

RELIGION AS IMPERIALISM: A CRITIQUE OF AFRICA'S EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that religion – when it is not abused or misinterpreted by its practitioners – can play a critical role in the life of an individual and in the running of the affairs of the society. However, this essay critically examines the phenomenon of religion as it constitutes imperialism against the backdrop of Africa's experience. It is argued that the Christian religion – which is the main focus of analysis in this essay – was a dependable tool in the hands of the colonialists in establishing and sustaining colonialism in various parts of Africa for many decades. It is also contended that the African has always been an innately religious person, and before the advent of Christianity and other foreign religions, Africans had their own mode of social organization which catered for their religious and other needs. And this explains why the culture of every African society had (and still has) a name for, and the way(s) of worshipping, the Almighty.

Keywords: Religion, Imperialism, Christianity, Africa's experience, Christianity, Islam

Introduction

... Sometimes, we pray for shortcuts to the production and reproduction of our needs or what is generally known as miracles. People rarely pray for those things they can produce effortlessly. The higher people are in the production system, the greater the surplus the system of production generates for them, the greater their sense of survival and security, and the less they are likely to preoccupy themselves in offering prayers to the supernatural forces or beings.

- Ogban Ogban-Iyam (2007: 23)

The fact that religion – when it is not misconstrued or misapplied – can serve as a veritable tool for the character molding and ethical upliftment of an individual had long been established. For instance, decades ago, Professor Bolaji Idowu had described the invaluable and salutary effects which religion could have in the value-orientation of a human being. According to him, that man is incurably religious is a fact which demonstrates itself daily in our experiences; religion, in his view, is a necessary part of human equipment – a persistent, ineradicable phenomenon in human affairs, and it naturally engages man's attention in consequence of his inevitable involvement in it one way or another, as also because of the sheer interest which it consequently arouses in every person (Idowu, 1967: 3).

However, religion has often been used for certain ends, the consequences of which have been detrimental to the overall welfare of man. This essay critically analyses religion as imperialism with particular attention on the experience of Africa. An attempt shall be made to examine the manner in which religion has been deployed to promote the domination and exploitation of man by man as well as the oppression of one person or group of persons by another. And this would be done against the backdrop of the bitter and agonizing experience of Africa.

Africa has been chosen as a case for analysis because it offers a quintessence of how a given race or people were (and are still being) exploited, plundered, pillaged, degraded and marginalized. As Niyi Osundare (1998: 231) puts it,

Africa is the most humiliated, most dehumanized continent in the world. Her history is a depressing tale of dispossession and impoverishment. This is a continent which contributed her most valuable assets – her sons and daughters – to the development and advancement of other places in the world. And even now she has nothing to show for the exploitation of her several natural resources: her gold, silver, diamond, copper, etc.; her cocoa, coffee, cashew, tea, etc. I have never stopped wondering how – and why – a continent can be so rich and yet so poor.

The African continent and its people have been victims of all the manifestations of imperialism such as racism, slavery, colonialism, apartheid, neocolonialism, etc. And religion is one of the instruments which have been used to perpetrate these iniquitous deeds. We shall endeavor to demonstrate that though the bedrock of moral values, religion has not only been bastardised, but has also become a dangerous weapon in the hands of the oppressors. Although the two dominant foreign religions that penetrated Africa are Christianity and Islam, this essay focuses mainly on the Christian faith due to the overwhelming encumbrances of space and time. This paper is organized broadly into five sections; following this introduction is section two where the concepts of “religion” and “imperialism” are briefly clarified. In the third section, the religious state of affairs in Africa before the arrival of Christianity and Islam is highlighted. The fact that the African has always been a deeply religious person is reinforced in this section. In section four, attention is drawn to certain instances when religion has been used to serve the interests of forces of oppression, domination and deception. This is done from the perspective of Africa. The conclusion is contained in section five.

