

# **Religious Experience of Materialism in Contemporary Nigerian Society**

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## **Intruduction:**

Materialism has long been accustomed to onslaught proceeding from those who oppose the over acquisition of material wealth at the expense of others. It has been treated as an enemy by the church, the moralists and those who want to maintain status quo. Today, with the astromical increase of bribery and corruption, the indictment proceedings from those who want immediate social change in Nigeria affected have increased their agitation. It is well known that everything for which materialists acquire is put in peril in time of war or natural disaster in the World, crisis, its ideals and glory are equally challenged and engulfed, common believe is that materialism flourishes only in times of fair social weather.

It is important to disabuse the minds of our readers who may thing that the term as used in this essay refers to the philosophical concept, which sees the entire universe, man inclusive as a material. On the contrary the term is used to refer to material wealth.

The main thrust of this short essay is to examine how materialism has affected the religious and the social life of the Nigerians. The paper will also discuss the positive and negative effects of materialism on the people and on the development of Nigeria. This paper was informed by the general religious apathy and the desire of almost every Nigerian to amass material wealth at all cost without due consideration for the welfare of the less privileged in the society.

Nigerians have become very materialistic to the extent that the Church or Mosque is not an exception in Nigeria today family survival depends largely on the amount of material wealth at the disposal of parents. The needed pleasure and sensuality in the family can hardly be found in a poor family. Consequently, most Nigerians in the present century are working hard to grab the National cake, Christians and Muslims alike.

### **Typology of Materialism:**

Thomas Aquinas (1982, 264) asserted that the greatest human good is happiness, the end to which all others are subordinate. He opines that it would be pernicious to a degree, if happiness were a matter of good luck, for that would mean that all other goods would be even more fortuitous, therefore, any attempt to lead a good life would go by the board. According to Aquinas (1982:265) wealth which is the source of happiness, are basically two types – natural and artificial. Natural wealth, according to him are namely: food, drink, clothing, shelter and supplies of natural needs. The Artificial Wealth is ‘\_money’ which was created to facilitate exchange of goods and services. We also have the mineral wealth.

Natural wealth was created to support human nature, therefore, it cannot be ultimate because it is subservient to man himself. On the other hand artificial wealth has its last end, as it is only a means to natural wealth. From the mineral wealth man creates artificial wealth. Aquinas (1982:153) maintains that these can also be referred to as material substance.

### **Morality in Materialism:**

Materialism in the ethical context presupposes freedom to accumulate great material substance in the right and honourable way guided by Christian morality. Agha, (2003:40) quips that morality is an integral part of religion because both of them emphasize human personality in its relationships and both are concerned with conduct. Fagothey (1953,341) sees morality as that quality in human acts which is called –right || or –wrong|| –good|| or –evil||. It is a term used to refer to the goodness or badness of a human act without specifying which (Agha, 2003:40-41). Titus, (1957:181) Claims that:

*Human conduct creates baffling problems because it is deceptive when least expected and yet it can lead men on to clear conviction as to what is right and what is wrong. What actions constitute standard of moral judgment to which human conduct must conform so as to be regarded as right or wrong? In the general sense, the word right implies conformity to Custom, Law, Conscience and some external authority.*

The passage is contending that the ownership of material wealth can only be regarded as right if the acquisition conforms to the norms of the society by which the action is judged. Fagothy (1953:62) quips that pleasure is the purpose of life, and that both sensuous and intellectual pleasure combined together may not give the type of pleasure that material substance will give. Material wealth and the love for it may serve as a double-edged sword. Materialism can be the source of power and the source of fear. It can as well corrupt a person absolutely.

The experience of materialism should be guided by the principle of morality because it could have great affect on the political, religious, and social life of an individual positively or negatively. Aristotle asserted equivocally that property should be privately owned but its use should be common. However, if the use of wealth becomes common, then the enjoyment of a family wealth will disappear. Yet there are some materialists who refuse their family the enjoyment of their great wealth. Such attitude will be morally wrong.

### **Wealth in Religious Life:**

There is the difference between an interior and exterior things according to their nature and utilization. Aquinas (1951:343) quips that:

*My own explanation begins by drawing a distinction between and exterior thing considered in its nature and in utilization. In its nature as subject to the will of God, whose nod all things obey, it does not fall under human power. But fir its utilization, man has natural ownership of external things, because through his reason and will he can employ them for human benefit. They were made on his behalf.*

However, the scripture states that God created everything and subjected all things under man's feet (Ps. VII:8). The implication of this is that religiously man has the right to acquire material wealth judiciously. Man was given natural dominion over material goods. In any case we must be aware that they do not belong to us exclusively by origin, but that we have received them from God. One day we will be required to give an account of our stewardship on earth to the creator.

