishing nature of religion is assessed with both statistical data and the subjective knowledge of the author as variables (Amaechi & Masoga, 2020; Glock, 2016). Here, it is from the former's critical engagement with scholarship that meaning to the latter is determined. While one of the variables (poverty index) could be quantifiable, the difficulty of quantifying religion could be acknowledged since religiosity, as adopted in this paper, is an outward expression of spirituality, which in turn is an intrinsic aspect of man. Therefore, sources are drawn from various sources, including data from reliable sources, scholarly works, and personal knowledge. An intelligent integration of all these will not only question the theory but also lead to a newfound hypothesis as the conclusion of the paper. With the exception of the papal documents that are cited with their titles, other sources are cited accordingly with the author's name followed by date.

The Poor State of Nigeria

Nigeria, though a country with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 1.084 trillion dollars, is almost the poverty capital of the world (Ubanagu, 2023). With the Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.535, 60% of the population is multidimensionally poor. With the present government, the poverty level of the country has gone out of control. A recent study (Moghalu, 2024) suggests that no matter the level of intervention introduced, the situation will not get better until the next four or five years. Also, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the level of inflation in the country increased by 33.2% in March 2024 (Adegbesan, 2024). An erstwhile deputy governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) was blunter in his analysis of the situation. For him, no matter the level of intervention, this problem will last till the next three or five years. He traced the problem of poverty in Nigeria to the previous regimes that took the economic future of the country for granted. These include mismanagement of the fiscal policies, excess external borrowing, budget deficit, and illegal ways and means of borrowing by the CBN to the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN). Others include an absence of an appropriate economic philosophy, deindustrialisation, population crises and epileptic power supply (Moghalu, 2024). All these contribute to the economic woes of the country.

The problem of poverty seems to be domiciled in Africa (Aina, 2016; Calderisi, 2006). Mauritius, with an HDI of 0.802, is the only country with a very high Human Development Index in the continent. With the exception of Pakistan, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Yemen, the other countries with low human development beginning from Tanzania to South Sudan (Nigeria inclusive), are all African countries. Nigeria at this time seems to be worst hit under the present regime of Bola Ahmed Tinubu. With a GDP per capita of 2,000 dollars, even the war-torn Ukraine is sending food relief to Nigeria (Alechenu, 2024).

Analysing the poverty level in Nigeria could be a herculean task though not impossible. First of all, Nigeria lost its economic glory with the discovery of crude oil in 1956 (Udosen et al., 2009). Before then, various regions of the country could boast of their economic prowess. The pyramid of groundnuts, the cocoa plantations, and the palm oil produced represent the wealth of the Northern, Western, and Eastern regions of Nigeria, respectively. The abandonment of agriculture and the concentration on crude oil left Nigeria in a monocultural economy (Nwaoba, 2016). The high level of corruption, especially in the oil sector, found the wealth of the nation in the hands of the few elites. As Aina would note, "... unequal income distribution in Nigeria means that a Nigerian child living in the country has a 5 times higher likelihood of dying before reaching 5 years than her counterpart in Bangladesh, even though Nigeria is richer than Bangladesh" (Aina, 2016, 169). The level of food production dropped, and Nigeria could no longer take care of its booming population. The population of Nigeria today is above 200 million and is estimated to reach 400 million in the year 2050 (Moghalu, 2024). The Malthus theory that the imbalance between the exponential growth of the human population and the arithmetic growth of food and other resources will lead to a situation of famine, disease, and war (Daoud, 2010) is becoming a reality in Nigeria (Moyo, 2012). In a country where survival is still of primary importance, many children are out of school. The level of education is low, and research is not funded. This contributes to the multidimensional poverty that 60% of the population currently suffers from. The education sector is not favoured in the national annual budgets. Because of this, the economic think tanks are not taken seriously as they should be. Recent findings in agricultural research are not made use of in farming. The quality of the soil and unreliable rainfall also affect the farm outputs. Another problem is that the natural resources are processed outside of the country and

reimported. All these contribute on a general level to the economic problem the country is facing. We should not forget the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on the global economy. Nigeria was also badly hit. The pandemic met Nigeria unprepared. 51% of the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) reported a decline in revenue since this outbreak (*From Crisis to Opportunity*, Factsheet, the 2023 Agribusiness Outlook).