Religion and Imperialism: Some Conceptual Perspectives

In an essay such as this, it is apposite to adequately situate the key concepts employed in their proper definitional perspectives. This not only enhances and enriches the understanding of the issues of discourse but also underscores the contexts in which these terms should be understood, especially because concepts and phrases can have different meanings to different persons in different situations. Thus, some form of conceptual analysis would suffice.

Understanding Religion

It is difficult to present a definition of religion which would be universally applauded. In fact, as A. C. Bouquet (cited in Idowu, 1967: 5) has shown, religion is one of the “most misunderstood, cheapened and misused” words. Etymologically speaking, the word religion seems to derive from three Latin words: “Ligare” (meaning to bind), “Relegere” (meaning to unite, or to link), and “Religio” (meaning relationship); consequently, in all religions, there must be specific features some of which are link, unity and relationship between man and the object of worship (Ogunkoya, 2008: 371). In the view of P. T. Gbasha (1995: 304), religion is as old as human society, and it is the outcome of man’s efforts to come to terms with a harsh and uncertain world. According to him, from the early times man was mystified by

the forces of nature, threatened by wild animals, distressed by death and the hereafter; all these, coupled with the fear of the unknown, brought about the birth of religion. In Gbasha's words, the birth of religion in itself was the realization by man that his existence is dependent upon forms outside himself, and that there is a power superior to man which directs and controls the course of nature and human life. This basic belief in a Supreme Power, is found in all communities and societies of the world, in varying degrees and with differing understanding and interpretations of the nature of the Power (Gbasha, 1995: 304-305).

According to Jeff Haynes (2008: 131), religion has two analytically distinct, yet related meanings. In a spiritual sense, he argues, religion pertains in three ways to models of social and individual behavior that help believers organize their everyday lives: first, it is to do with the idea of transcendence, that is, it relates to supernatural realities; second, it is concerned with sacredness, that is, a system of language and practice that organizes the world in terms of what is deemed holy; third, it refers to intimacy, that is, it relates people to the ultimate conditions of existence. Haynes observes that in another, material, sense, religious beliefs can motivate individuals and groups to act in pursuit of social or political goals as very few – if any – religious groups have an absolute lack of concern for at least some social and political issues. Quoting Calvert and Calvert (2001), Haynes also points out that religion can consequently be a mobiliser of masses, a controller of mass action, an excuse for repression or an ideological basis for dissent. It has been reasoned that religion may be considered from four basic points of view: subjectively defined, religion is man's natural and innate consciousness of his dependence on a transcendent supra-human Being and the consequent natural and spontaneous propensity to render homage to and worship Him; objectively, religion may be seen as a complex or configuration of doctrines, laws and rituals by which man expresses his loyalty to a transcendental Being – the Absolute, God; morally, religion may be defined as a virtue in a person which makes him/her to honour and worship God; and finally, religion may be viewed institutionally as possessing its own definite system of beliefs, system of activities and system of values, like any other social institution (Iwe, 2003: 2-3).

In his own analysis, James Mentineau (cited in Nabofa, 1988: 45) defines religion as the belief in an ever living God, that is the Divine Mind and Will ruling the universe and holding moral relations with mankind. In the words of Geertz (1973: 90), religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating concepts of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. It has also been contended that for a long time in human history, it has been realized that in order to really understand man thoroughly it is essential to study his religion; it is also stated that it is religion that binds all elements of human life and culture and therefore, to know something about what man holds dearest, that which gives his life its basic rule of behaviour, man's religion should be studied (Nabofa, 1988: 1).

In the opinion of J. I. Omoregbe (cited in Ogunkoya, 2008: 371), religion can be seen as a bi-polar phenomenon – man who is the religious man on one side and on the other a transcendent being or deity believed to exist and which is worshipped by the religious man. Drawing attention to the close affinity between religion and culture, Omoregbe declares:

Religion is inseparably part of culture. Every religion is the product of a particular culture within which it grew. Its doctrines reflect the worldview of that culture, at that particular time. Hence, it is impossible to understand any religion without understanding the culture within which it grew. It is impossible for example to understand Christianity without understanding the Jewish-Greco-Roman culture. Similarly, it is not impossible to understand Islam without understanding the Arabic culture nor can the Hindu, Buddhist or Janist religion be understood without understanding Chinese culture any more than the Chintoist

religion can be understood without understanding the Japanese culture (cited in Ogunkoya, 2008: 375).

