

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CHURCH PROLIFERATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: The worry of this study is that the proliferation of churches through pastorpreneurship which is driven by economic determinism has deepened the socio-economic miseries of the people instead of ameliorating them. Against such understanding, the study investigated the impacts of the proliferation of churches on the economic development of Nigeria. The argument is guided by the Marxist Political Economy framework. The qualitative study adopted the descriptive research design and relied on data collected from secondary sources; which were subjected to thematic and content analysis. The result showed that: economic determinism is the major driving force of church proliferation; the growing trend of religious manipulation and exploitation of the religious followers for self-advantage and self-aggrandizement by the religious bourgeoisie is counter-productive to economic development; so much so as the enormous wealth of the churches has not been effectively utilized to practically address the socio-economic conditions of hence rising poverty and unemployment of the worshippers and breakthrough seekers; all these thrive due to weak regulatory framework of the Nigerian system. The study recommended amongst others that: churches should complement their social supports with practical economic activities such as investment in productive activities for sustainable economic growth and development; promotion of the values of hard work, integrity, industry and modesty above over reliance on the spiritualization of practical socio-economic problems and over materialisation of the spiritual spaces; stiffer regulatory framework to keep the religious centres focused on the essence of their incorporation; followers' radical self-awakened social consciousness to contend with the social ills of religious manipulation and exploitation for selfish reasons.

Keywords: Political Economy, Church Proliferation, Religious Bourgeoisie, Economic, Development, Poverty.

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BACKGROUND

Historically, Christianity came to Africa with the imperialist incursion and penetration of the later 15th or early 16th century. It was carried along with Portuguese trading expeditions. It however served as the forerunner of exploitative colonialism in the garment of mission *civilisatarice* (Schrader, 2000; Tordoff, 2002). The first attempt to implant Christianity in the area that later became Nigeria failed in 1560. A second attempt which came through the Church Missionary Society saw the establishment of the Methodist Church through the pioneering work of Thomas Birch Freeman in around 1842. Subsequently, the Roman Catholic Church (1862), Baptist church (1850), Anglican Church (1850), Presbyterian Church (1846), Wesley Methodist Church (1852) were variously established (Imo et al., 2020).

The Christian religion acted as a tool for the politico-economic conquest, subjugation and exploitation of Africa and the exploitation of her resources for the development of metropolitan

Europe (Rodney, 1972; Ake, 1981; Schraeder, 2000). Hence, the exploitative character of colonialism was implanted in social structures (superstructure) created by the colonial political economy. Religion was a constitutive element of superstructure of domination. This character is seen to have been further entrenched in the social life of Africans in the postcolonial era.

Recently, churches and religious centres are seen growing at exponential rates, industries are dying, while poverty and unemployment rate are creating conditions of human insecurity in Nigeria. The phenomenal growth of giant cathedrals and dearth of industries in Nigeria accentuate this assertion.

Meanwhile, caveat has to be placed that the argument here is not an attack on the Judeo-Christian religion; neither is the paper doing the devil's advocate. It is rather a call for the critical re-evaluation of what Martin Luther King (Jnr.) described as "dry dust religion" which extols the glories of heaven without taking pragmatically progressive steps to deal with practical socio-economic conditions that causes men earthly hell (cited in Carson, 2000). Poverty, unemployment, sickness, disease and death are no doubt the major socio-economic conditions that cause men earthly hell in Nigeria. It is worrisome that the churches rather than ameliorating these conditions appear to be acting in ways that accentuate or deepens them.

It is trite that man is both material and spiritual being. He is therefore driven in pursuit of actualization of both material and spiritual needs. Religion becomes for him a fundamental path to the achievement or actualization of his spiritual needs. Work, labour and industry are the paths to the actualization of his material need. Expectedly, the pursuit and actualization of both needs should be balanced. But there rather has been the manipulation of the spiritual as the antidote for the achievement of the material needs. It is our contention that the spiritualization of material gifts (wealth), commercialization and materialization of religion through *pastorpreneurship* drives the proliferation of churches, healing, prayer and prosperity centres in Nigeria. By the phenomenon of proliferation of churches as driven by *pastorpreneurship*, we "find churches breeding, brooding, hatching and springing up like maggots on daily basis" (Obiora cited in Hundu & Azembeh, 2018, p.44). The irony is that while churches are springing up and their General Overseers profiteering, companies are closing up. The aftermath of this has been weak economic growth, poor economic development and growing misery index. The economic downturn when juxtaposed with religious growth, sprawling church edifices and properties, profligate and ostentatious lifestyles of some church owners or General Overseers and their families; and the appalling and denigrating socio-economic conditions of most church members also presents a stark contrast. This happens because vulnerable and gullible persons are manipulated by religious prebendalism.

This paper unrepentantly argues that the endemic spiritualization of social life is an albatross to economic development in Nigeria. This spiritualization of social and economic life undermines the development of social consciousness and the questioning spirit which thrives on the dogmatic indoctrination prevalent in the religious cycle. This is such that the social wealth generated by the churches is unquestionably privatized as properties of the church founder and their families. It is now bemoaning observing the rat-race for material acquisitions, influence and affluence showcased through magnificent church buildings, properties and size of religious followership. The commercialisation of the spiritual and spiritualization of socio-economic life of the people by the *church owners* have impacts on economic development. This is what this study attempt to x-ray through the Marxist Political Economy (MPE) lenses.