Jesus Christ dwelt extensively on the evils of material wealth but he did not condemn the possession of property nor did he denounce the possession of goods or money. However, he implicitly spoke against the deceitfulness of people (Matt. 12:22). He strictly warned against covetousness (LK.12:13-15) and he specifically pointed out the danger of accumulating material treasures (Matt. 6:9). After pointing out the impossibility of serving God and Mammon (Matt. 6:24) he went on to teach that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things which he possesses (LK.12:15) His parables suggest that man has the right and responsibility to hold and administer wealth (Matt. 5:14; LK. 19:12; 16:1) Christ emphasized that it must not be acquired at the expense of others. The poor are always at our doorsteps knocking for help. Material wealth acquired through bribery and corruption is an ill-gotten wealth.

A person who appropriates material wealth through honest means may be said to be virtuous but to appropriate what belongs to the public or group of people or an individual through dubious means is vice. This has become the practice in Nigeria today. This paper is making a passionate appeal to all who are involved in the act to desist. One may still experience materialism in ones life without being involved in malpractices.

The desire for material substance is the root of all evil things in our society including sudden deaths and the frequent plane crash in Nigeria. The inordinate ambition to acquire money by all means is the bane to national development and peace in Nigeria. People tend to emphasize materialism at the expense of spirituality. Hobbes claims that there could be a right to material wealth only if it was acquired according to the stipulations of the law (Samuel, 1996:2820. But Locke (1966:282) maintain that –the right to private property precedes the civil law, for it is grounded in natural moral law||. There is absolutely nothing wrong in a person having the experience of materialism.

Agha (2004:16) opins that the acquisition of material wealth requires ethics of responsibility, which is theocentric, in which the self and community are dominated by the action of God. Keeling (1977:45) asserts that:

*We are responsible for our action in the dynamic sense that we can over come both the external pressures of society and environment and the internal pressures of genetics and psychology and begins to act by the power*

*of God in us, as people who have nothing to fear and nothing to lose*

The experience of materialism is a personal responsibility that is much concerned with our past actions and the present acts. The ethical problem of material wealth is not on the acquisition of it, but on the wrong means of acquiring it and it is being used to oppress the poor and to corrupt the society. The real value of material wealth lies on its distribution for the economic and social well-being of the less privileged in the society. Adams, (1925:138) postulates that good -work efficiently and successfully accomplished brings with it feelings of satisfaction and happiness. From common experience in social life, it is those who give their material wealth for the good of others that never lack. They receive more blessings from God because they contribute to human and community development.

The Church and the Mosque no longer play the prophetic role of condemning ill-gotten materialism. Their leaders have become deeply involved in the acquisition of wealth. Some have single handedly built Universities and Schools. Some sing the praise of those who cheated to get into the office for material benefits. Makinde (2004:3) asserted that:

*...If you want to be a cool millionaire establishes a church, deceive with miracles and signs and preach prosperity. Hence the Denominational prostitutes are but rolling stones that gather no moss.*

The desire for prosperity and material wealth has the most common incentive for the proliferation of Churches in Nigeria.

A Sociologist, Peter Berges (1967:375) lamented that the only important sphere of influence religion retains today is within the family-that is on a personal level. Materialism has been the major cause of religious apathy. The quest for great material substance has led to the establishment religious service in every garage and in every available classroom in Schools. Religion is no longer seen as the moral cohesive force in our modern Nigerian societies. Materialism has taken the upper hand. Statism, secularism and political ideologies, rather than religion have become the major sources of crisis and division.

## **Material Wealth and Politics:**

In the Nigerian society today materialism and politics have become synonymous so much that only those who are rich run for political position because they can afford to bribe their way through. The major political objective now is no –longer to develop the Nation or Society but to accumulate wealth for themselves and their unborn generations. This has informed the mad rush into politics at all cost including human lives. In the political life of a nation materialism arises out of the notion that those who have experienced material wealth are equal in all respects, but are unequal absolutely in property ownership.