On his part, Robert Bellah (cited in Juergensmeyer, 2006: 39) regards religion as an attempt to reach beyond ordinary phenomena in a “risk of faith” that allows people to act “in the face of uncertainty and unpredictability” on the basis of a higher order of reality. For Louis Dupre (cited in Juergensmeyer, 2006: 39), religion can be described as “a commitment to the transcendent as to another reality”. In most of the foregoing conceptualizations, there appears to be a tension between this imperfect, disorderly world and a perfected, orderly one to be found at a higher, transcendent state or in a cumulative moment in time (Juergensmeyer, 2006: 39-40). Looking at religion through the lenses of the radical materialist framework, V. I. Lenin (1984: 7-8) reasoned that religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people, overburdened by their perpetual work for others, by want and isolation. According to him, impotence of the exploited classes in their struggle against the exploiters just as inevitably gives rise to the belief in a better life after death as impotence of the savage in his battle with nature gives rise to beliefs in gods, devils, miracles, and the like. Lenin also pointed out that those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. But, in his words,

Those who live by the labor of others are taught by religion to practice charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their entire existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate price ticket to well-being in heaven. Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.

Lenin’s penetrating analysis of religion approximates the role it played for foreigners in despoiling Africa. It also captures what religion has been used for by some people in their relations with others. Nevertheless, irrespective of how it is conceptualized, religion underscores the recognition or acceptance by man that there is a superhuman power which controls life and the affairs of the universe, and that this supernatural power deserves reverence and worship. Every society in human history has always had its own understanding of the existence of this supernatural entity and its mode of worshipping or relating with it.

A Word on Imperialism

Like religion, the phenomenon of imperialism is no less difficult to define. Indeed, attempting to define it can be a herculean task (Obo and Ekpe, 2014: 2027). As Palmer and Perkins (cited in Obo and Ekpe, 2014: 2027) have pointed out, imperialism can be discussed, denounced, defended, and died for, but it cannot be defined in any generally acceptable way; it means different things to different people. According to them, imperialism is a highly subjective word – that is, writers define it pretty much as they please.

According to Langer (cited in Assibong, 1999: 134), imperialism can be defined as “the rule or control, political or economic, direct or indirect, of one state, nation or people over other similar groups, or ...the disposition, urge or striving to establish such rule”. In the words of Michael Barratt Brown (cited in Ake, 1981: 20), imperialism is

The outward drive of certain peoples...to build empires – both formal colonies and privileged positions in markets, protected sources of materials and extended opportunities for profitable employment of labour. The concept has thus been associated with an unequal

economic relationship between states, not simply the inequality of large and small, rich and poor trading partners, but the inequality of political and economic dependence of the latter on the former.

The phenomenon of imperialism has also been seen as a “quest by stronger nations to exert political, economic, social and cultural control over weaker nations to the advantage of the stronger nations, and to the disadvantage of the smaller states” (Assibong, 1999: 134). Generally, imperialism is a relationship of domination between two parties which is characterized by inequality and the exploitation of one party by the other.

