

## LEADERSHIP, CHANGE AND RELIGION: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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### **Abstract**

Change is ubiquitous in any society, especially a society that strives hard to fulfill human needs. The Nigerian experience is no exception. Nigeria has undergone various systems of political changes. These include parliamentary feudalism to military dictatorship as well as presidential aristocracy. Yet, none has reasonably met the yearnings of the society. This can be attributed to the fact that the word "leadership" is often misunderstood. Rather than leading by example, dictatorship and anarchy have eaten deep into the fabric of the elected and appointed leaders both in the church and political circles. Nigeria has witnessed succession of changes of power from north to the southwest, from southwest to the south-south and back to the north. Unfortunately, these changes in leadership have not been of any benefit to the common men, but those in the corridor of power. In the midst of this disturbing socio-political upheaval, the intention of this paper is to examine Jesus' attitude to leadership and socio-religious situations of his period and what Nigerian leaders can learn from it. The researchers made use of historical method in this work. The paper discovered that Nigerian political leaders are self-centered; religious institutions have lost focus; and that Jesus exhibited servant-leadership attitude towards his followers. It is therefore recommended that political leaders should have servant-leadership attitude and that the Church should wake up to her responsibility.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Change, Politics, Dictatorship, Religion

### **Introduction**

In any given society, leadership (or the art of governance) is a very serious issue. As such, it has continued to engage the attention of scholars in different fields of study. It is an issue that bothers people in the society, be it small or large, urban or rural, without gender specification and regardless of social status, simply because it has direct effects on human lives for good or bad.

Nigeria is a country where citizens have suffered much degradation ranging from economic hardship and political misrule mainly owing to bad administration, corruption and poor leadership. Although, it is often stated that religion and politics are two bed-fellows that can not be separated. The advocates of this school of thought have biblical basis for their argument. As true as this fact may sound, it is quite unbelievable to also discover that the same religion has often been manipulated and sentimentally used by those seeking public offices to actualize their dreams. The corrupt use of religion in Nigeria is prevalent, especially within the political circle.<sup>1</sup> This, in actual fact was openly displayed in the last general elections in 2015 in Nigeria, where some presidential candidates started romancing both the church and the mosque in their attempt to canvass for votes from unsuspecting and innocent Nigerians.

It is more worrisome to know that the desperate inordinate pursuit of wealth in Nigeria has taken a dangerous dimension. This sharp turn of event can be attributed to bad or poor leadership. Without mincing words, religion (both Christianity and Islam) has not been shining example in leadership matters. Greed, materialism and corruption have eaten deep into the fabric of the religious institutions. Lack or inadequate self-sacrificing leadership in religious institutions has paved way for distrust between leaders and followers. Division and disunity, hatred and blackmail are on the high side in most religious establishments.

Judging from the foregoing, it is clear that the failure of those in the corridor of power (leadership) to judiciously manage the wealth of the nation has continuously made life unbearable for the masses. Their inability to effectively tackle corruption, mismanagement of public funds and security issues have led to masses' vigorous demand for change in socio-political and economic spheres of the nation. The question that engages the mind of the author is: can religion engineer good and effective leadership and the desired change in all spheres of human life in Nigeria? The paper equally examined Jesus' leadership style and lessons therein for Nigerian leaders.

### **Definition of Operational Terms**

#### **Leadership**

Leadership has long been a subject of study, and as such, many thoughts and ideas do exist about the subject. However, it could broadly say that a leader is one who guides a group or gives a piece of advice to them towards a certain goal or project so that the goal or project could be accomplished.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, leadership to a lay man means the art of leading, but it goes beyond that. Leadership is both people and programme.<sup>3</sup> This is because a leader works with people, responsible for them and is accountable to them. Yet, a leader is also responsible for the programmes of the institution, church and organization.<sup>4</sup>