Problematizing the Study

The exploitation using Judeo-Christian religion has been refashioned; this time not in the hands of white missionaries but black preachers. This is such that while the church is burgeoning with giant cathedrals, highest number of churches per capita and ostentatious life style of the gospel preachers, Nigeria carries the inglorious toga of a country with the highest number of poor people but ironically amongst the nations with the highest number of rich pastors in the world (Imo et al., 2020).

The point is that Nigeria, the dubbed giant of Africa is a nation with many paradoxes. It is one suffering economic hardship, poverty, unemployment, infrastructure delay in the midst of abundant mineral and human resources. Scholars say the country is suffering from resource curse. Despite this, the religious industry particularly Christian Pentecostalism flourishes. According to the Nigeria Business Directory (2024), there are about 16, 146 churches (excluding branches) in Nigeria. Majority of the number is in the southern Nigeria with about 4,326 in Rivers State alone. There is however no doubt that church planting could be a blessing where properly managed. However the reverse is the case in Nigeria.

As industries fold up and economic hardship mounts, the churches are blossoming, with of the churches and religious centres taking over industrial estate and business premises as worship centres. No doubt, the collapse of the industries is not the undoing of the churches. Bad policies, infrastructure decay, poor power supply and corruption are the causative factors. But the churches and worship centres albeit serve those who have lost their jobs in the industries differently. The burden here is how would prayers of the churches offer jobs and prosperity where there are no industries to offer employment and stimulate economic growth.

Jacobs et al. (2014) noted that churches have drifted away from the role of spiritual and social satisfaction of its member to self-accumulation for “owners” of the churches and the families. Members of the church squeeze and self-exploit themselves to sustain the church and the evangelization project. This is because the message is centered on the primacy of giving to the church. The more they squeeze and self-exploit themselves, the poorer they become and the richer the “Man of God” becomes. Their show of wealth speaks more to these. Ogbonnaya *et al* (2024) reported that Nigeria religious industry worth exceeded ₦500 Trillion in 2024. The point is that the Nigeria religious sector is a thrilling sector, creating massive wealth. Unfortunately, the religious industry contribution to national GDP has not counted much. This is because their finances and wealth are dormant. They constitute dormant finances because they are not significantly plunged into productive economic activities such as establishment of industries for employment generation.

While a direct causative relationship between church proliferation and economic development may be difficult to establish, a correctional or associational relationship is plausible. This is particularly so, where poverty, unemployment and inequality are used as proxies for dearth of economic development or underdevelopment. Are the churches playing any role in the accentuation of any or all of these three proxies of underdevelopment? Can the churches engage in productive activities to check the growing trend of these proxies of underdevelopment? These are some of the issues at the heart of this study. The scenarios painted in the background to the study together with those articulated above motivated this study. This study is therefore an attempt to critically unravel the driving force (political economy) of church proliferation and its impact on the economic development of Nigeria. Meanwhile, the argument of this paper is guided by the following questions: what is the driving force of church

proliferation in Nigeria? what are the mechanisms of exploitation in the religious industry in Nigeria? what are the impacts of religious exploitation on economic development in Nigeria?

THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

Political economy is essentially about the relationship between economic and politics. Epistemologically, the term is derived from the Greek word *polis*, meaning or state and *oikonomos*, meaning “who manages a household” (Bassey & Ndiyo, 2017, p. 46). In this sense, political economy is concerned about the state (government) management of the economy. This particularly is the domain of classical political economy or liberal political economy of Adams Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus etc; and the Keynesian political economy. To be sure, the liberal economic dimension of political economy places the primacy of the political over economic. That is to say; it is politics or the political life that determine the economic life. The radical Marxian political economy inversely places the primacy of economic (material) above the political.

Political economy in the radical Marxist sense deals with the production of material wealth- the foundation of the life or human society. Man must produce in order to satisfy his material need. This production of material wealth is a social process which involves human labour, means of production and objects of labour (factors of production); together these constitute the productive force or forces of production, hence of mode of production. Our focus here is not merely on production of goods or services, but the social relation developed in the production process. The position of individuals in the production process either as owners or non-owners of the means of production and the correspondingly level of social interaction and relation that emerges from the relation of production are fundamental in the appreciation of the Marxist Political Economy. It is from this process that the development of social consciousness informed the erection of structures, institution and society that sustains a given mode of production is produced and reproduced (Marx cited in Ekekwe, 2009).

It is equally from the above perspective that the idea of economic structure (substructure) as determinant and configurator of the superstructure (political institutions, power structure and ideology, including religion) in the determination and the allocation of resources is further explained and understood (Ake, 198; Ekekwe, 2009; Bassey & Ndiyo, 2017). It is equally important to add that in the process, exploitative social relation of production is produced, mechanized and sustained through culture, ideology, civilization and history as element of the superstructure. This according to Ekekwe is the “materialist root of political economy” (2009, p. 27); which bring into focus the ideas of historical and dialectical materialism.

It suffices to add that political economy is an interesting field of study. As an interdisciplinary field of study, draws strength from economics, sociology, political science, psychology, and history; and therefore concerned with the development of society. It is the scientific study of history, society and social change which equip us with a clearer and sharper understanding of the interrelatedness of historical processes, social phenomenon, and social problems. A fundamental utility of the political economy as a scientific study of the society lies in the sharpening and shaping our understanding of the future and a guide to a desirable end.