The rash oil subsidy removal without a cushioning effect has badly hit the economy. The high level of inflation, which could be traced to the printing of excess Naira notes by the former CBN governor, colluded with the high price of the premium motor spirit in skyrocketing the prices of goods and transportations (Moghalu, 2024). Other factors that worsened the economy under the Tinubu-led government include the exchange rate unification in a loose monetary environment, as well as a late appointment and lopsided composition of the presidential cabinet (Moghalu, 2023).

But all these are material poverty. Adopting a conciliar understanding of material poverty, Aina defines it as the “conditions of human life characterised by economic stagnation, impoverishment, and lack of development, social injustice, and obscene inequality with a small minority enjoying the wealth and products of the whole (Obijiaku, 2015; Aina, 2016). When one’s income is so insufficient that he cannot enjoy a reasonable level of life, such a person is said to be materially poor (Saunders, 2015). Although this paper centres on material poverty, justice cannot be done to it without paying attention to the intellectual poverty. Material poverty could be either a consequence or a reflection of intellectual poverty (Akinwale, 2016). This view of Akinwale seeks to be supported by Moghalu when he made the statement that part of the Nigerian economic problem is the absence of an economic philosophy or absence of nationhood (Moghalu, 2023). To tackle material poverty, one needs a technical solution. But since material poverty is a reflection of intellectual poverty, a technical solution may not be enough, as that will be like addressing the symptoms and neglecting the root cause. It is in this light that Akinwale suggests an existential solution, which primarily aims at critiquing the technical solution (Akinwale, 2016). Such existential solution is enunciated in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, as upholding human dignity, ensuring the dignity in labour, solidarity, justice, common good, etc. It is here that the appropriate philosophy of economics comes in and assumes an indispensable position. In between the two is the moral poverty. When

the intellectual poverty lacks the existential solution, it degenerates to the moral poverty, which then breeds the material poverty. We will therefore not fail to make mention of moral poverty, especially as enunciated in the *Populorum Progressio* of Paul VI. Juxtaposing moral poverty to material poverty, which for him is the lack of the bare necessities of life, he defines moral poverty as being crushed under the weight of self-love; “oppressive political structures resulting from the abuse of ownership or the improper exercise of power, from the exploitation of the worker or unjust transactions” (*Populorum Progressio*, 21). Buttressing the material poverty, the conciliar Fathers note that “while an immense number of people still lack the absolute necessities of life, some, even in less advanced areas, live in luxury or squander wealth—extravagance and wretchedness exist side by side” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 63).

To the trio of material, moral, and intellectual poverty, Aina adds a fourth form, which is spiritual poverty. This form of poverty is defined as “a state of human existence that is characterised by a voluntary opening up to God as a sign of one’s trust and dependence on divine providence” (Aina, 2016, 166). This form of poverty is voluntary and is aimed at identifying with the materially poor by embracing their condition so as to help in liberating them from this unjust shackle (Dorr, 1994). The inability to distinguish these forms of poverty will surely militate against any scholarship on and any fight against poverty itself.

The Trial of Religion in the Court of Poverty

Looking at Nigeria’s poverty level and the rate at which churches and mosques are arising, one is easily inclined to the notion of religion as a favourable habitat for poverty. Of the 9 countries examined by the Pew Research, five are in Africa, while the others are in Asia. None of the countries in Europe appear on the list. While these European countries rank low in prayer, their HDI is very high. China scored the lowest in prayer (1%) but with a HDI of 0.768. Such findings make it very hard for one to doubt the direct causal link between religion and poverty. Apart from this demography of the 2023 Pew Research, certain realities in Nigeria seem to endorse this claim that religion is a cause of poverty. For example, the Boko Haram is an Islamic terrorist group in Nigeria that sees western education taboo and thus fights its eradication from the country. Fuelled by religious fundamentalism, the Boko Haram