Leadership is both an art and a science. As a science, it is goal, structures, policies, times, boards, and committees. As an art, it refers to personality, beliefs, conviction and people

skills. Leadership in proper harmony is both people and programmes. It is both a technical science and sensitive art. It is concerned with group goals and needs as well as the people of the particular organization.<sup>5</sup> B.O. Ukeje notes that, "The function of organizational leadership is to influence the group towards the achievement of group goals by planning, organizing, directing and integrating the institutional demands and the needs of members in a way that will be both productive and individually fulfilling."<sup>6</sup>

### **Change**

Change, arguably, means different things to different people depending on prevailing circumstances, but for Nigeria and Nigerians, in the context of the new political dispensation in the country, the underlying meaning of change is simply "a break from the past".<sup>7</sup>

To this extent, expectations are therefore high in Nigeria that this new administration which promises that change will not only concretize that break, but also define a new direction that will lead to national rebirth and economic growth. The elections in March and April were indicators of the fact that Nigeria is about to begin a journey into the world of change.<sup>8</sup> By minimizing the colossal fraud that typified four previous elections held between 1999 to 2011, the hope of leadership ascendancy through the will of the people is beginning to emerge thus raising the hope that sooner than later, the technical term "democracy" will be part of the political, economic and social culture of Nigerians. Change can also be simply described as "variations or modifications in any aspect of social process, pattern, or form".<sup>9</sup> It is also "any modification in established patterns of inter-human relationships and standards of conducts".<sup>10</sup>

Judging from the above, change can start anywhere. In fact, every system is to some extent altered by changes in any of its parts. Giving our leaders' penchant for corruption, Nigerians are cautiously optimistic about the positive changes that are presently taking place in Nigeria notwithstanding its slow pace.

### **Religion**

Finding a generally acceptable definition of religion has always been an herculean task because religion means different things to different people. As such, it is often defined by various scholars to suite a particular purpose. For instance, Emile Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things".<sup>11</sup> By sacred things, he meant things "set apart and for-bidden--beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them". Sacred things are not, however, limited to gods or spirits.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, a sacred thing can be "a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house". In a word, anything can be sacred.<sup>13</sup> Religious beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends and the representations that express the nature of these sacred things, and the virtues and powers which are attributed to them.<sup>14</sup>

When religion is seen in terms of "sacred", "divine", intensive "valuing", or "ultimate concern", then it is possible to understand why scientific findings and philosophical criticism do not necessarily disturb its adherents.<sup>15</sup> Edward Burnett Taylor defined religion as the "belief in spiritual beings".<sup>16</sup> He argued that narrowing the definition to mean the belief in a supreme deity or judgment after death or idolatry etc, would exclude many people from the category of religious, and thus, "has the fault of identifying religion rather with particular developments than with the deeper motive which underlies them".<sup>17</sup> He also argued that the belief in spiritual beings exists in all known societies. Friedrich Schleiermacher defined religion as, "a feeling of absolute dependence".<sup>18</sup> His contemporary Hegel disagreed, defining religion as "the divine spirit becoming conscious of Himself through the finite spirit."<sup>19</sup>

The definition of Karl Marx succinctly described the Nigerian situation and reasons why citizens do cry for change. According to him, "religion is the opium of the people".<sup>20</sup> By implication, religion is both an expression of suffering and a protest against suffering.<sup>21</sup>

### **Leadership and Political Dispensation in Nigeria**

It is an obvious fact that leadership and political system in Nigeria right from the First Republic (1963) to the present time is very discouraging. Many politicians in the past and present are not only greedy but selfish, corrupt and far from being politically matured and civilized. The incessant political failure in the country is not because politics in itself is dirty, or evil, but it essentially has to do with our refusal to follow the principles, rules and procedures of politics.<sup>22</sup>