Africa before the advent of Foreign Religions: A Short Historical Excursion

In an attempt to rationalize the ravages of imperialism throughout Africa, Western bourgeois anthropologists and other imperialist apologists and ideologues have put out a huge chunk of falsehood to the effect that Africa’s history and culture began with Africa’s contact with the white man. It was stated, for instance, that before the advent of Islam and Christianity, Africa was a “dark” continent without religion, and its people were primitive, barbaric, cannibalistic, etc. Indeed, Europeans

Came to Africa armed with pseudo-scientific evidence of Black inferiority and the Biblical myth of the eternal damnation of the Black race to servitude. They were convinced that Africans were inherently inferior and profoundly different from whites and from other human types, and that they had contributed virtually nothing to human civilization. No wonder, therefore, Africa was dubbed ‘The Dark Continent’. Such a view...was clearly useful as a justification for the European occupation of Africa, for a people characterized as one without history or culture, indulging in abhorrent practices such as human sacrifice and cannibalism, were clearly in need of European tutelage. Thus, the colonial stereotype of the African became that of a people saved from themselves by the benevolence of their colonial rulers (Offiong, 1989: 123)

As Gbasha (1995: 305) has observed, the indigenous African religion was misunderstood and misrepresented by early writers and colonial administrators who condemned the religion in its entirety and described it variously as superstition, heathenism, paganism, fetishism, idolatry, something which should be discouraged and exterminated. An example of this view, according to Gbasha, is the following statement which Leo Frobenius claimed he had read from a Berlin Journal:

Before the introduction of genuine faith and a higher standard of culture by Arabs, the natives had no political organisation, nor strictly speaking, any religion....Therefore, in examining the pre-Muhammadan condition of the Negro races, we must confine ourselves to the description of their crude fetishism, their brutal and cannibalistic customs, their vulgar and repulsive idols...

The truth, however, is that before the foreign faiths arrived Africa, the people had their well-defined mode of social organization, part of which was the means of catering for their religious and spiritual needs. Indeed, as Onigu Otite, an eminent Nigeria Sociologist, has remarked, Africa once led the world in civilization, a different form of civilization with a deeper moral tone, as distinct from that of the West which is characterized by inordinate materialism (Otite, 1992: 4). There is no doubt that the African belief in the existence of the Creator and Controller of the universe was adequately encapsulated in the tenets of the African Traditional Religion. There were a number of socio-cultural elements which

pervaded most African communities, and these included: the concept of, and an indigenous name for, the Supreme Being – Invisible, Sovereign and Benevolent; a moral sense of justice and truth, and knowledge that there exists good and evil; the belief in the existence of the human soul and the belief that this soul does not die with the death of man; the existence of spirits – good and bad – and the belief that communion with the Supreme Being is possible through the inter-mediation of these spirits and of the ancestors who are believed to be interested in the well-being of their living descendants; and the existence of myths as rational and philosophic explanations to justify the continuance of some religious practices, the order they follow, and the use of specific symbolic objects as concrete means of strengthening the relationship between man and the transcendental realm of existence, the celebration of all these in feasts and festivals for the purpose of their continuity and culture transmission (Onwubiko, 1991: 59-60).

Before Christianity and other foreign religions arrived the shores of Africa, Africans had always believed that there was a Supreme Being who was responsible for the good harvests, pure and ever-flowing streams and rivers, unpolluted environment, and the peace and serenity which characterised the African communities. The fact that the African did not call his/her creator “God” – which is a foreign language – did not obliterate the recognition of a Supreme Being in African culture and tradition. The creator was and is still called by several names among African communities.

In Cross River State (South-South Nigeria) alone, the Creator has many appellations, given the multi-cultural nature of the state. In Umon, He is “Surem”; in Efik, His name is “Abasi”; the Ejagham and Bahumono people call Him “Obasi”; in Yakurr, He is known as “Obase”; in Bekwarra, He is called “Unim Atah”; the Erei people know Him as “Ekpenyen”; in Mbembe culture, His name is “Ibinokpabi”; in Boki, He is referred to as “Osowo”; the Yala people know Him as “Owu”, etc. Onwubiko (1991: 60) observes that the Fon people call God “Nana Buluku”; His name among the Akan is “Onyame” or “Onyakpon” while the Mende and Kikuyu call Him “Ngewo” and “Ngai” respectively. In Igbo, He is “Chi”, “Chukwu” or “Chineke”; and in Yoruba, He is called “Olorun” or “Oladumare”. The list is endless.

