

CHRISTIANITY AND THE QUEST FOR THE PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Issue of human rights abuse in Nigeria has been discussed from various angles from political, social, economic and judicial viewpoints. While efforts made in academic endeavour are highly commendable, one area which seems to have been largely ignored is what should be a religious response to the subject matter. This paper is aimed at discussing the issue of human rights from a Christian perspective with emphasis on what should Christian organizations do in the quest for the promotion of human rights in Nigeria. That is, how Christianity can help in making sure that the exercise of human rights is given the necessary attention. This is very important in our country today because the incessant abuse of human rights by the successive government and their agencies has become a source of worry to Nigerians and entire world. Owing to myriads of abuse, many innocent lives have been claimed. In achieving the aim therefore, we shall discuss issues relating to human rights abuse, various cases of abuse in Nigeria and what should be the attitude and efforts of Christians. Recommendations will be made towards stemming the tide of human rights abuse in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS:

CHRISTIANITY: This is defined according to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English as the religion based on the teachings and deeds of Jesus Christ.

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HUMAN RIGHTS: This is a combination of two words, Human and Right. Human is defined as of or typical of people. While, Right is considered to mean something fair or morally accepted by most people

QUEST: It is a long search for something that is difficult to find, or an attempt to achieve something difficult.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1995, Nigeria has witnessed a massive upsurge in incidents of extra judicial killings, deprivation of liberty, torture, denial of free access to the courts, abuse of due process, restrictions on free movements, privacy, free press and freedom of association and assembly. All these and many not mentioned, has made Nigeria as a country to be regarded by other nations of the world as unsafe for any economic activities to flourish. It is as a result of this, that this paper intends to look critically at the various abuses and the need for the government and their agencies to stop this menace before it gets out of hand in order to restore the dignity of our country Nigeria.

WHAT IS HUMAN RIGHT?

Given a definition of human rights is by no mean an easy task. This is because it is easy to describe than giving a definition of such. Sebiomo (2009) describes human rights as those rights that are born with man and which a man enjoys for being a man of a society. The rights are God-given and ought not to be taken away or violated by any person or authority. The so called rights are universal and found in every culture and society. They are to be respected by all. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR] which was enacted in 1948 was for the prevention of inhuman treatment of man by man. It contains thirty (30) articles on human rights. The Human Rights is found in chapter iv of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The rights as entrenched in Chapter iv of the 1999 constitution are;

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Section; 33 Right to life

Section; 34 Right to dignity of human person

Section; 35 Right to person liberty

Section; 36 Right to fair hearing

Section; 37 Right to private and family life

Section; 38 Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion

Section; 39 Right to freedom of expression and the press

Section; 40 Right to peaceful assembly and association

Section; 41 Right to freedom of movement

Section; 42 Right to freedom from discrimination

Section; 43 Right to acquire and own immovable property

Section; 44 Right to compulsory acquisition of property

In spite of the fact that these rights are entrenched in the constitution which everybody can have access to, the level at which government, agencies and individuals violate these rights with impunity has become a thing of concern to both young and old in the country. In fact, Babatunde (1996) asserts that Nigeria has witnessed a massive upsurge in incidents of extra judicial killings, deprivation of liberty, torture, denial of free access to the courts, abuse of due process, restrictions on free movement, privacy, free press and freedom of association and of assembly.

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN NIGERIA

Since 1995, the rate at which human rights is being abused in Nigeria is alarming and every efforts being made by the successive administrations to eradicate the monster has not yielded any fruitful result. While Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that

"Every human being has the inherent right to life.

This right shall be protected by law. No one shall

Be arbitrarily deprived of his life"

Also, Article 4 of the African Charter on Human and people's Right which is the same as Sections 33, 34 and 35 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states that:

"Human beings are inviolable. Every human being

Shall be entitled to respect for his life and the

Integrity of his person. No one shall be arbitrarily

deprived of his right"

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In spite of the constitutional and Universal protection Rights from extra judicial killings, torture and degradation treatment provided for in various human rights instruments, agencies of government continue to abuse human rights and perpetrating acts of extra judicial killings, torture and inhuman and degrading treatment on the Nigeria people.

Many citizens were tortured and assassinated and deprived the rights to life. Few among whom are; Kudiratu Abiola the wife of the acclaimed winner of the June 12, 1993 presidential election annulled by the former military head of government Ibrahim Babangida, Pa Afred Rewane, Toyin Onagoruwa, Funsho Williams and many others.

