

Sacred corruption in sacred places: the case of some selected Neo Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria

Abstract

It is no longer news that corruption is a persistent phenomenon in Nigeria; in which there is official misuse of funds and resources. If dishonesty or fraudulent practices are found in the mist of those in political power and among public servants, should such then be found in a place where the agitation day and night is on "holiness unto the Lord"? When "sacred corruption are found where the "so called people of God" dwells, then such a country is finished. The Church should be the precursor of anti-corruption campaign. But unfortunately, corruption in the Church is "a new thinking in reverse order". Corruption in today's Church takes many forms and can be interpreted in various ways. The faces of corruption in the Church are many. These as observed in this paper includes, misinterpretation of the word of God to suit their purposes, extortion, ethical problems, charismatic and so forth. The paper then examines the high rate of corruption in some selected new generation Churches in Ibadan Metropolis; with the view to establishing the level of greed and how efforts to maintain self-imposed ostentatious life style leads them into "sacred corruption in sacred places". Phenomenological and descriptive methods were employed in carrying out the research. It is our belief that the results of the research will go a long way in reducing the level of "sacred corruption in sacred places" in Nigeria.

Keywords: corruption, Ibadan metropolis, Neo Pentecostal, sacred, sacred places

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Introduction

Etymologically, the word 'sacred' descends from the Latin word *wikt:sacer*, that is, consecrated, or dedicated to the gods or anything in their power, and to *sacerdos* and *sanctum*, -"set apart".¹ Strong's Concordance records *sacred* through the Greek word *hierós* (ἱερός) meaning sacred, a sacred thing, a temple² Helps Word-Studies (2011) detailed it as 'properly, *sacred*' (because it is associated with God's *sanctuary, the Temple*); or consecrated to deity and therefore "*holy*," i.e. *inviolably sacred* because it is acceptable for God's service'.³ It is also viewed as something revered due to sanctity and is generally the state of being perceived by religious individuals as associated with divinity and considered worthy of spiritual respect or devotion; or inspiring awe or reverence among believers. However, this can be inferred to mean a selected 'blessed' place for the assembly of the selected or called out persons of God.

On the other hand, Mfumbusa⁴ sees corruption as impairment of integrity, virtue or moral principle. He defines it as "inducement (as of political official) by means of improper considerations (as bribery) to commit a violation of duty". The Neo-charismatic/Pentecostal churches movements are a category of evangelical churches which teach about the gifts of the Spirit, spiritual warfare and power evangelism. Literally, they are the so called 'Holy Spirit guided' Churches. As Achebe⁵ puts it, 'things have really fallen apart and the centre cannot hold'. This is why corruption exists in sacred places? The Church which is the centre of social and moral philosophy is not supposed to be mentioned at all with corruption. No doubt, the

Church has had various leadership challenges over the years and Neo Pentecostal Churches are no exception. In fact, the case of sacred corruption is more associated with such churches.

Based on the foregoing, former Chairman of the Independent Corrupt Practices and other related offences Commission (ICPC), Mustapha Akanbi stated in a paper delivered in 2001 entitled, "The Fight against Corruption in Governance", thus:

Corruption is a dangerous foe... The endemic nature and deliberating effect of corruption on the cultural, economic, social and political foundation of the society has been most harrowing and disconcerting. Corruption is, indeed, the bane of our society. It has been the harbinger of the messy situation in which we find ourselves today. Our economy has been ruined, our hopes for greater tomorrow have been dashed, our value system is destroyed so much so that the world begins to see us as men and women without honour and dignity.⁶

The combination of these words, "sacred" and "corruption", are not ally to stand together but an upturn in the contemporary ecclesiastical set-up has made the compatibility possible. Mfumbusa (2010) calls it a fundamental paradox because as Church grows, corruption grows in like speed.⁷ The above candid and forthright utterance is a factual pronouncement on the state of Nigeria on the issue of corruption, howbeit, related to the state of contemporary Churches. This, however, calls for serious and urgent attention.