Indeed, the African is innately religious. As Basil Davidson (2000: 82) has rightly observed, religion appears in all its varied African garb as the projection and affirmation of certain norms which govern the evolution of society; it is the selective codification, for its impact on everyday life, of a “two-way” network of moral pressure: of the workings of the principle of Good in its positive sense, on behalf of whatever supports or guards a specific social system; and of the workings of the same principle in a negative sense – the sense of Evil which promotes or provokes, chiefly as one form or other of punishment or deterrent, whatever may go against that system.

The foregoing point has been eloquently amplified by J. S. Mbiti (cited in Edet and Segun, 2014: 49) who states that Africans are notoriously religious, and that religion permeates all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. It is clear that each African society has its own cultural heritage and religion is by far the richest part of that heritage; it is found in all areas of the Africa life: it dominates the thinking of the African people to such an extent that it shapes their culture, their social life, their political organisations, their economic activities and of course their traditional legal system and jurisprudence (Edet and Segun, 2014: 49). Indeed, the fact that religion is a major pillar of the value system of traditional African society is highlighted by Mbiti (cited in Edet and Segun, 2014: 49) thus:

Because traditional religion permeates all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields, where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at

school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.

It can be gleaned from the above passages that the general pattern of the indigenous African religion is held to be one with a belief in the Supreme Being, divinities or spirits, ancestral spirits and mysterious powers. In an interesting series of essays, Douglas Anele (2013) argues that the autochthonous belief systems that constitute African traditional religion, which emerged from intimate blending of existential realities in different culture areas were relevant to the lifestyles and experiences of the inhabitants as an instrument for coping with the complexities of human existence in a largely agrarian setting. According to him, essential to African traditional religion is belief in the existence of a Supreme Being or Force, a pantheon of divinities, sacrifices, rituals and festivities for propitiating the supernatural beings. In Anele's words,

in virtually every community, each version of ATR has no recognized founder, but there is a priestly class with the responsibility of ensuring that members of the community lived according to stipulations of the religion in each area. The fundamental doctrines and injunctions of ATR were not embodied in a purported revealed holy book.

Among the Africans, the knowledge of God has always been so self-evident that no catechetical instruction is necessary. For instance, the Ashanti of Ghana say: "Obi nkyere abofra onyame", meaning "no one shows a child the Supreme Being". In other words, every child knows God instinctively (Awolalu, 1981: 3). In fact, it is rare to find a true African who will doubt the existence of God or claim to be an atheist. If there is anyone like that, in the words of Awolalu (1981: 3), further investigations will reveal that he/she has been exposed to non-African cultural influence. Among African communities, the Supreme Being was and is still believed to be the Creator and the Sustainer of life, the Determiner of destiny, the Judge who is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. The preceding analysis depicts the situation in Africa before the arrival of the white man and his foreign religions and values. The Africans' immense love for, and belief in, the Supreme Being and Creator was exploited. The African was told to worship the Supreme Being through the methods of the white man and most of the pillars of African indigenous religion were denigrated. The African way of life was thus cannibalized and inferiorized, and that was to be the genesis of many decades of devastating imperialist onslaught on the continent and its human and material resources.

Religion and Man's Domination of Man in Africa: Establishing A Correlation

There is no doubt that the two major foreign religions in Africa – Christianity and Islam – have provided a somewhat attractive eschatology, moral code and worldviews, which enable millions of people to organize their daily lives and prepare mentally for the future; and perhaps, the threat of everlasting hellfire and promise of eternal bliss in heaven might have helped some believers to lead decent lives (Anele, 2013). But the issue of concern in this essay is to show that religion has been used to establish and accentuate the relationships of subordination between countries as well as individuals.