THE CONCEPT OF CHURCH PROLIFERATION

A church is a community of believers; place of solemn worship, prayers and connection with a higher power or divine being; an institution that provide spiritual leadership, education and community. The church emerges from the womb of religion. A spotlight on the concepts of religion and Christianity here becomes precursory to the understanding of the concept of church proliferation. Religion is man's search for a relationship with his creator (maker). It is a response to human's need for theodicy and soteriology. Man when troubled, resort to the extra-ordinary power of a divine god to reconcile with the imperfection of the world. In such times, he resorts to the theodicy of God of justice, the protector, defender and giver. Soteriology on the other hand means the study of salvation. Religion also offers *soteriological* answers to opportunities of salvation, relief from suffering and a reassuring meaning of life. It focuses on the nature of salvation, the meaning and the processes of salvation (liberation from sin, suffering or other bondages). The pursuit of theodicy and soteriology are therefore the core of religion, particularly Christianity (Obiora, 1998).

Literally, proliferation refers to the rapid increase or spread of something in an uncontrolled and unchecked manner, with significance consequences. Within the context of the church, proliferation is the exponential growth and expansion of different kinds, types and trends of religious faiths (Kitanse & Bibinu cited in Imo et al., 2020). Adetoyese (2017) defined church proliferation as a process that result in a new (local) Christian church being established. This is different from the establishment of a new worship centre of same denomination. According to Hundu and Azembeh (2018) church proliferation in Nigeria falls under different types and are diverse in origin, belief, size, behavioural pattern and traits. These types are: evangelical, pentecostal groups, healing ministries, thaumaturgical movement, sabbatarian movement, and endtime crusaders. The evangelical/Pentecostal group has been at the forefront of the proliferation. They are followed by the healing ministries and the thaumaturgical movement.

Church proliferation is a phenomenon particularly associated with Christian Pentecostalism. Pentecostalism was however not a known feature of the Nigeria religious landscape until the 1970s. Hitherto, the mainline churches (Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, Baptist, and Presbyterian Churches) dominated Nigeria's religious space. The Assemblies of God in 1930 blazed the trail of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Subsequently the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) (1973), Living Faith Church (Winners Chapel 1973), and Christ Embassy (LoveWorld Assembly, 1976), amongst others followed (Imo et al., 2020). Undoubtedly, the Christian religion has experienced great level of exponential growth in Nigeria. The rapid spread hinges on the healing, deliverance and miracle ministries as well as the prosperity gospel.

The causes of church proliferation according to Adetoyese (2017) are: pride and arrogance, insubordination or unmentorability of some pastors, doctrinal disagreements, corruption, and frustration of some pastors etc. Nna cited in Imo, Onwochei and Hellerman (2020) on their part summarized the reason for the proliferation of churches in terms of socio-economic factors such status consciousness, quest for cultural identity, emphasis on prosperity preaching and search for social security. These churches and centres blossom due to the poor socio-economic conditions, where poverty, hunger, sickness, disease, unemployment abound. These conditions are rather spiritualized with the centre professing spiritual solutions to them and with the "word of God" as the instrument.

THE CONCEPT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development is concerned with the overall well-being of the citizens of a society. It is aimed at improved standard of living, including creation of more opportunities for the people in education, healthcare, employment, poverty reduction and reduction of inequality (Kalu, 2022). Falodun and Nnadi cited in Ojo and Babajide (2022) defined economic development as “the process by which there is a long period of sustained growth in the per capita real income of a country, accompanied by the fundamental changes in the structure of the economy and an overall sustained improvement in material well-being of the people” (p. 78). From these definitions, increased per capita, social and economic welfare, and reduction in poverty and unemployment are the measuring indicators of economic development. These conditions occur or are present in situation of progressive economic activities revolving around agriculture, trade, industry, manufacture, service delivery, knowledge, skills and innovation sectors. It is structural linkages and positive multiplier effects created amongst these sectors that bring the desired economic development and social progress.

This study establishes a relation between the church and economic development. The church in contemporary times has become an economic entity. This is a major argument of this paper. This church extracts revenue and therefore should play certain role in economic development. It is in the light of this that Thomas Aquina’s “City of God” can be built on earth such that God’s will of prosperity could be on earth as it is in heaven; with religion being used to pursue universal common good (Aquina cited in Sabine & Thorson, 1973). The application of economic tools in the analysis of the impact of religion on the society is therefore not a recent concern. The “common good” of St. Aquinas in our estimation is the reduction of poverty, hunger, unemployment and inequality. As ogbonnaya *et al* (2021) averred, the religious sector is a thriving sector. By its massive wealth creation, it should play critical development role in the country’s economic development.

Theoretical Explication

The argument of this paper is anchored on the Marxian Political Economy framework (MPE) otherwise called the theory of economic determinism (Eremie et al., 2019). Marx in his radical evolutionary approach to the understanding of political and social problem traced the root to the economic foundation of society or social relation. Primarily, society exists in a system of patterns of social relations entered into by man in his drive and struggle for survival. Production of material need is the essence of this social relation, hence the social relations of production. The system of social production and relations of production are the fundamentals of the MPE. Social relations such as those between husband and wife, teacher and student, employer and employee, church leader (owner) and the followers (worshippers) can be fully analyzed and understood as pattern of social productive activities, the only difference lies in the products. Other elements in understanding of the Marxist political economy are class and class relations, dependency and exploitation. There is no luxury of space for explanation of these concepts of MPE. We had rather attempted to clear with the concepts in the application of the theory as set out hereunder.

The MPE is applicable to the study of political economy of church proliferation and economy development in Nigeria. It suffices to caution that to appreciate the application of the MPE theory to the social problem of church proliferation, exploitation and economic development; one must discard the prejudices and emotionalism that obfuscate critical thinking

and questioning. We are rather invited to follow the rigor, logic, transparency and intellectual honesty deployed in the analysis. This is the distinguishing scientific character of the Marxist political economy in the analysis of societal and social problem.