Suffice it to say that in Nigerian society, there is no iota of respect for the constituted authorities, democratic rules of behaviours, then election rigging, political terrorism became free weapons in the political chess game for power. Leadership and political circle have become arena to display hatred, hooliganism and public demonstration of magical powers. Ours is a society where somebody may find it difficult if not impossible to win any election from Ward to Federal levels without having a huge amount of money to give to various groups and individuals.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, it is interesting to note that the only time when Nigerians demonstrated their highest level of political maturity, civilization, understanding and decency was in 1993, when two party systems, Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC) was in operation under the military regime of Gen. Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida. The election was generally declared free and fair, conducted under peaceful atmosphere and sanctioned by International Observers as freest and fairest election in Nigeria and Africa in general.<sup>24</sup>

Today, political leadership has become an avenue to make quick money and thus become rich over night. The struggle for political leadership or power has become part and parcel of our daily existence; it is seen as a do or die affair as observed in the last general elections in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, leadership is seen both in the religious and political circles as an avenue to siphon and mismanage funds. Arbitrary increase of fuel prices has become a common occurrence. The government has always claimed to over-subsidize the fuel and therefore, the masses must bear the cost. In spite of this, corruption has become so systematically institutionalized such that the citizens do not feel any positive effect. The ordinary men and women on the street have not been spared of bad leadership that has resulted to abject poverty, hunger, unemployment and corruption. This explains why the masses desire change (at all levels of government) that will sooth their pains and pave way for the much desired growth and national transformation.

### **Leadership, Religion and Change in Nigeria**

A leader is one who makes things happen that would not happen otherwise. If the leader causes change that he intended, he has exercised power, but if the leader causes changes that he did not intend or want, he has exercised influence, but not power.<sup>25</sup> In the opinion of John Gardner, the task of leaders is to help societies, "understand the problems that all must face, to aid in the setting of goals and priorities, to work with others in finding paths to those goals chosen, maintaining public morale and motivation and nurturing a workable level of public unity".<sup>26</sup>

Leaders must activate existing institutions in pursuit of the society's goals or, when necessary, help redesign institutions to achieve that result. Leaders must also help people know how they can be at their best. In a free society, leaders perform these functions within a framework of constraints. This includes an uncorrupted electoral process, the rule of law, institutional checks and balances and a free press.<sup>27</sup> The checks on power must be in working condition, or the laws of the land would be circumvented. As far as this paper is concerned, leaders refer to persons who occupy important positions in the formal polity such as presidents, prime ministers, governors, legislators, local government chairmen and a host of other public officers.

In as much as there are many leadership styles, the paper focuses on two types of political leadership commonly practiced in Nigeria and by extension African societies namely: "instrumental and societal leadership".

In Nigeria, the "instrumental" leader uses power and influence primarily in the pursuit of private (personal, close family, cohorts) goals. To such people, community objectives are secondary. The main concern of the instrumental leaders is how he can use his office to achieve personal objectives. He may not be lacking in social/ or community commitments, but in practice more considerations are given to self over the interests of the society which he governs.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, the "society" leader is a public servant first and only secondary a private person. While the instrumental leader uses his position to promote private and selfish goals, the societal leader subordinates private narrow goals for broader community

objectives. To such people, power and influence are important only if they can be used to solve human problems. While the societal leader is more likely to resign when he is convinced he can not influence changes for the benefit of the public, the instrumental leader would hold on to power as long as his private objectives are achieved. He does not care whether the community derives any benefit from his actions or not.<sup>29</sup>

Without mincing words, the lack of selfless, non-corrupt and committed leaders have contributed immensely to the socio-political and economic predicaments facing Nigeria today. The untold sufferings of the masses have therefore led to their yearning for changes.

Corruption and lack of committed leadership could be traced back to the First Republic in 1960-1966. Acrimony and corrupt practices among the founding fathers of the nation prompted the first military coup on January 15<sup>th</sup> of 1966. Not everybody has the leadership acumen to lead an organization, not to mention a nation. At the same time, no society should expect to have an endless succession of great and extra-ordinary leaders like Churchill of Britain, Bill Clinton of United States or De-Gaëlle of France.<sup>30</sup>

Throughout history, change has remained a permanent feature in the affairs of men/women and nations. Change is the reason mankind has advanced in various areas of life including government or leadership. In recent time in Nigeria, the clamour for change from the corrupt and inept ways of the previous leaders has assumed a new dimension.<sup>31</sup> It is worthy to mention that the existing political parties have failed the electorate miserably.