History of corruption in the Church

Armstrong, writes on "The Roman Catholic Church in 1500";

The Catholic Church was an enormously powerful force in 1500, medieval society, and extremely wealthy. The elaborate, ornate,

¹Stormonth J, Phelps PH. Sacred. Blackwood & sons; 1895. 883 p.¹³

²Strong J. Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible; 2009.¹⁴

³Helps Word-studies, Helps Ministries, Inc. "Sacred."Downloaded, 5 Mar. 2017

⁴Bernardin Mfumbusa. The Church is growing, Corruption is growing. *East African Media and Social Responsibility*; 2010.⁵

⁵Achebe C. Things Fall Apart. Great Britain: Heinemann Educational Books; 1958.1

⁶Akanbi M. The Fight against Corruption in Governance. in This Day Thursday; 2001.2

⁷Bernardin Mfumbusa. The Church is growing, Corruption is growing. *East African Media and Social Responsibility*; 2010.⁵

gilded cathedrals built to enshrine saints' relics were very costly, and the Church also collected regular tithes from its members. By the late fourteenth century, people had begun to become deeply suspicious of the Church's ostentatious wealth. After the Black Death, which wiped out at least a third of the population, many people no longer trusted the Church's authority. Church officials were often seen as corrupt, bribing and coercing people to obtain money for the church under false pretences. Since members of the church were not allowed to work for a living, they had to gain money by other means. Friars took a vow of poverty and roamed the countryside, relying on charitable donations for their livelihood. Summoners brought sinners to the church court for punishment. People bought indulgences from pardoners to purchase forgiveness for their sins.⁸

As a rider to this, Starkey said, "Catholic Church is 'irredeemably corrupt from top to bottom.'⁹

In the 4th Century, Monk Gregory learnt that there were few Christians in England. He sent Augustine, a Missionary Monk along with other 40 monks on crusade to England in 596 to convert people to Christianity; they ended up converting King Ethelbert and the majority of his kingdom to Christianity. Thomas Becket became Chancellor of England in 1154, the same year Henry II became King, and later was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury; Thomas believed in the King's idea that clergymen accused of serious crimes should be handled by the courts, but later changed his mind and Henry II took it as a sign of betrayal and sought revenge. He fled from England to escape charges brought against him; later he returned and excommunicated the Archbishop of York and other supporters of Henry II.¹⁰

Consequently, Henry's Knights: Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy, Reginald Fitz Urse, and Richard le Bret, travelled to Canterbury Cathedral on December 29, 1170 and demanded that Becket pardon the men he had excommunicated. Becket refused and these four knights hacked him to death with their swords. The 'awfulness' of the Roman Catholic Church led Martin Luther in 1517 to pen his '95 theses' which sparked off German Reformation.¹¹ He began the criticism towards the power and corruption of the Pope and the Catholic Church; attacked the Pope for excusing people's sins in exchange for money and for not allowing the bible to be translated into other languages.

Subsequently, Edward Seymour (Duke of Somerset), a Protestant, made drastic changes to the Church of England and introduced the English Prayer Book and now allowed clergy members to marry. Meanwhile Queen Mary I (a Roman Catholic believer) believed that only the Pope could be declared as the Church leader and claimed that the bread and wine of communion became the body and blood of Jesus Christ; her beliefs led to the execution of Thomas Cranmer (Archbishop of Canterbury) on 21 March 1556 and other Protestants who denied the belief that the Pope was the only true head of the Church.¹² As time passed by, Pope Leo X allowed sinners to be free from their sins at the exchange of money. Protestant's 'Catholic abductivism' of 'money-at-the-exchange-of-all' degenerated into priesthood ritualism, charismagic, witch-crafty and so on even in the contemporary Pentecostal terrain. This term has grown to become 'real' corrupt practices in the so-called sacred places in such that all sacred practices have become accessible at the exchange of money.

⁸Armstrong HW. The Roman Catholic Church in 1500; 2017.³

⁹Starkey D. Catholic Church is 'irredeemably corrupt. The Telegraph; 2013.¹²

¹⁰Flashcards at ProProfs. The History and Corruption of the Roman Catholic Church; 2012.⁷

¹¹Luther M. Ninety-five Theses; 1517.¹⁰

¹²Flashcards at ProProfs. The History and Corruption of the Roman Catholic Church; 2012.⁷