In the present democracy social efficiency is not measured by output as an ideal. John Dewey (1966:122) opins that:

*When social efficiency as measured by product or output is urged as an ideal in a would be democratic society; it means that the depreciation estimate of the masses characteristic of an aristocratic community is accepted and carried over. But if democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of destructive capacities be afforded all.*

The measure of efficiency is not always a part of the process of democratic experience in Nigeria. Rather it is measured by tangible external products and by the achievement of a distinctively valuable experience. This is why the Nigerian democratic process has become materialistic. The ultimate result is that all who have participated in the Nigerian democracy have experienced materialism in their family life. .Chuta laments that:

*The sad thing about the materialist in Nigeria is that he is highly admired and then revered by the majority of the people. That is what makes him thrive in the society. As long as he gives money to people to support project in the community and at times, the Church, no one appears to be concerned about how he makes his money.*

The experience of great material wealth may in many cases lead to lack of patriotism if the wealth was acquired at the expense of the nation's economy.

## **Materialism and corruption:**

Corruption is one of the major obstacles to Nation building. It is one of the aggravating and disastrous problems in Nigeria. The BBC English Dictionary (1992:254) quips that corruption in any form entails dishonesty, something that is illegal and morally wrong. Obasanjo (1980:15) claims that it is the general public that is more often than not the victim and that successful prosecution of the offenders is usually problematic.

The desire for excessive material wealth breeds bribery and corruption, which are the most endemic disease to national development and survival. It has eaten deep into the marrow of both public officers, civil servants, politicians and even some Church leaders. It is now difficult to know who to trust in our society. The main instruments of development are depleted by evasion, which leaves the state treasury empty. The allotments from the treasury are eroded by the corruption of project administration at every level. Contracts are never executed because the money is embezzled and shared. V.I. Okeke (2002:128) lamented that:

*The problem of corruption among developing nations particularly Nigeria has reached epidemic proportions and it appears to be defying solution. Corruption in Nigeria has long been recognized as a very serious national malaise.*

Corruption in Nigeria is cancerous. A flood of resources put into the pipeline at one end come out from the other end reduced to a trickle or even swindled. Some times corruption takes the form of –Legitimate || expenditures, such as bullet proof cars, building estates in every capital city, new road construction, you name them. The abysmal poverty of the masses contrasts sharply with the astronomic material wealth of a handful of politicians, landlords, businessmen and other tycoons. The stratification in the wealth in Nigeria is much sharper than in the developed nations. Corruption breeds poverty, which gives birth to strife and rancor. No wonder St Augustine of Hippo (1917-1920) affirms that when Government becomes corrupt rebellion may be ethically obligatory.

## **Materialism in Social Life:**

Today in Nigeria materialism is experienced in an invigorating social atmosphere. This has resulted into a new definition of the meaning of wealth as when some politicians say that it is an –end to life|| instead of a means to an end. Many Nigerians claim that material wealth is an expression of good life. No wonder some people have used either their parents, or loved ones, or children for money rituals. There is an urgent need for Nigerians to re-evaluate their ancient philosophy that would discern –the germ of materialism imbedded in it||, so as to help the nation –out of the various circles of decaying spiritualism. According Scott, (1963:22-23) Nigerians have to indicate

–the way to achieve real spiritual freedom offered by the material philosophy||. Certainly, a new material factors and conceptions have the human society. It is the source of power in Nigeria. Those who are materially blessed see themselves as the Lords in the society even those who acquired their wealth through fraudulent means are proud of their wealth. Materialism has ruined the political process in Nigeria. Wealth is the sources of corruption. The love and desire for materialism has contributed in no small way, to moral deficiency, virtue and human dignity have been shun and thrown overboard.

The divine right permits every individual to inherit material goods from parents. The desire to get rich overnight force some people to steal, embezzle public funds indulge in human sacrifice and to kill others. It is the source of evil in the society. The desire to acquire great wealth is one of the causes of proliferation of churches in Nigeria. It is a source of pleasure and respect.

## **Summary and Conclusion:**

We are in agreement with both Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas that there is nothing wrong in amassing wealth beyond ones immediate need in the right way. We are God’s stewards on earth, therefore we must not worship material goods as our god. The desire to amass wealth compels people to be involved in robbery, killing and embezzlement of public funds. It can force a person to become a member of a social group otherwise barred to him. The desire for great wealth may drive a person to excessive influence over political decisions or assume corresponding great responsibility for serving the

common good. Dubious means and unlawful means of acquiring great wealth in order to meet the needs of the family will bring disgrace to the family and posterity.

The experience of materialism has led men of God to become Worldly. Some religious leaders use diabolical means to convert people. Prosperity Sermons have become daily sermon and others have become self-made priests. The Church has become the richest gold mine industry in Nigeria today. Religion seems to have lost its control of social vices through the threat of super natural punishment. Morality is at the lowest ebb. All are the attempt to experience materialism.

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