However, it is important to state that we do not belong to the category of people whom Professor Anscombe (1976: 131) says challenge the existence of God. According to her, God is hated by some people, and from such hatred of God some have fallen into open atheism: they do not want God to exist, hence they do not acknowledge God, and they reject the worship of God as being unworthy of free spirit; they despise the worshippers of God and mock them as slaves. Religion is critiqued in this essay because it has been deployed for purposes that are ungodly and unconscionable.

In order to sell his faiths the white man had to capture the mind of the African. The latter was told that the Westerners and their religion represented all that was good and desirable, and that he should denounce his "native" ways. But there is an overwhelming historical evidence to show that at the time

that the African socio-cultural values were being despised and pooh-poohed, worse things were happening in Europe and America. For instance, Edward Blyden (cited in Offiong 1989: 129) has noted that

Roman spectators encouraged men to butcher each other not under the influence of any cause as respectable as superstition but from a morbid love of amusement at the sight of blood. There were women among the spectators who sat and applauded, and with wild outcries urging the populace to refuse the petition of the kneeling gladiator, giving the signs of murder to the guards of the arena. If the censurer of African customs read further and came down to the time when Christianity had taken possession of Southern Europe, he would observe that among the sportive recreations of highly cultivated Spanish Christians, was the shedding of blood, sometimes on behalf of Christianity; they would see a bull-fight in the list of amusements at Seville or an auto-da-fe in the square of Toledo.

To facilitate the religious conquest of Africa, the Westerner launched a sustained attack on most of the highly esteemed cultural symbols of the continent. A quintessence of this is the experience of the people of Arochukwu in South-East Nigeria. The Presbyterian missionaries who were stationed in Calabar (South-South Nigeria) were said to be party to the decision to deal with the Arochukwu and their Long Juju (the "Ibiniukpabi") militarily. This decision, according to Professor Ayandele (cited in Afigbo, 1973: 94), was taken in 1898 and its purpose was to force the Igbo people of Nigeria to accept Christianity. This decision was effected by the Aro expedition. This position is corroborated by the views of Sir Herbert Richmond Palmer, who, writing in 1921 as the then Lieutenant-Governor of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria said: "I think I am correct in saying that the Aro-Chukwu expedition was mainly due to missionary prompting and influence" (Afigbo, 1973: 94-95).

Christianity was even said to be the prime catalyst for societal growth and development and it was also opined that Africa's progress was being retarded because of its non-Christian mode of social organisation. According to the proponents of this scientifically puerile view, the West was radically transformed by the Judeo-Christian religion which taught man that he was created in the image of God; that man was the king of creation, and with an end superior to that of any other creature; and that man was free to determine and shape his own destiny. All these, in the words of Pierro Gheddo – one of those who effectively used religion to promote the interests of Western Imperialism – are basic ideas derived from biblical revelation upon which Western "civilization" rests (Offiong, 1980: 45).

Gheddo also pointed out that Christianity, offering the example of God-made-man, has suggested the possibility of man's limitless ascent enabling him to share in the life of God by means of grace. As he put it, this is the initial step – recognition of the dignity of each single human person towards man's progress and that of society. In other words, in the West, man at the centre of creation, thinking and acting, became the essential nucleus around which everything else is organised. Gheddo also stated that when this idea, slowly maturing over the centuries, was accepted, it put an end to the immobility of society and of mentality, and started the movement toward liberty, democracy and social justice. But in African and other underdeveloped societies, as far as Gheddo is concerned, "man is only one of the many elements of nature without any particular superior dignity. It is clear that starting from such a basic idea man could not progress but remained stationary and closed in the recurring cycles of nature" (Offiong, 1980: 45). It appears that the belief of the foreign religious invaders was that the work of teaching had to begin with the work of destruction: that is the total destruction of all traditional beliefs regardless of their values, the total destruction of all ways, followed by the initial teaching that although man in general is evil, that the black man is more evil than all others (Offiong 1989: 131). As Offiong (1989: 132) has impressively argued, the missionaries released a spiritual holocaust that destroyed both the spiritual

life of the African and the deep foundations in which it had its roots. Moreover, according to him, the teachings of the missionaries which were largely incomprehensible to Africans had little to add to the Africans' moral code, its commandments being mere repetitions of their own, such as the injunctions not to kill, not to steal, not to sleep with another man's wife, etc.