On the abuse of right to dignity of human person as contained in Section 34 of the constitution, The Article 7 of the International covenant on Civil and political Rights states that:

*"No one shall be subjected to torture, or cruel,
inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.
In particular, no one shall be subjected without his
free consent to medical or scientific experimentation"*

Oke (2003) discusses that torture as a method of investigation has become the order of the day both within the police force and other security agencies in Nigeria. It is not uncommon for the police to employ the use of electric shock, horse whips, cigarette, burns, manacles on suspects who have not been found guilty by the court of law, suspects who according to the law, were supposed to be presumed innocent until proved guilty. Under this caption, it is very difficult if not impossible to count the number of innocent souls that are on daily basis being sent to their early graves by the so called security agents. They are employed to secure lives. But, their actions in the recent time have shown that they are more happy and active at destroying lives than protecting it. What a paradox! Some very important cases of police torture was the case at the Onikan Stadium in Lagos where policemen arrested two suspected thieves, tied them to the stake and beat them thoroughly on the allegation of stealing carpet from the VIP (Very Important Persons) stand at the stadium. On February 13, 1995 two state counsels to the River state Ministry of Justice were severely beaten, while a staff of Government House in Port-Harcourt was stripped naked in public, whipped and taken away by a contingent of policemen stationed at the venue of the trial of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other Ogoni activists. Others who received inhuman treatment are Basorun MKO Abiola, Chief Olu Falaiye, Kunle Ajibade, Charles Obi,

Comrade Koleri and many more. Babatunde (1995).

Though, the present civilian political regimes since 1999 has given the members of the fourth estate of the realm the freedom to exercise their freedom to write out to the public any of their opinions about the government which they want the members of the public to know. While these efforts are highly praise-worthy, the civilian regime could not be said to be totally free from the web of human rights violations. Festus (1998) contends that many innocent souls have been killed for doing their jobs. Others who are not killed are harassed, molested, and unjustly detained for questioning by the government and their agencies especially the members of the police force and the State Security Services (SSS). Many prominent Nigerians being detained in the past were Dr Fredrick Fasehun, Brigadier Buba Marwa, Nosa Igiebor, Editor-in chief, Tell magazine, Chris Anyanwu and Bayo Onanuga. Ajayi (2009).

The freedom to associate, move freely without hindrance, and assembly are the important hallmarks of a democratic society. But in Nigeria today, the case is different. People died in their numbers on various religious related crises. Boko Haram in the Northern part of the country has become a monster and the government of the day is handicapped on what to do. The recent protest by the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) and other human rights activists over the removal of oil subsidy by the Federal Government did not end without various abuses being committed by the agencies of government. One of such is the killing of Abiodun Ademola as reported in *The Punch* of Wednesday, January 11, 2012 by Sesan Olufowobi and others who was killed by a police officer. Ademola was said to be playing with his friends on the street of Lagos when the police officer shot at him and this led to the death of this promising soul.

On January 18, 2012 a 'Tokunbo' dealer was shot dead at Idere, a town in Oyo state by a police officer who had earlier requested for N200, the man gave him N100 instead and this annoyed the officer who shot him at the fore-head and the man died instantly. The irate youths in the town burnt the policeman beyond recognition. Why nobody support the action of the youth. But, in this instant case, the youth said they are pushed to the wall by the activities of the policemen in the area. Another instance was the act of the police officers who tear-gassed prominent Nigerians among whom was an elder statesman chief Braithwaite over their protest against oil subsidy. Still on the issue of Boko Haram, their activities in recent time have really affected the Christians in that part of the country of their freedom of worship. This

came as a result of the various bombing of places of worship by this sect

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Christianity is a religion that is based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Hornby (1995) describes Christianity as a religion which believes in the teaching of Jesus Christ, like Christian faith, church or the religious people who show the qualities that are thought of the Christians. As a result of this, the attitude of Christians on the protection of human life needs to be considered. It has made an order that nobody should take life of another person under whatever circumstances as contained in Exodus 20;13. It is also repeated in Deuteronomy 5;17 "*Thou shall not kill.*" By doing so, the various human rights abuses in Nigeria which involve the shedding of innocent blood, is never supported by Christianity as a religion in whatever form. Olabode (2009) explains that human rights and Christianity work towards how citizens will be beneficiaries of the society in which they live. They also protect the freedom of life of the citizenry. The fundamental human rights as contained in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria could be said to be an offspring of the Ten Commandments. For example, Genesis 9:4-6 says:

".....whoso sheddeth man's blood by man shall his blood be shed for in the image of God he made man"

Also, Matthew 5:21-27 says "*Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time that thou shall not kill; and whoever shall kill shall be in danger of judgement.*"

As we are all aware that it is the duty of the citizens to support the government of the day to see that the fundamental human rights of the people are well protected, But, what we see in Nigeria is that, it is the same government and its agencies who are saddled with the responsibility of protecting lives that are to blame for human rights abuses in the country. With the various abuses being experienced in the country today, and the various Biblical passages drawn from the Bible on the need to protect life of other fellow being, it is quite clear that the activities of the agencies of government on many occasions negate the teachings of Christian on love for one another.