insurgence as well as the herdsmen killings across certain states in Nigeria have led to people abandoning their homesteads and farmlands for the internally displaced people's (IDP) camp (Amaechi and Tshifhumulo, 2019). According to the UN Refugee Agency, as of December 2021, there have been a total of 2.2 million IDPs in the North East, with 35% of them being the working population. As of the same time, the Middle Belt has recorded 452,000 IDPs with a working population of 42% (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Global Focus, 2021). The destruction of lives and properties and abandonment of farmlands have resulted in a scarcity of food. The prices of food items have gone high and have affected other faces of the industry. Boko Haram is an Islamic terrorist group, hence faith-based. Also, many children in the northern part of the country that could have gone to school to secure a brighter future are on the streets as *almajiris* (male children seeking Islamic education in Northern Nigeria). The idea of *almajiri* was borne out of the Islamic faith, and it constitutes a threat to security and development (Hoechner, 2014; Soyinka, 2012). We should not fail to mention those who sleep in the church and refuse to work, believing that God will throw down manna from heaven for them (Obiora, 1998). These are the negative influences of religion on the economic development of a country. The common denominator here is fundamentalism—an extreme form of religion that abhors reason and tolerance.

Religious fundamentalism and its negative impact on the economic development of Nigeria is only one aspect of the picture. Christianity has also contributed a lot to the development of Nigeria. The missionaries built schools, hospitals, and vocational centres for the people (Ojigboro, 2021). Till today, mission schools (as schools owned by churches are still called today) remain the best schools in the country (Obi, 2019). From them emerge illustrious sons and daughters, contributing immensely to the development of society. Many faith-based organisations are also found in Nigeria, helping a lot and offering jobs to people. The Islamic non-usury lending also encourages reducing the gap between the rich and the poor. More to that, there are some disturbing observations that could necessarily object to the assertion that religion breeds poverty based on the Pew Research. For example, according to the Pew Research findings, while Algeria ranks 3rd in prayer, it can boast of a high HDI of 0.74. Another question mark before the suspected direct causality is the fact that while Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world, it is less

prayerful as a country than Nigeria. How could China, with a religiosity rate of 1%, not be richer than the European countries with the prayer range of 6%-10% and HDI range of 0.889-0.962? Placed side by side with the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) findings of the last century, we could also ask the question on why the United States of America (USA), with a high level of religiosity, also has a high HDI of 0.927. The appropriate hypothesis here is that while religion could be a cause of poverty, there are other variables playing contributory roles to this economic quagmire.

Looking at the wealth of Europe and the reality of religion on this continent, a little historical excursion could be of help. Starting with the renaissance age of the 14th–17th centuries, the absolute grip of religion on this continent began to wane. With the discovery of the new worlds, new insights into mathematics and astronomy, and the consequent replacement of the traditional Aristotelian physics, man gradually came at the centre and could take his destiny into his own hands (McQuillan, 1995). This anthropocentrism was a retrieval of the *homo mensura* of the sophists in the 5th–4th BCs. With the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in 1437, there was a confluence of humanism and reformation challenging the absolute authority of the Church. While the challenge of the absolute authority implied the rejection of absolute truth, truth itself became contextual and relative. This is how the seed of disintegration in the faith of Europe began. At this time, the British empiricists had started emerging. Philosophy became earthbound, and anything that could not appeal to the senses was disqualified as an object of knowledge (Višňovský, 2023). This included the idea of God. Alongside were the continental rationalists, who were the grandchildren of Pythagoras and Plato.

With the transcendental idealism of Kant and its distinction between truth as it is and truth as it is known, the German idealism came to the stage (McQuillan, 1995). From Tübingen to Jena and then to Berlin, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel took this to its zenith. This not only influenced its politics and nationalism, it also dealt a big blow to religion. It was also during the pantheism controversy of Baruch Spinoza who equated God with nature (McQuillan, 1995). Although Kant distinguished the phenomenal from the noumenal, he maintained that the knowledge of God is both possible and valid. His philosophy also tried to serve as a bridge between the British empiricists and the continental rationalists (McQuillan, 1995). However, Hegel, in his

understanding of absolutism, reduced everything to consciousness and made man, or the I, the centre of every knowledge.