Therefore, and in order to achieve the desired change, Nigerians hearkened to the "lone voice in the wilderness" to embrace change. Change from a corrupt society to a nation of integrity; from a parlous economic condition to a prosperous one that caters for all citizens.<sup>32</sup> As ordinary Nigerians brace for the "change" which the present administration is bent on bringing to Nigeria, there is the need for every arm of the government and political parties to support this laudable effort rather than isolating themselves from it. A situation where they work at cross purposes with the Nigerian people by opposing the change mantra will not only be unpatriotic but counter-productive and may likely to boomerang.<sup>33</sup>

The question we should be asking is: will change ever come? "Change" is presently in chain and trouble in Nigeria. It is daily contending with enemies within. Those that profit from all manner of protracted problems bedeviling the system are powerful. They are men with men, money and means. They are elements who do not pray that Nigeria stays in good standing. They are characters who interpret Nigeria's comfort as their discomfort. For them, the status quo of quagmire and backwardness must remain for them to remain relevant. Men who take tankers of Nigeria's fuel across the borders for sales in neighbouring countries while their brothers and sisters struggle to get a liter to power their generators.

At this juncture, one wonders if religion has not failed Nigeria and Nigerians. Throughout the history of mankind, religion has been a creative and innovative factor of great strength, able to create new culture, shape strong identities and more importantly, change society. Therefore, religion has all of those benefits, but, according to conflict theory, it can also reinforce and promote social inequality and social conflict. This view is partly inspired by the work of Karl Marx, who said that religion was the "opiate of the masses". By this, he meant that religion, like a drug, makes people happy with their existing conditions. Marx repeatedly stressed that workers needed to rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie. To do this, he said, they needed first to recognize that their poverty stemmed from their oppression by the bourgeoisie. But people who are religious, he said, tend to view their poverty in religious terms. They think it is God's will that they are poor, either because He is testing their faith in Him or because they have violated His rules. May people believe that if they endure their suffering, they will be rewarded in the afterlife.<sup>34</sup> To this extent, their religious views lead them not to blame the capitalist class or ruling authority for their poverty and thus not to revolt. For these reasons, Marx concluded that religion leads the poor to accept their fate and helps maintain the existing system of social inequality.

Religious institutions, more especially in Nigeria, have lost focus simply because they have compromised their stand. Religion is expected to act as an agent of social change and transformation. Religious institutions/organizations are expected to guide and help in shaping (changing) the society. The question is: where is the hope for the future when religious leaders who are supposed to portray God in words and deeds are actively involved in corruption and mismanagement of funds?

### **Jesus' Attitude to Leadership and Socio-Economic Change: Lessons for Nigerian Leaders**

In the gospels, there are several passages in which Jesus alluded to what true leadership can achieve. Jesus vehemently spoke against the worldly systems of authority, and he proposed a social system that is quite the opposite to what we are accustomed to. Jesus, in particular, warned against notions of power, prestige, partiality, and primacy among his own followers. In Jesus' words, the lowly are the greatest, the humble are exalted and the last are first.<sup>35</sup>

Jesus was the supreme example of leadership. In the incarnation, he voluntarily set-aside the independent exercise of some of his divine prerogatives, took the form of a bond-servant, humbled himself through obedience, even to the point of dying on the cross (Phil. 2:7-9). In Nigeria today, there are many who want to exercise authority, but very few want to take the towel and basin and wash feet. A common misconception among those who want to exercise a leadership role over others is that it comes with glory, power and positions of honour. In actual fact, such a mistaken belief occasion Jesus' words in Matthew 20:26-28, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be the first must be your slave..." Note that the word

“servant” in Matthew 20:27 means “slave”. Although, not every servant was a slave but every slave was a servant.