Social injustice as being preached against by Amos is also relevant here. Injustice is never supported by Christianity as a religion in whatever form. Olabode (2009) explains that human rights and Christianity work towards how citizens will be

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Social justice refers to fair treatment of people without reference to their ethnic, religious or political background. When this is practiced by our political leaders, the various agitations and protests by the people which have resulted in the abuse by the government agencies will be a thing of the past. Chenimuya opines that wherever injustice exists, there will be disharmony, abuses, and disunity.

The importance of social justice is greatly emphasised in some Biblical passages. For instance, Amos 5:7,15,24 says.

"Ye who turn judgement to wormwood and leave off righteousness in the earth. Hate the evil and love the good and establish judgement in the gates. Let judgement run down as waters and righteousness as a mighty Stream."

It is due to the failure of those at the corridors of power to exercise justice that has led to the various agitations from interest groups. Therefore, in order to restore peace and stability in the country and guarantee her survival, there is the need for equal treatment of all.

Also, the various abuses by the government agencies in Nigeria can be settled, if we abide by the teachings on love as stated in the Biblical passages. The need for love is strongly emphasised in the first epistle of John 3:11-12 where he says:

"This is the message you have heard from the beginning that we should love one another and not be like Cain, who was of the evil and murdered his brother."

Jesus Christ in the same vein gives good example of how men should dwell together in love. For instance, the author of John admonished us to *love one another and as Christ loved us, so we must love one another.*

Peter also in his gospel demonstrates how man from differs backgrounds could come together by showing love. He says in his letter that:

".....see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently" 1 Peter 1:22.

The passage above as contained in the Bible gives a vivid information about the importance of love. That anyone who hates his brother is a murderer and we know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. How can we claim to be Christians when we do not love our neighbour? If anybody claims to love God and hate his brethren then the love of God is not in him. To love ones neighbour is to make a practical example not in words but in actions and deed. Omidiwura (2009) says that the whole essence of human rights is to achieve justice and this is also what religion and Christianity is all about.

Christianity strives at nothing but justice, fair play and peace, which also is the hallmark of human rights. This perhaps is why many notable Christians leaders within and outside the country have fought and still fighting against injustices in all its ramifications. Prominent among them are: Cardinand Anthony Olubunmi Okogie, Bishop Bolanle Gbonigi, Pastor Tunde Bakare etc. In fact, the recent oil subsidy protests across the nation showed that Nigerians are tired of human rights violation being perpetrated by the men in uniform. This was as a result of the way religious leaders and more especially Christian leaders condemned the act in its entirety.

Recommendations

In view of the discussions and presentations made in this paper, it is pertinent to suggest some recommendations which if followed sincerely will help the stakeholders concerned to address the issue of human rights abuses which has become the order of the day in Nigeria. Though, the lists are inexhaustive, few that are very relevant to this study will be considered.

Since the government recognises the existence of Fundamental Human Rights in our constitution, it should be their responsibility to make sure that the violation of human rights by anybody no matter how highly placed should not be

swept under the carpet.

Religious leaders should sincerely preach and follow the teachings of their religions; this is because those in government and other agencies are adherents of one religion or the other. And all about freedom, love and equality are spelt out in the holy books.

It is also important in Nigeria if we want to promote justice, equality and equity. Christians should be taught how dialogue could be used in resolving conflicts. Many a times, confrontations by the members of the public against the security agencies which has led to various abuses from the government agencies has never resolved the matter. Rather, innocent lives are being lost in the process.

Seminars, conferences, symposia should be organised for our security agencies by the church on the need for the protection of life. Prominent men of God can also be invited to present papers. This is why the prayer/seminar organised for the people at the entertainment industry by The Redeemed Christian Church of God held recently at the Redemption camp along Lagos-Ibadan expressway is highly commendable.

Conclusion

By and large, the aims of this paper have been achieved. We have been able to discuss the issue of human rights in Nigeria, the various abuses melted out to people by the government agencies most importantly and what should be the attitude of Christians on human rights abuses making references to Biblical passages. Various recommendations are also suggested both for the church, government and the security agents. It is hoped on a final note that if the suggestions offered in this paper are followed, the incessant abuses by the government agencies will be highly reduced if not totally eradicated.

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