Though German idealism began to wane towards the end of the 19th century with the arrival of Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Marx, its impact on religion was worsened with Karl Marx's dialectical materialism, which was an inverted Hegelianism. Together with Friedrich Engel, he reduced everything to matter, consequently rejecting the idea of God (Batista, 2023). He even regarded religion as an opium of the people and the soul of a soulless world. From the Kantian revolution to Marx's materialism, there was a decline in the influence of religion on European society. With the conflicting ideas on the possibility of knowing God, religion became a private issue and was relegated to the margin. The osmotic diffusion effect was greatly reduced, and atheism could thrive on the soil of secularism.

We can assert at this point that it was the enthronement of reason at the detriment of faith that saw the wane of religion in Europe and not that the wane of religion brought about the economic development of Europe. From the beginning, part of the Christian message is a holistic development of humankind, including his deliverance from abject poverty. Part of this was ensuring social equality in all spheres by accommodating the disadvantaged. This later came to be known in the social teachings of the Church as an option for the poor (Aina, 2016). This option for the poor has always been there (Van der Watt, 2012). In two places in Acts of the Apostles, the evangelist Luke reports on the life of the early Christians (cf. Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35) claimed, they owned everything in common, and no one was lacking anything in their midst. Luke not only presented a model lifestyle to his church members, but on a general note, reports of an early economic model for poverty alleviation—an inclusive economy in which everyone has a role to play and has access to the benefits accruing there from. In contrast to the economy for the 1% (Serry & Arenda, 2014), this inclusive economy becomes an antidote to the world foreseen in Thomas Malthus "Theory of Economic Development and Human Population—a world in which the future belongs only to the powerful. This is a world that the early Christians already foresaw and battled against. They understood that the Christian faith ought not to be only spiritualised but also needs active witnessing in communal living and *koinonia* (fellowship) economy (Pesch, 1986). Aina cites a 2005 Human Development Report that the transfer of 1.6% of the annual income of the world's wealthiest as his or her

option for the poor could have the capacity of eliminating multidimensional poverty from the face of the earth within the space of ten years (Aina, 2016).

From each according to his or her capacity and to each according to his or her need became an essential element of the Marxist communalism. Although this goes back to the Greek friendship utopia as seen in the works of Plato (*Republic*) and Aristotle (*The Nichomachean Ethics*) and was later taken up by the Roman poet Cicero (*De Officiis*), Luke interprets it as an eschatological fulfilment of Deuteronomy 15:4, where it is outrightly stated that no one should lack anything among the people of God (Pesch, 1986). Utopia could mean no place (*ouk topos*), meaning it does not exist in reality or a nice place (*eu topos*), too good to exist in reality. However, in the Lucan Church, utopia becomes a reality (Pesch, 1986). Communism tried unsuccessfully to replicate such a state with an inclusive economy. The reason for its failure could not be far-fetched. While communism is dictatorial and suffocates the right to private property, communal living or inclusive economy creates a balance between common good and private property, and the citizens voluntarily and convincingly contribute to the general coffers (Pesch, 1986).

From the *Rerum Novarum* during the 19th century industrial revolution to the *Fratelli Tutti* during the 21st century COVID-19 pandemic, the church has always been lending her voice in addressing human hardship, securing human dignity, and promoting human development. This is the so-called existential solution to intellectual and moral poverty. Other documents of the church providing existential solutions include *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931, *Laborem Exercens* of 1981, and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* of 1987. The central theme here is human dignity, and that wealth is meant for man and not man for wealth (*Gaudium et Spes*, 63, 65). Included are, among others, programmes and actions aimed at marching a brake on an uncontrollable capitalism, securing human dignity, and encouraging solidarity among humanity. When human dignity is trampled upon, wealth becomes poisonous, and the collective wealth of a nation dwindles. That is the case with many African countries today.