In the modern pentecostal churches, there is a pattern of productive relation existing or entered (albeit inexplicitly) between the owners of the church (preacher, General Overseer, G.O) and the congregation (members, worshippers and breakthrough seekers). A form of property relations and with the church as a means of production; church owner (G.O) as owners of the means of production; and the church workers and followers as labourer emerges from this relationship. This constitutes the substructure. Religion and the gospel emerge from this social relation as the superstructure- an ideological instrument deployed to whip these followers into the seed sowing and prophetic-giving dogma. These are extractive mechanisms. Here the religious leader, founder, Daddy G. O. becomes a religious bourgeois (exploiter), while the church workers, congregants, worshippers, breakthrough seekers from whom values are expropriated constitute the religious proletariat and mass of the exploited. The accumulated and extracted values from alienated church proletariates and the mass of church followers are converted into the personal property of the G.O. and his family.

An exploitative dependent relationship is also developed wherein the breakthrough of the seeker is tied to the apron-string of the daddy G.Os. Just as the metropolitan bourgeoisie and societies develops and becomes rich by exploiting the satellite, so the religious bourgeoisie exploit the miracle and breakthrough seekers to their selfish advantage. This produces the stark reality of rich church (pastors) and an armada of poor congregants. The church has thus become an instrument through which the religious bourgeoisie exploit the gullibility of the unsuspecting mass of the church (like potatoes in a sack) to his personal enrichment. There is “no doubt, these promote members dependency and underdevelopment of a people’s economy” (Ojo & Babajide, 2020, p.79). This point explains the sharp contradiction between the reality of multi- dimensional poverty of the mass of church members and the glowing affluence of the churches and the G.Os. This could be best explained in terms of accumulation by dispossession, which is made possible by dependency on religion; and the religious bourgeois claim to offer a spiritual solution to practical socio-economic problems of poverty, unemployment, poor health through the prayers and invocation of some powers. Ironically the *invocators* of the powers had not used same to solve their socio-economic problems, but have resorted to practical realistic and realizable solutions with the church as an industry for wealth creation.

There is underlying class exploitation in the religious industry. We had set out the religious bourgeoisie and the religious proletariats. Does this fit into the Marxist class analysis? Recall our position that the church business or religious industry is a system of social production; the social relation arising therefrom produces the religious bourgeoisie and the mass of the exploited congregation, followers, miracles and breakthrough seekers are religious proletariates. Each of these occupies a position in the system of social production either as owners of the church as a means of production or non-owners. Their relation to this means of production and role in the organization of labour is clearly defined. The religious bourgeoisie- owners of the church (as means of production) are the preachers, miracle workers, seedtakers, recipient-accumulator of seeds, offerings and tithes as surplus and thus converted to private property constitute a class- the class of the exploiter. The religious proletariates: church workers, miracle seekers, seed givers, tithers, contributors to church growth and properties also constitute a class- the class of the exploited. They are exploited and alienated from the products of their labour. This consequently explains the share of social wealth of the church which the classes dispose,

their share of it and the mode of acquiring same. It is this that explains the exploiter- exploited relation in the religious industry in Nigeria and most part of Africa. This further accentuates the relevance of the MPE to this study.

Similarly, the researcher adopts the MPE because it offers a shaper toll for understanding social problems. Without doubt, the MPE offers the sharpest understanding of the growing monster of church proliferation, and commercialisation of religion and the transactional gospel. This elucidation offers a pathway of whether to encourage and follow the train of crass materialism and commercialization of the religious industry or look for a deeper understanding of the meaning and essence of life and living or living and existence. To be sure, one may be breathing (living) but not conscious of his existential reality and true causes of his present social conditions (lack of social consciousness).

For the researcher, the MPE as deployed calls for a clearer examination of crass materialism and sterile bourgeoisie intellectualism which sustain the exploitation, veiled in the trickle down modicum and wait –for- your- turn mentality. The religious industry deploys this antics too; and when junior pastors cannot wait because nothing trickles down, they break away to establish their churches, hence church proliferation. The transactional gospel businessmen and religious bourgeoisie also emotionally and spiritually manipulate the miracle and prosperity seekers from reaching the social consciousness and reality of their material exploitation. Touch not my anointed and do my prophet no harm” and other Judeo-Christian biblical dictums are easily resorted to and intellectually manipulated to undermine the development of social consciousness and critical questioning spirit amongst the followers, worshippers, and seekers.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this is a qualitative study. The descriptive research design was adopted. Data which were in qualitative forms were generated from primary and secondary sources. The primary data were obtained through the direct observation of the researcher by means of participant observation. The secondary data were largely collected, textbooks, magazines, newspapers, journals etc. Thematic and content analysis was adopted to analyse the qualitative data by way of literature survey and critical discourse analysis.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Examination of the driving forces of church proliferation in Nigeria

Socio-economic factor is the principal force of church proliferation in Nigeria. Poor socio-economic conditions of the people accentuate church proliferation which is principally driven by factors such as quest for prosperity, status consciousness and search for social security. Most importantly, the Nigeria economy has failed to provide good employment for its citizens. In the absence of well-paid employment, people resort to the religious gospel industry not as a vocation but as a trade, profession and source of employment and livelihood. The priesthood or pastorage expectedly was not a profession but a vocation- a calling. For a vocation, the indicators are sacrificial service; focus on spiritual growth and development. A vocation is therefore a call to sacrificial service. Conversely, a profession is a trade, an occupation which requires specialized training, skill development and expertise. It is characterized by accountability and standard as

well reward and compensation system. The contemporary reality is that the supposed God's vineyard has descended into a profession and trade.