The Church and holiness

Regarding the holiness of the Church, Koltun-Fromm (2010) points out the difficulty in translating who/what are considered "holy", focusing on what Ezra believes. She focuses on purity and holiness and how it changes from one source to another: ...only the priests, God's name, and anything else related to the name or worship of God is considered holy by God himself. Therefore, only the priests are considered to be the people whom God has chosen to be special and set apart. But in another source, all of Israel is considered to be holy. She comes to the conclusion that there are three types of holiness: Holiness ascribed, holiness achieved, and holiness from pure genetic lines. Holiness ascribed means that God declared something or someone to be holy and nothing can be holy without his say. Holiness achieved is earned through obeying the holy law and the divine rule. A person can work for his holiness instead of being born into it. The final type of holiness is supererogatory holiness, this is achieved through semen purity. Ezra believes in holiness ascribed and that God has labelled all of Israel and its people as holy.¹³

The above statement points Israel as a called out nation of God for an exemplary relationship which was known to God alone at the call out of Patriarch Abraham. Likewise, the derivative Greek word for Church, *ekklesia*, simply means 'the called out ones'. Hence, Israel as a nation is an Old Testament type of the New Testament Church and out of the three types, holiness ascribed must be practiced by all members of the Body of Christ. This is the Theo-centric nature of the New Testament Church. On the other hand, according to Berkhof (1994:574-5), he divided the conception into two main parts: The Roman Catholic conception and Protestant conception: The Roman Catholic conception of the holiness of the Church is primarily of an external character. It is not the inner holiness of the members through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, but the outer ceremonial holiness that is placed in the foreground.¹⁴

The above Roman Catholic conception expunges curiosity of why the papacy operates duo lifestyle. The view gives a different definition for internal and external character of holiness. In the light of Chinua Achebe's view as quoted by Mfumbusa (2010),¹⁵ "Nigerians are corrupt because the system under which they live today makes corruption easy and profitable." Likewise, the Church is corrupt down to earth because the system under which its dogmas are built is corrupt. Conversely, Berkhof sees Protestant conception as having a quite different conception of the holiness of the Church; They maintain that the Church is absolutely holy in an objective sense, that is, as she is considered in Jesus Christ. In virtue of the mediatorial righteousness of Christ, the Church is accounted holy before God. In a relative sense they also regard the Church as being subjectively holy, that is, as actually holy in the inner principle of her life and destined for perfect holiness... this holiness is first of all a holiness of the inner man, but a holiness which also finds expression in the outer life. Consequently, holiness is also attributed, secondarily, to the visible Church. That Church is holy in the sense that it is separated from the world in consecration to God, and also in the ethical sense of aiming at, and achieving in principle, a holy conversation in Christ...¹⁶

This is a true picture of holiness ascribed in its 'writing' sense. Holiness without must be a product of holiness within which is a sign

¹³Koltun-Fromm N. *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community*. Oxford Scholarship Online; 2010.⁸

¹⁴Berkhof L. *Systematic Theology*. Great Britain: The Bath Press; 1994.⁴

¹⁵Bernardin Mfumbusa. The Church is growing, Corruption is growing. *East African Media and Social Responsibility*; 2010.⁵

¹⁶Berkhof L. *Systematic Theology*. Great Britain: The Bath Press; 1994.⁴

of 'Calvaric repentance'. The visible Church cannot/is not in any way excused from this Biblical statement of truth. Yet, Neo Protestant 'Catholic abductivism' is germane to why corruption exists in the so-called Holy Spirit guided sacred places.

Sacred corruption: Neo Pentecostal experience in Nigeria

As could be seen from above, sacred corruption is not new in the history of the Church. There are numerous examples of religious leaders calling attention to corruption in the religious practices and institutions of their time. The Jewish prophets, Isaiah and Amos berate the rabbinical establishment of Ancient Judea for failing to live up to the ideals of the Torah (Isaiah 1:2–31, Amos 5:21–24). In the New Testament, Jesus accuses the rabbinical establishment of his time who followed only the ceremonial parts of the Torah and neglected the more important elements of justice, mercy and faithfulness (Mat. 23:13–33). In 1517, Martin Luther accuses the Catholic Church of widespread corruption, including selling of indulgences. In 2015, Princeton University professor Kevin M. Kruse advances the thesis that business leaders in the 1930s and 1940s collaborated with clergymen, including James W. Fifield Jr., to develop and promote a new hermeneutical approach to Scripture that would de-emphasize the social Gospel and emphasize themes, such as individual salvation, more congenial to free enterprise.¹⁷