The historical experience of Africa clearly shows that religion was a major instrument deployed by Europeans to establish and sustain colonialism in the continent. It is instructive to point out, for instance, that the Church played a leading role in fuelling the engine of slavery and Belgian colonialism in Congo-Kinshasa (now Democratic Republic of Congo). The Christian religion was effectively used by Belgium to perpetuate its ruinous and oppressive rule in that country. For example, in the words of Professor Wamba-Dia-Wamba (1996: 10-11),

... 'Humanist' priests in Kongo Kingdom demanded only that slaves be baptized before boarding the slaving ships – one of these even named Jesus! Placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy (some theologians even speculated that Blacks had no soul), Black people were denied civilization, culture and history. Their experiences were said to have no educational value, no truth value and no knowledge value...

Indeed, Christianity was central to the enterprise of Western imperialism in Africa. It was, for instance, used to capture the minds of Africans and this helped to lay the foundation for the centuries of colonial domination which the continent suffered. As Eghosa Osaghae (1999: 135) has observed, the Christian and Islamic religions were introduced into Africa at the behest of the major powers of that time (especially the Roman and Ottoman empires) whose imperialist ambitions were justified on the grounds of religious propagation. According to him, Christianity may not have been propagated by openly violent means but it is widely known that Christian missions that came to Africa, beginning in the fifteenth century, were forerunners to the colonial enterprise and in many cases were instrumental in the establishment of colonial rule.

In South Africa under the apartheid system, the white supremacists used religion to rationalize the worst form of imperialist subjugation mankind had ever witnessed. In fact, the black people in that country had to establish their own churches guided by the philosophy of the "Black Theology". It was in those churches that the enormous moral deficiencies of the apartheid system were exposed. Indeed, the despicable role of the church in sustaining the evil of apartheid was highlighted by Nelson Mandela, the inimitable and universally-venerated icon of the liberation struggle in South Africa. According to him, the policy of apartheid was supported by the Dutch Reformed Church, which furnished apartheid with its religious underpinnings by suggesting that Afrikaners were God's chosen people and that blacks were a subservient species. In the Afrikaner's worldview, apartheid and the church went hand in hand (Mandela, 2001: 128).

The role of the Church in the colonial plundering of the resources of Africa as well as the exploitation of individuals in inter-personal relationships can be brought to the fore if it is realized that, as John Newsinger (1986: 13) has reasoned, despite their claims to supernatural origins, churches are very much of this world, and they are firmly rooted in the material existence of their particular society, and while this might seem a perfectly commonplace observation, it is a reality that is acknowledged far more often than it is explored. Newsinger also contends that any consideration of a particular church must always start with the question of whose church it is. In his words,

...who staffs the church? From which groups in society does it recruit its personnel? Who are its congregation? Which social groups participate regularly and actively in its rites? How and by whom is it financed? Is it financed by ownership of huge landed estates, by massive investments in private business, by the state, by voluntary

contributions? And if by voluntary contributions, from which social groups? What is its relation to the state? Answering these questions is of crucial importance if the politics, and developments in the politics, of the church are to be understood.

Many church leaders often hoodwink adherents of the Christian faith by misrepresenting sections of the Bible which implore Christians to respect constituted authorities. Church members are regularly told by “men and women of God” to unquestionably obey, respect, honour and adore those in positions of authority. They are expected to always support and pray for their spiritual and political leaders. In fact, the church leader is “daddy” and his wife – if he is married – is “mummy”! And it is sacrilegious to challenge or question their views or decisions on any issue. Yet there is no record in the Bible to indicate that any of the great apostles of Christ was ever called “daddy”. Commenting on what he refers to as “the relevance of the charismatic movement to society’s needs”, G. A. Akinola (2002: 24) points out that the doctrine of this movement has led to what he calls “political quietism”, by which it is believed that since “God is in control”, it is futile to embark on or get involved in, resistance against any system or government, however tyrannical.