The treatment of "service in the vineyard" as a profession of full gospel business has shifted focus from service to God and humanity to the pursuit of wealth, hence commercialization of the gospel and materialization of the spiritual (spiritual providence). In the eyes of Weber (cited in Bamidele, 2017) the pursuit of wealth has become human motivation in religion. This was how religion gave birth to capitalism in the first instance. No doubt the material profiteering of modern religion evolves from the capitalist spirit of religion, which is as old as modern history. The capitalist spirit of religion is about profiteering from religious works and duties. The exponential growth and expansion of different kinds, types and creed of religious faith herein described as Christian Pentecostalism find good explanation in the capitalist spirit of religion. Church proliferation in this light is largely driven by the economic factor of profit, accumulation and material acquisition not service to God and humanity.

The quest for material gain (economic determinism) is essentially the driving force behind church proliferation in Nigeria. The church has become a business venture for wealth creation and most priests, pastors and preachers have turned tradesmen. The primary focus is no longer salvation but material prosperity, albeit erroneously through prayers and some assignments instead of industry. As such there is the near abandonment of the theodical and soteriological mission and vision of the church. The religious bourgeoisie, holding to their trade of wealth creation with the church as a mean and the gospel as an instrument, deploy exploitative mechanism of accumulation by dispossession. Greater details on these manipulative mechanisms are offered in the consideration of the second question. In the light of the above, one finds on the streets of many southern Nigeria cities such as Port Harcourt and Lagos, an average of ten to fifteen different churches on every street. Equally found in these places are two storey buildings of about six flats housing four to six different churches, with some taking turns in one hall to conduct their church service. What follows is the scramble for time, space, converts and worshippers, not necessarily for the salvation of the souls, but ultimately for the extraction of surplus value. Nothing is spared in the scramble. Certain unwelcome, unspiritual, a-religious and ungodly subterfuges are many times deployed.

Strongly, issues of unemployment and poverty are factors in the proliferation of churches in Nigeria. This has created a new form entrepreneurship called *pastorpreneurship*. A pastorpreneur is an entrepreneur or one who set up a church as a business venture. *Pastorpreneurship* is the act or business of inventing, creating, increasing and turning religious programmes and activities into opportunistic avenues for money making, maximization of profit and wealth creation in satisfaction of selfish ends (Ughaerumba, cited in Hundu & Azembe, 2018). This emerging lexicon, the new game in town is driven by economic practice *evangeconomics*. The phenomenon of *pastorpreneurship* accentuates the deviation of the ministry from vocation to a profession.

The mass poverty and lack of mass social consciousness in Nigeria provide fertile breeding ground for this phenomenon and hydra-headed monster. *Pastorpreneurship*, commercialization of the gospel and religion, unrevealed spiritualization of the material and materialization of the spiritual fuels falsehood, fake miracle, quick money syndrome "miracle credit alert" and the prosperity gospel thrive due to mass poverty in the land.

MECHANISMS OF EXPLOITATION IN THE RELIGION INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

In the political economy of church proliferation, diverse mechanisms are deployed to facilitate material exploitation of the followers. One major mechanism deployed is the commoditization of spiritual blessing. Commoditization here implies the transformation of spiritual blessings into merchandise or marketable products. By this spiritual blessings become articles that can be bought and sold like every other commodity. Meanwhile God's blessing is commonized and equated with flashy cars, impressive mansion, and expensive lifestyle. Commoditization of spiritual blessing goes hand in glove with the commercialisation of the gospel in some form of transactional mechanization.

The practical manifestations of the above come in form of indulgence and contracting of prayers; where a breakthrough seeker contract the prophet or prayer warrior to pray on another's behalf. The rather most disturbing and trending form of commoditization of the spiritual is the huge transactional cost in the payment for mantles. These mantles come in such forms as: anointing oil, miracle keys, hand bangles, handkerchiefs, stickers, banners, scarfs, miracle perfumes etc. These materials (mantles) are commoditized as conduits or vessels for spiritual power, blessing, breakthrough, healing and protections, and they are many times sold at exorbitant prices. For instance Prophet Jeremiah Omofefiyin sells his "Key of David" mantle for prosperity at between ₦1.5 million to ₦3million. His miracle fish is also sold at almost same rate.

Another mechanism of religious exploitation is the booking or payment of money for appointment with some men of God. This is sometimes disguised in the language of booking for counseling session. This is most prevalent in NRM, and many of the new generational Pentecostal and revival churches. They happen in the 1st and 2nd generation NRM, but sometimes without the tacit approval of the G. O.s. Some religious proletariats in the process of transformation such as junior pastors and some church workers scavenge on this as a medium for their own survival.

Emotionally charged languages are deployed generally as a tool for manipulation and financial extortions and exploitations. The religious atmosphere has recently become saturated with such expression as the heavier the seed, the heavier and faster the blessing and miracle. This is a farce. God's blessing and answer to prayer is not function of the quantum of or regularity of seed sowed, tithe paid or prophetic giving. These mechanisms work for the religious bourgeoisie and against the followers (seekers). The promise of divine intervention and financial breakthrough in the light of the socio-economic reality provide fertile ground for religious exploitation. These seekers for divine intervention and financial breakthrough are preys of religious bourgeoisie as predators. The followers and seekers are emotionally and spiritually manipulated into the belief of kingdom investment as spiritual investment into one's material and social breakthrough. This is a serious issue in the political economy of church proliferation in Nigeria. It is a given that evangelization requires financial resources. Using the insight offered by Ekeh (1975) and Nnoli (1981) these acts are tantamount to religious prebendalism. Sacred endowments and spiritual providence are highly commoditized, commercialized, consumerized and for material and economic profiteering and not necessarily for public good and the salvific mission, but for private accumulation, expanding influence and affluence of the transactional gospel preacher.