Business leaders, of course, had long been working to "merchandise" themselves through the appropriation of religion. In organizations such as Spiritual Mobilization, the prayer breakfast groups, and the Freedoms Foundation, they had linked capitalism and Christianity and, at the same time, likened the welfare state to godless paganism.¹⁸

In Nigeria the situation became worse, considering the level of poverty and the rate of privatization and commercialization of Churches; most especially by the so called neo Pentecostal Churches.¹⁹ According to an old German saying, "Being in the Church is like driving a bicycle. Upward, you bow, but downward, you tread." Not even the most religious places are safe from evil. In fact, the Corrupt Church is often portrayed as much worse than a simple Supervillain Lair or secular League of Evil. When even the expected holy priests and ministers turn to the dark side and they psychologically manipulate the masses with mere superstition, charismagic and deceit then what hope is there for the society? Apostle Paul writes to the Romans in Romans 16:17–18, 17. I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teachings you have learned. Keep away from them. 18. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, *but their own appetites*. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive *the minds of naive people* (NIV). 17. Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. 18. For they are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, *but their own belly*; and by good words and fair speeches deceive *the hearts of the simple* (KJV).

The picture that emerges from the sacred places in Nigeria is appalling. It is even more abysmal and grotesque when talking of

some neo Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria.²⁰ Many factors contributed to this upsurge. First, the neo Pentecostal Churches claim to offer a personal encounter with God through the power of the spirit, healing from sicknesses and deliverance from evil in all its ramifications: spiritual, social and economic. Since this is what most Nigerians are looking for, it became easy for such Churches to manipulate the congregation with sweet words without minding the level of spirituality of the leader. Second, Neo Pentecostal Churches presented the older Churches as if they have lost their charismatic power and they have the monopoly of God's power²¹ Third, food security is now being seriously threatened, privatization and commercialization of education increase, why not Churches as well if food security could be guaranteed and problem of unemployment solved?²²

Bagobiri (2000)²³ confirmed the existence of this afore-warned corruption in the so-called sacred places at the Catholic Bishops' conference of Nigeria (CBCN) where they critically looked into areas such as "The reality, causes, consequences and the way out of this unwholesome situation that we have found ourselves in as a nation". He said that at the end of every Assembly, a communiqué is issued for the interest of the nation. That one of the communiqué issued read thus: We are painfully aware that corruption has eaten deep into the very fabric of the Nigerian society. It has become so pervasive that many now accept it as the "Nigeria way of doing things. People now speak about a so-called "Nigerian factor" when they mean corruption has been institutionalized to a point where it almost passes for official policy in both the public and private sectors of our national life. The socio-economic and political system itself appears to be built on corruption and thrives in it. Even the Church and other religious organizations are themselves not completely free from corruption.

In the process of this research, a famous king in one of the South-Western states of Nigeria attended a Church Thanksgiving service after his kingship coronation; he knelt down before the coordinating clergymen for prayer, this he did sounded ridicule to his kingship authority as perceived by the indigenes but he responded that he had not knelt down before men but representatives of the Creator of the heaven and earth. Unfortunately, he was disappointed to meet the same clergy men at the Ogboni Fraternity Council. This made him renounced Christianity as his religion. Corrupt priests in 'godly' attire! Belly Ministry by Table Ministers; this is what Mfumbusa (2010) referred to as an "impairment of integrity".²⁴

There are several cases of rape, manslaughter, fraud and other associated dubious acts committed by some Ibadan based pastors all in the name of special prayers for the victims. Online Nigeria (2016), records of a popular Pastor, Isaiah Akinojo, who raped his friend's 7-year old daughter in the Church auditorium.²² Furthermore, a Neo Pentecostal Pastor was alleged, prosecuted, confirmed and brought to media on Kókóró Aláte Programme on Petals 102.3Fm to have engaged in gay sexual immorality with his Church members in order to be delivered from spiritual wife.