Apart from the existential solution, religion, especially the Christian faith, has contributed immensely to the growth of the wealth of the nations, especially in Europe (Pinholster & Newton, 2023). With the emphasis on the togetherness of faith and reason, which dates back to the patristic age and blossomed in the scholastic era, Europe found

herself flourishing more than other continents in the world. Hence, the Renaissance, which is often called the age of the birth of reason, is not actually so. Instead, it was the age of the mechanistic divorce of faith from reason. The enthronement of reason became the suppression of faith. Before this era, the development of Europe started and became fully hatched in the mediaeval universities founded by Christianity. The Benedictine tradition of *ora et labora* (pray and work) is not a mere motto but a testimony of the necessity of industry in houses of prayer. Christianity has never encouraged idleness, and hard work is the key to economic development. From the mediaeval breweries to the practice of usury, the modern way of creating and saving wealth owes monasticism a huge dose of gratitude (Ovit, 1986). This was the initial meaning of capitalism, namely, wealth creation as against an economic system. Despite the dissociation of reason from faith, the Church's value of justice, inclusion and equity were not abandoned but secularised. As Aina would note, "the consistency of the Church, particularly in Western Europe, led to structural responses to poverty and wage inequality such that today, the region is lowest in poverty index and highest in human development" (Aina, 2016, 181). Today, the Christianity and faith-based organisations are big employers in Germany and other parts of Europe (Hien, 2014). Hence, one cannot talk of the wealth of Europe without mentioning the Christian faith. At the turn of the present millennium, the Catholic Church became the highest private employer in Germany despite the decline in Church attendance.

From what we have seen, even before the disintegration between faith and reason, Europe has started flourishing and was far behind other nations of the world. The simple reason behind it is that reason was never trampled upon. The crystallising logic here is that people tend to distance themselves from God when they are comfortable. On the other hand, religion, from its etymology as *religare*—binding, has to do with a feeling of dependence. As the Germans would say, *Not lehrt Beten*—need teaches man to pray. This was no less the case as in the second part of the 1940s after World War II. The German churches were filled to the brim. At the September 11 experience in the USA, the people went back to the church. The African churches are still filled to the brim because of extreme poverty orchestrated by bad governance and mismanagement of resources. The right antecedent is simple. People are not poor because of their religiosity. They might be pious because they are poor. In the face of hopelessness, they find recourse to God, powerless before an

impending doom, they recourse to a higher power. With this, we examine Africa and its religious atmosphere. We can thus assert here that religion does not breed poverty. Rather, poverty breeds religiosity.

Poverty in Africa and Prosperity Gospel

A brand of Christianity that merits attention in this paper is Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on the prosperity gospel. This type of teaching that God desires his followers to be wealthy and in excellent health has permeated even the mainstream churches (Niemandt, 2017; Williams, 2022; Perriman, 2003; Swoboda, 2015). Because of its Pentecostal character, it is usually believed among scholars that prosperity gospel began in America with Pentecostalism (Williams, 2022; Bowler, 2013). This may not be the case. Both prosperity gospel and Pentecostalism began in Asia Minor in the 2nd century AD, but by two different groups. While Pentecostalism started with the Montanists in Phrygia, prosperity gospel was already preached at this time by the Church Fathers, starting from Cerinthus to Justin Martyr (Frey, 1999; Taylor 1855). Despite its being championed by these great theologians, it was never the official teachings of the Church and was even attacked by Origen and Augustine.