The only key to effective leadership is to learn from Jesus Christ himself. Jesus’ economic policy provides a holistic and dynamic approach towards the interplay between church and state, the sacred and the profane, the material and the spiritual.<sup>36</sup> In one of his teachings, Jesus admonishes to “give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God”. It is, therefore, unfortunate that in Nigeria today, leaders and politicians withhold both what belongs to God and Caesar to themselves. Rather than following Jesus’ admonition and footsteps, the self-acclaimed “messiah” in Nigeria are nothing but oppressors and tyrants and people are made to groan under their oppressive leadership.

At a time when no prophets were expected in Israel, John the Baptist appeared in the desert, calling all the Israelites to repent. He warned the people to flee from the coming wrath of God and no one was exempted from this warning. The same fate awaits all corrupt, careless, and callous leaders and politicians in Nigeria who refuse to serve the electorate.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, the crowds wanted to be healed and Jesus spent a portion of his time healing them. Yet, Jesus kept the big picture in his mind that is, making the gospel relevant to all spheres of their lives. Thus, when Simon came to inform him that a huge multitude wanted to see him, Jesus responded with his priority of preaching not healing.<sup>38</sup> A priority is something seen as more important than something else. Therefore, like Jesus Christ, Nigerian Christian leaders in particular should be concerned with how to relate the gospel of Christ to the development and nurturing of good governance, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, fight corruption, and alleviate poverty.

In the same vein, service to others represents Jesus’ concept of leadership. Jesus taught his disciples that the greatest among them should be a servant. To Jesus, call to service has its practical implications. In the first instance, it reminds leaders to always consider the good of others first. The president, governors, local government chairmen, and other government functionaries are to think first of the masses/electorates that voted them in and bestowed on them their confidence to rule them. It is unfortunate to say the least that the looting of public funds by the “legis-looters” coupled with their extravagance lifestyles do not really portray Jesus’ call to service. The politicians make good promises in order to be voted into power.<sup>39</sup> After gaining power, the voters do not mean anything to them; they are no longer useful. “The evidence of this is the accusation and counter-accusations about the worst of crimes which keep flying around about our present crop of leaders”.<sup>40</sup>

Leadership is sacrifice, but, the kind of leadership in our nation (Nigeria) is at variance with the sacrificial leadership of Jesus Christ. The political assassinations, mismanagement of public funds, gangsterism, and thuggery to tract down political enemies are not a sign sacrifice. Sacrifice in leadership calls for a conscious effort at



alleviating the poverty of others, promoting justice and equity, providing job opportunities and social amenities the citizens yearn for.

### **Conclusion**

The paper has been able to show that true leaders who should be living examples of integrity, honesty, consistency, accountability and are deeply spiritual are few. Rather, what we have are selfish and self-made leaders who have nothing to offer. It is high time Nigerian leaders are made to realize that their election into various political offices should be seen as call to public service. They are to invest their time on the masses with love, compassion and humility.

Where good and capable leadership is not in place, most things do not work. Therefore, one of the solutions is to have a discipline leadership, which in turn, will be able to bring the desired changes the masses yearn for.

Similarly, like the Pharisees and Scribes of Jesus' day, some religious leaders in Nigeria are guilty of the sin of hypocrisy, corruption and pride. According to Agbese, "There are, today, religious barons who operate and enjoy anonymity. They are misguided follower engage in atrocities that severely strain the mission of religion as a force of unity in the service of man and his soul".<sup>41</sup>

One of the destructive elements of any leadership is materialism. A lot of religious leaders in Nigeria have sacrificed their righteousness on the "alter" of materialism and greed.<sup>42</sup> It is, therefore, advisable for the church to spearhead the war against corruption, and any other social vices. They should be actively preaching against it, not aiding it. They should stand tall while declaring the mind of God.

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