IMPACTS OF CHURCH PROLIFERATION AND RELIGIOUS EXPLOITATION ON THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA

This is the crux of the matter. It is therefore requires critical and balance evaluation devoid of emotionalism. The MPE is critical, factual logical and therefore devoid of emotionalism. This is what distinguishes the MPE as an ever potent scientific tool in the analysis of social and economic problem.

The researcher is not unaware of the some positive social impacts of the churches. Undoubtedly, the Christian religious bodies or movements had made some contributions to social or moral development of the society. For instance the Catholic, Methodist, Anglican Churches had made significant impacts on the educational development of the society. The new generation churches of the Pentecostal brand otherwise called the New Revival Movement (NRM) had also made some marks on development of their immediate environment. These churches have made some marks on the socio-economic lives of the people. For instance Pastor Wale Adefarasin of the Guiding Light Assembly through his multi- strategy approach recently attended to alleviating poverty as one of the problem causing *men earthly hell*. This he did through provision of schools for the poor and meals for the widow, water project and health facilities in Obalendee, Lagos. The RCCG through its “Habitation of Hope Foundation” had touched lives through rehabilitation of prostitutes, drug addicts, and criminals. It has provided shelter and offered social services to the people. Several other churches would have made their marks in addressing the spiritual, physical and social needs of the people. There is also no doubt that the church provides a sense of hope, brotherhood, spiritual solace, and network of supports in coping with economic stress. The churches and religious institution have helped promote moral values, strong family bond, social coherence and harmony in our society. But the positive impacts are however insignificant. Albeit, some through false prophesy had created social conflicts in families and in societies.

It is most worrisome that the spiritualisation of social and economic life detracts attention from the real causes of socio-economic problems. This is such that many times, economic hours are wasted in the pursuit of spiritual answers to practical economic and social problems. This has seriously overshadowed the need for practical realistic and reliable solution, such as reawakening of social consciousness and practical confrontation of systematic and structural issues in development crisis. One example suffices here. Leadership, particularly transformational type is the key to the development of any society. The churches had rather prayed for a good leadership to emerge at each turn of election, than guiding their members to taking active democratic actions that could midwived the required leadership for the transformation of the society. What is needed is social mobilization with the church as a vehicle for the emergence of transformational leadership through democratic means. This is the knowledge Martin Luther King Jnr. and the movement/struggle for civil right and black emancipation in the United States of America passed to suppressed, oppressed, marginalized and alienated societies (Carson, 2000). It is by this that the church becomes the “salt of the earth” and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13). It appears the church by its new dynamics is gradually losing it saltiness, with their activities accentuating Martin Lurther’s dry dust religion. Let us now turn to the main issue.

The church has become an economic entity and the fattest growing industry in Nigeria. While businesses are struggling to survive, the churches are blossoming and booming with sprawling edifices and properties conspicuously and had recently resorted to buying up landed properties of defunct and moribund industries. For instance, Hardel and Einic Company Lagos

before it collapsed, unemployed 5,000 Nigerians. The premises of the company currently house the Covenant Christian Centre with our 5,000 congregants, who gather there praying for financial breakthrough, healing and God's blessing. There is also the case of Ugo Foam Industries along Akilo road Lagos, now being occupied by the Latter Rain Assembly of Pastor Tunde Bakare. There was Eleganza Industries, whose premises have been occupied by the Mountain of Fire Miracle Ministries. The location of defunct Dunlop and Michelin industries Ikeja Lagos now houses the Redeemed Christian Church of God. The church branch also sits on the premises of Okada Micro Financial Bank at Palm Groove, Lagos. At Ilupeju industrial estate Lagos, churches have taken over the premises of the collapsed companies. These churches are now warehousing praying persons instead of production and products (Mon, 2017; Anyawu, 2021; Nigeria Business Directory 2024; Ogbonnaya, 2024).

In Rivers State, the Chidex Electricals at Okija Street, D/line Port Harcourt now house the Salvation Ministries. At Rumuola junction Port Harcourt, the Light House Family Church has taken over the premises of the defunct Shandee Fast Food and Confectionaries. Within the same axis, the Impact Church, Rumuola occupies the premises of Toyota Company. The premises of Chido Industrial Complex Elioju Road Port Harcourt have been taken over by the Living Faith Church. At Alesa Eleme, the premises of the moribund RESA confectionaries have also been taken over by the Salvation Ministries. Churches taking over hitherto companies and business premises are common features of Nigeria urban centres and towns. The hitherto workers in the defunct companies are now the breakthrough seekers in these churches and miracle centres.

Let us reiterate that is not argument or claim that the churches are responsible for the death and dearth of industries. Our concern is that countries do not become progressive and prosperous by the astronomical rises in churches. The greatness, socio-economic development and improved welfare of the population of a country are fallouts of growth in industries. The case of Nigeria is rather different. While she boost of an impressive record of number of churches per capita, it equally has the highest number of poor people in the world, yet with the highest number of richest pastors in the world (Kitanse & Bibini cited in Imo *et al* 2020). Astonishingly, while industries are dying in Nigeria, religious centers and churches are contesting among themselves. The contest is usually about giant cathedrals, size of congregation, followership and most influential preacher in terms of material possession and connections.