Among others, present-day Pentecostalism and prosperity gospel have merged. It is also believed that the initial fathers of American Pentecostalism were not prosperity preachers. They were rather engaged in an otherworldly preaching. It was the second generation that pulled Pentecostalism from the sky to the earth and became so materialistic. This was the marriage between Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel. This gospel is common today in Nigeria, not only among the Pentecostal preachers but even among some Catholic priests; Pentecostalism today is synonymous with prosperity preaching (Hackett, 1998). The logic behind it is that God can miraculously make one rich. To receive this miracle, all one needs is faith and seed sowing to the point of precluding industry (Roberts, 1970; Williams, 2022). They do this by engaging in a literal interpretation of the Bible (Williams, 2022). Because of this false hope, the prosperity gospel degenerated to fraud by enriching the pastors and impoverishing some members of the congregation. Most of the pastors romance with the power that be, adore them in the churches, and could no longer speak truth to power. This creates a favourable habitat for the

growth of corruption and impunity among the political leaders, leading to further impoverishment of the state.

Despite the evident fraud in prosperity preaching today, many Christians still prefer it as an option for the poor. The main reason why the option for the poor does not work is because the poor often believe in immediacy and are not patient enough to endure the hard road to productivity. Prosperity gospel understands it very well and offers the poor an attractive hope of immediacy (Hackett, 1998). It is because of this and other factors that many left the mainstream orthodox churches and flocked to Pentecostalism. The paradox remains that the more the prosperity gospel grows, the poorer the people become because this gospel does not offer existential solutions in combating poverty.

Conclusion

We began this discussion with some empirical findings that seem to suggest that religion is a clog on economic development. However, a closer look reveals some objecting points to this proposition. Although there seems to be a certain correlation between religion and poverty, the connecting calculus is more complicated than meets the eye. Hence, a critical study became a dissertation. Different forms of poverty—material, intellectual, moral, and spiritual—as well as their interconnectedness are examined. With some historical input, we noted that religion has played a contributing role in economic development. This is most true in Christianity as a religion of faith and reason. Guided by faith and reason, ethical principles are meant to guide economic roadmaps. These include industry, sincerity, human dignity, solidarity, and the inclusion of the margin. Here, the poor assume an indispensable position. Right from the Old Testament, the Good News is meant to console and liberate the disadvantaged (cf. Ex 3:7-8, Isaiah 61:1, Sir 35:12-14). The mission statement of Jesus Christ in Luke 4:18 is to bring the good news to the poor and to proclaim liberty to the chained.

Now, we can address some of the questions raised above. Is there any causal link between religion and poverty? The answer is obviously in the affirmative. Are countries poor because they are religious, or are they religious because they are poor. No country is poor because it is religious. On the other hand, religion contributes immensely to the growth of the economy through the above-outlined ethical principles and praxis. Why is it then that poverty is higher in countries that are very

religious? The answer is simple. In the face of helplessness caused by poverty, people turn to God for assistance. Hence, countries are poor not because they are religious. Rather, they are religious because they are poor. How do we then justify the notable instances where religion is seen as a direct cause for poverty? That is only a travesty—an abuse of religion. As Aristotle would say, although politics is a necessary good for the state, it could also be dangerous in the hands of the wrong person. The same goes with religion. When an object fulfils its function, it is called virtue. When it is used for the wrong function, it becomes a vice. Given the indices of the abuse of religion and its militating factors against economic growth, could we suggest banishing religion from human society? It is not possible to banish religion from human society. Apart from the positive roles of society, man is intrinsically religious. This has been the basis of critique of the BBC research findings of 2014 (Akinwale, 2005). Even those who do not believe in God have a religious affiliation to another value. Instead of banishing religion, religion itself should undergo a certain *metanoia* (change of mindset) so as to purify itself from the filths that militate against the development of society.

The Church in Africa must adopt the option for the poor, examine why it does not work some times, and tackle the militating factors. Aina is of the utmost conviction that “extreme poverty can be eliminated if we do the needful, upholding the inspiration and interruptive capacity of ‘option for the poor’ while responding in concerted and strategic ways beyond mere proclamation and general moral persuasion. This is how the Church and its social movements in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries succeeded with the principal social questions at that time” (Aina, 2016, 182). There is a need for a transformation based on justice, inclusion, and equity (Aina, 2016). In the face of injustice and inequality, with the consequent excruciating poverty, the Church must speak truth to power. This should also be the duty of other religious leaders in Nigeria.

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