In a short but interesting essay, Tochukwu Ezukanma (2014) observes that in the churches, the revered gentlemen who are supposedly called by God and anointed, pretend to be all knowing and flawless, and to reinforce their powers and control over their members and to dispossess them of their money, they lie and twist the Word of God. According to him, deliberately oblivious of the poverty that dominates the lives of the generality of their members, they build their financial empire and maintain an awe-inspiring lifestyle of magnificent mansions, fleet of luxury cars, private jets and the indulgence of other avaricious fancies. So, in his words,

instead of leading people to the Truth, they lead them farther away from the Truth. Not surprisingly, the more religious the Nigerian society becomes, the more it is full of hate, cruelty, lawlessness and violence. In spite of our excessive religiosity, is the Nigerian society, including the churches, not suffused with wickedness, selfishness and immorality?

It is instructive to note that some of the richest members of the wealthy and property-owning class in Nigeria are church leaders. For these people, religion is an avenue for primitive accumulation of wealth. Some of them even own private jets! But biblical accounts clearly show that material wealth was not the priority of Jesus Christ and His apostles. It is clear that we do not have to accept hook, line and sinker everything a clergyman/woman says just because he/she is a religious leader. In a penetrating critique of Apostle Paul, Femi Aribisala (2014) admonishes that:

we should not automatically accept Paul because his epistles are in the bible. Instead, it is imperative to ascertain if Paul’s word is in consonance with that of Jesus. Jesus requires no less. He asks: ‘Why don’t you judge for yourselves what is right?’ (Luke 12: 57).

Osundare (2012) has reminded us that it has been frequently observed that, for the most part, religion in Nigeria is nothing more than superstition, a crafty mask, and grand pretense. This, according to him, is particularly so with the country’s swelling ranks of prosperity Gospel preachers, those faith-vendors who purchase sins and sell forgiveness at equally exorbitant prices. As Osundare (2012) puts it,

if you are poor, we are told, it’s because of your sin; if you are jobless, it’s because you’ve strayed from the straight ‘n narrow way. Absolving the creators of the corrupt socio-economic system that turns its victims into paupers and social cannibals, these preachers portray every crook in power as God-chosen, even when that power has come through rigged elections and murderous brigandage. They conduct thanksgiving service for notorious political jobbers and perform homecoming

ceremonies for returnees with looted fortunes. When the wealthy crook hands them the key to a luxury car (or private jet), they shower the 'cheerful giver' with blessings, beseech God to 'prosper his ways', and extol his virtues to the high heavens...

Conclusion

Our attention in this essay has been on religion and how it constitutes or promotes imperialism. It has been demonstrated that although religion can serve useful purposes, it can also be abused and used for negative ends. It is the extent to which religion is used to promote or rationalize the exploitation or oppression of man by man that it constitutes imperialism.

An attempt has also been made to show that before the advent of foreign religions, African societies had their various ways of worshipping and relating with the Supreme Being, which is an indication that Africans did not become religious or God-fearing only with the arrival of the Westerner. We do agree with the view that:

Man is a religious being. And he seeks for explanations for phenomenal happenings on earth through religious inquiry. When we see the endless repetition of sunrise and sunset, we are filled with awe. The development of human embryos in the women's wombs and the nature's orderly system of doing things are reasons why people believe that a supreme being created the earth. So, millions of people on earth today believe that the existence of God is a reality (Okoye, 2014).

There is no doubt that religions are not people, and we don't need to bow to them, especially when they lead us into the temptation of committing abominations against humanity (Okonkwo, 2014). It may be too late to chase away the foreign religions from Africa, but it is certainly not too late for the African to reassert himself, rediscover his noble past, and re-launch some form of cultural or religious renaissance.

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