The survival and growth of the religious centres or churches depend on extraction of value (money) from the followers and members. The accumulation by dispossession enriches the church and its leadership and the families (patrimonialism); and impoverishment the followers. Many of the painful seeds sown in transactional exchange for material blessings, miracles and blessing had not yielded fruit. Yet God through the givings of the church congregants and religious followers has supplied the needs of the preacher while members are leaving in penury. The capitalist ideology of profit maximization now underlies religious practice of *evangenomics*.

A major argument of this paper is that the churches or religious centres have great quantum of financial resources at their disposal. These resources could drive economic development. The National Bureau of Statistics cited in Ogbonnaya *et al* (2024) reported that revenue of the church run into ₦ 500 Trillion in 2024. This exceeds the total revenue of Nigeria as shown in the country is budget 2015-2023. To be sure, Nigeria's total actual revenue as contained in the yearly budgets of 2015 to 2023 stood at ₦99.14 Trillion (Budget Office of the Federation, 2015-2023). Comparatively the wealth of the religious industry is massive enough to support the national economic development. Unfortunately, most of their funds had remained

idle funds and mostly used to finance and sustain the extravagant lifestyles of the transactional prosperity gospel preachers. One finds these in their conspicuous display of wealth such as private jets, Gulfstream jets of differently brands and classes. For instance, General Overseer of the Living Faith Church (Winners Chapel) owns private jets- Gulfstream G550, Gulfstream 450, Gulfstream V, and a Learjet with a combined value of \$98.3 Million (₦15.9 billion). Apostle Johnson Suleiman owns three private jets. Adeboye and Ayo Oritesjafor individually own Gulfstream V (Mon, 2017). These funds deployed for the profligacy of these pastors could be invested in industries and agricultural development to be owned and managed by the religious centres. This could drive economic growth and development with a spiraling positive linkages and multiplier effects. This could equally generate employment for the many breakthrough seekers and therefore reduce unemployment and poverty in the country.

Similarly, the religious industry's contribution to the nations GDP and economic development has not counted much for the nation. Its multiplier effect to the economy is less. This is mostly because; they are not in the tax net. By the provision of the laws of the Federal Inlands Revenue Service (FIRS), "the profit of any company, institution engaged in ecclesiastical, charitable, benevolent or educational activities of a public character are exempt from income tax, if such profit are not derived from trade or businesses carried on by the company" (para. 18) FIRS cited in Ogbonnaya et al. 2024). This leaves the religious industry with humungous non-taxable dormant finances. But these monies in my view are proceeds of a transactional extraction from the congregants. The modern Pentecostal churches by their commercialization of the gospel, spiritualization of the material, and materialization of the spiritual, commoditization of spiritual blessing, healing and miracle are now industries engaged in business activities. Even the schools and universities established and managed by them are fully liberalized and commercialized, with their fees amongst the highest in the hierarchy of institutions providing similar service in Nigeria. By these, their income should be taxable.

The churches as economic entities extract values (revenue, income) through tithe, offering, donations, seed sowing, financial booking for counseling, and sales of mantles, spiritual endowments and objects etc. These have generated substantial revenue for the churches. Some of these have been invested in hospitals, schools (including universities) and real estates. These are essentially for business and not some sorts of ecclesiastical, charitable or benevolent activities. The proceeds from these investments enrich the church. While all almost all the members contribute their measures to these investments and acquisition, they have received a disproportionate share or sometimes no shares of the economic gains of the investments and acquisitions.

Again there is nothing wrong with religious wealth. The preacher must not beg to eat while preaching the gospel. But the preacher must stay within boundary of modesty. The wealth of the church and the preacher must not be at the expense of the poverty stricken and gullible members and breakthrough seekers. Secondly the socially produced wealth should be properly redistributed. When the surplus produced in the religious industry is amazed as wealth and properties of the owners of the church- religious bourgeoisie, poverty is deepened and inequality gap further widened. Unfortunately, the prosperity theology has succeeded in concealing it intention by the resort to the "turn by turn" mentality. While the followers wait on God for their turn of blessing, the religious bourgeoisie are already enjoying their heaven on earth.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Economic determinism as the Driving Force of Church Proliferation

A major finding from the qualitative data presented, analyzed and supported by the theoretical framework is that economic determinism is the main driving force of church proliferation in Nigeria. The churches and religious centres have become business centres and economic entities. They are driven by the ideology of profit maximization. This is because church planting has become one of the most lucrative industries in Nigeria. However, the profit maximization for wealth created by the church is through accumulation by dispossession. The wealth of the church comes through the exploitation of the followers, worshippers and breakthrough seeker. This findings is supported by the findings of Akabike et al. (2021) who held that in the religious industry's trade of self-aggrandizement, manipulative mean (emotional manipulations) are used to aid the outright financial extortion of the people. The commercialization and commoditization of spiritualism, the transactional gospel and religious prebendalism are driven by the pursuit of material gain (economic determinism) not salvation. Religion in Nigeria has become organized mechanizing.