²⁰Dairo AO. Privatization and Commercialization of Christian Messages in Nigeria. In: *Creativity and Change in Nigerian Christianity*. David OO, Akintunde A (eds.) Lagos: Malthouse; 2010. 193 p.⁶

²¹Maxwell Neal A. Hope through the Atonement of Jesus Christ; 1998.¹¹

²²Dairo AO. Privatization and Commercialization of Christian Messages in Nigeria. In: *Creativity and Change in Nigerian Christianity*. David OO, Akintunde A (eds.) Lagos: Malthouse; 2010. 193 p.⁶

²³Dairo AO. Privatization and Commercialization of Christian Messages in Nigeria. In: *Creativity and Change in Nigerian Christianity*. David OO, Akintunde A (eds.) Lagos: Malthouse; 2010. 193 p.⁶

²⁴Bernardin Mfumbusa. The Church is growing, Corruption is growing. *East African Media and Social Responsibility*; 2010.⁵

¹⁷Kruse KM. *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*; 2015.⁹

¹⁸Kruse KM. *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*; 2015.⁹

¹⁹Dairo AO. Privatization and Commercialization of Christian Messages in Nigeria. In: *Creativity and Change in Nigerian Christianity*. David OO, Akintunde A (eds.) Lagos: Malthouse; 2010. 193 p.⁶

Subsequent to that, a famous pastor was caught by the Nigerian Police Force while he carried sacrifice to a T-junction closer to his Church. He was let go because he claimed he had committed no offence against the Nigerian Law. It is assumed that he carried the sacrifice to appease the gods to increase Church membership. Meanwhile, during a personal interview session with one of his members, she confessed that her pastor brought a casket to one of the cross-over nights recently and ordered members to drop offering inside until it became full. This he claimed would avert death in the following year. What a pulpit robber!

Some of these acclaimed pastors have gone to the extent of occultism to conjure evil spirits to perform fake miracles. They have left the Biblical truth and have chosen voodoo as a better option to the name of Jesus Christ. END Time Journal International has revealed several of them while few of them denied. Anyway, Elijah Akinade and Ajanaku's cases are now exposed.

Guided on Church Finance; out of the 300 randomly selected Neo Pentecostal Churches, only 37 (12.33%) has Financial secretary as a non-family member of the Church founders. Significant respondents of 263 (87.67%) either has financial secretary as founder's relative or the G.O. serves as the Treasurer of the Church. Only 9 (3%) out of the 37 (12.33%) perform End-of-the-Year Audit. It was observed that there is a weak or poor system of financial record in the founded Churches and this has given chance for misappropriations, embezzlement, and misuse of Church properties like missionary vans converted to ceremonial vans while some are given out for hire.

Noticeably, about 290 of the sampled Churches show a clear indication that such Churches are founded as a business enterprise such that any account irregularity would not be exposed to naive members who are only concerned about getting solution to their problems.

Many more Churches are being sucked into the vortex of politics; notable ministers of the gospel are savouring the wine of partisanship and throwing off the mantle of truth. The pulpit is meant to be the altar of plain truth but some of these altars have become the den of Hell where mammoth crowd are misinformed about Heaven and Hell. Rich members are given whole access to seeing the pastor any moment of the day while less privileged members are not known by their so-called shepherd. These pastors enjoy visiting rich men's houses, being buddies to top personalities in the society, worshipping on the altar of waivers and patronage system, and encouraging theft from public till by requesting for and accepting hefty donations from public officials. They do not bother knowing how their so-called elders get the huge offerings and tithes; knowingly or unknowingly, they have entered into an unholy alliance with the political elite to steal the commonwealth and live a life of affluence and showmanship. This jeopardy has affected the church and pillars of the Kingdom because only a few members are conscious of Heaven, unfortunately.

No doubt, three levels at which Christian leaders face perils that need to be overcome for their lives to be characterized by integrity and generosity. On the micro level, leaders are threatened by arrogance, self gratification and indifference towards the needs of other people and the planet. Insecurities such as self-protective withdrawal, a sense of despair, fear, and the unwillingness to take a stand on a matter of

moral principle may also have an effect, easing the way for leaders to surrender ethical principles for the sake of profit or promotion.²⁵

Conclusion

The Church is both visible and invisible in nature. In actual sense, its visible component is inimical to its invisible structure. Those who hold pillar of the contemporary Church have shifted it into lustful and selfish satisfactions because of their carnal aspirations and this has deformed the affluent shape of Nigeria. Nevertheless, these corrupt priests are capable of reforming their Churches (by His Grace) if they will confess and forsake the Devil to turn to Jesus Christ at Calvary. This is one of the Ecclesiastical challenges of the 21st Century Church. Interestingly, the problem is not only visible in Nigeria but in Africa and the world at large.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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