The Church as an Instrument of Manipulation and Exploitation of Worshippers

The analyzed so far made also indicated that religion is an instrument of exploitation in Nigeria. This accentuates Weber's description of the capitalist spirit of religion. There is no doubt that profit maximization builds on exploitation. The materials profiteering through religion, with the use of churches and religious centres as medium and tools cannot be divorced from exploitation. Similarly, as firms compete for customers and deploy strategies to sustain competitive advantages, so churches in the religious economy in Nigeria compete for followers. In their competitive environment, diverse strategies, subterfuges and manipulations are deployed to achieve and maintain competitive advantages in the church business environment. Many of the fake prophecies and *arrangee* miracles are driven by competition. Fear and prosperity theologies are also manipulated to sustain the church. In all these, the church leaders survive, gain affluence and extravagancy off the penury of the gullible, unquestioning followers. This finding is strengthened by the MPE adopted as the theoretical framework which suggests gospel is being manipulated through *pastorprenuership* as instrument of accumulation by dispossession and exploitation.

The Impacts of Church Proliferation and Economic Development

The findings from the analysis showed that while churches are growing and becoming richer, the congregants are becoming poorer. While church and religion have become the fastest growing industry in Nigeria, poverty and unemployment is on the alarming increase. While industries are dying, the churches are buying over the warehouses of the industries as worship centers. There is the phenomenon of dying industries and emerging giant cathedrals in Nigeria. The study has established that poor government policies, inadequate infrastructure, poor power supply are the critical factor responsible for dead industries. However, the exploitation of the religious industry had in diverse measures emasculated the penurious religious worshippers, miracle and breakthrough seekers. It has deepened structural poverty occasioned by the dearth of industries.

The exponential growth of the churches, its' stupendous wealth and the affluence of the religious bourgeoisie when juxtaposed with the growing poverty of the members presents a paradox. What is more? The churches are playing noticeable role in the underdevelopment of Nigeria's economy.

The Issue of Weak Regulatory Framework

The weak regulatory and enforcement framework does not only affect public sector institutions. It has been shown to affect the religious industry with attendant impacts on economic development. The churches and the religious bourgeoisie have profited by exploiting the people and the system due to loopholes created by the law regulating the financial activities of churches and religious centres. This is not helpful for the economic development of Nigeria. Because the activities of the churches and religious centres are not strictly regulated; some have become business centres of organized merchandising which is outside their purview in the eyes of the law. Some of these entities have become conduit for corruption and money laundering. The use of Pastor Ayo Arisejafor's private jet for the national arms deal scam of 2013 clearly exemplifies the point been made here.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

When Marx dealt with capitalism, he was more concerned about the ordinate drive for materialism, profit and dearth of humanism which undermines effective redistribution of socially produced wealth. The worries was also about making of a living rather than making a life; where success was measured by size of material accumulation instead of quality of service and relationship with humanity. It is this race for crass materialism that drive religious profiteering, church proliferation and exploitation of members or gullible followers by the religious bourgeoisie. The religious bourgeoisie, transactional gospel preachers by their actions had dampened the socio-economic miseries of the majority. They have emasculated the social condition of men. The social wealth generated by the churches has rather enhanced and sustained the wealth of the religious bourgeoisie instead of using or channeling same to confront the social and economic conditions that cause unemployment, poverty and other social miseries. Without confronting these conditions, and the religious preaching amount to dry dust religion. Astonishingly the preachers-extollers of the glories of heaven are themselves accumulators of materials, wealth and properties on earth. While they want to leave an enjoyable heavenly-like life on earthy, they cajole the gullible followers to look up to heaven and a better life to come hereafter.

It is a trite that privilege people does not voluntarily give up their privilege position, and that it takes courage to confront social ills. This critique of church proliferation and economic development in Nigeria is a modest contribution to the call for social change. The caveat here is that the researcher is not one of those holier than thou negative critics of the church. The researcher is a believer of the gospel, a lover and follower of Christ, nurtured in his bosom and sustained by its spiritual blessing and will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen. However, the position of this paper is clarion call on church to return to its salvific mission as the salt of earth and light of the world; a call on the church to be more practically concerned about the social and economic condition that causes men earthly hell; a call on the

church to take economically practicable and realizable steps to contribute to the socio-economic development of society, so that the city of God could be replicated on earth.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- Churches should complement social and emotional supports with practical economic activities such as investment in cottage industrial, agriculture, innovation, and skill development for sustainable economic growth and development. Instead of keeping people in church fasting and praying for unavailable jobs, productive ventures of the churches should rather provide employment, reduce poverty and increase the capital base of the church. This would be a practical mean of redistribution of accumulated social wealth by the church.
- Churches should promote values of hard work, integrity and industry, instead of 'dangerous prayers' and over reliance on spiritual intervention for solutions to practical socio-economic problems.
- A transparent support system that addresses socio-economic need of the people without exploitation should be developed and sustained by the churches. One of such would be low and interest free loan to members to support their businesses. A church co-operative and development bank is another viable option.
- The Federal Government through its regulatory agencies such as the Corporate Affairs Commission should ensure that churches adhere strictly to religious standard and the purpose of their incorporation. The books of the church should be mandatory made open to members who are the contributors to its finances. This will enhance probity, transparency and accountability in the running of church business and churches. The FIRS should equally work towards capturing churches as emerging economic entities into the tax net.
- The anti-corruption agencies should beam its searchlight on the activities of the churches to forestall the churches from being used a avenue for money laundering
- Churches should align their practices with spiritual value by ensuring that the spiritual and material wellbeing of the congregation takes pre-eminence over the financial gain of the preachers.
- The followers and worshippers must be self-awakened to social consciousness of their religious, emotional and spiritual manipulation for selfish reasons; and aggressively demand for probity, transparency and accountability of the church business from the church leaders.

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