An Ethico-Philosophical Inquiry of the Socio-Cultural Challenges of Pentecostalism in Modern Nigerian Society

Amunnadi, Chukwudi Ani PhD  
Division of General Studies, 
Enugu State University of Science and Technology Agbani, 
Email Address: amuchuks@gmail.com  
Phone No: 08114107176

&  
Oduenyi, Sebastian PhD  
Division of General Studies, 
Enugu State University of Science and Technology Agbani, 
Email Address: sebastianoduenyi@yahoo.com  
Phone No: 08032657942

Abstract

The study of Pentecostalism has continued to occupy a center stage among the themes of global discourse in modern times. Pentecostalism in recent times is providing a paradigm shift to Christian and non Christian perspectives of religion as a platform for individual and national development. Yet not much study has been done on the above concept with respect to the socio-cultural constraints confronting it as developmental platform. This work will therefore attempt to examine some of the socio-cultural challenges undermining Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria. A qualitative research design is adopted for this study while content analysis technique was used for the analysis of collected data.

1.0) Introduction: Aihiokhai (2010) states that from a recent survey of the religious identity in America and in Africa has shown that there has been a steady growth in the membership of Pentecostalism while other Christian denominations are fast losing members. This new development he submits is fast redefining the religious topography in these places. Pentecostalism according to Vondey (2018) relates to religious oriented activities centered
on the transformative encounter with the Holy Spirit. Corroborating the above submission Albrecht and Howard (2014) posit that the above concept refers to Christo-centric activity mediated through a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit. In other words they state that in a Christo-pneumatological sense it is a theological activity that is characterized by spirituality. Vondey (2018) therefore submits that by emphasizing spirituality as its central core Pentecostalism as a theological discourse places itself as a phenomenon that transcends a mere theoretical or purely intellectual exercise.

Obadare (2018) states Pentecostal Christianity or simply put Pentecostalism in Nigeria is eliciting great success in Nigeria that is creating great tensions in Western Nigerian Islamic world. According to him the emergence of charismatic form of Islam in Western Nigeria that is characterized by new modalities of prayer, worship and proselytizing as well reforms in their organizational structures among others are undergird of political threats to which Pentecostalism are being exposed to. It is against this backdrop that he states that the establishment of Muslim prayer camp along the hitherto Pentecostal prayer camp dominated area in Lagos–Ibadan Express Way is a pointer to their readiness to dare the overflowing influence of the Christian world. Furthermore he posits that from enquiry he found that the above development was sprang up due to the quest by the Muslim adherents to create the visibility that they too are not ready to play a subsidiary status in the larger scheme of things be it on a mere traffic blockage or in the arteries of power. Besides he notes that in recent times the above competition for prominence at the public and political space of the nation has led to several conflicts over issues on gender, mode of dressing, day of prayer, and strategies on interfaith engagement

Pentecostalism in Nigeria is therefore fraught with various dimensions of challenges which range may from social, cultural, theological to political. Put simply it has found itself in a fierce market place. Pentecostalism as
described by Gwamma (2008) relates to Christian movement that seeks not only to experience the new life in Christ but also to experience endowment of power from on high as the scriptures promised. He said that any discourse on power encounter with respect to the Pentecostal movements owes its origin to the biblical tradition of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 1-4).

The advent of the holy spirit on the day of Pentecost provoke socio-cultural effects and reactions among the people who came to Jerusalem from all over the world for the feast of Pentecost so also the Pentecostal movements has continued to produce socio-cultural effects and challenges because of its emphasis on power. Based on this emphasis on power Pentecostalism according to C.P. Wagner in Gwamma (2008) sees power encounter as a visible, practical demonstration that Jesus Christ is more powerful than false gods or spirits worshipped or feared by people group. Pentecostalism It is against this background that this paper seeks to engage an ethico-philosophical enquiry on the socio-cultural challenges of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. The task of ethics is the analysis and clarifications of moral terms as a means of understanding the fundamental principles underlying the rightness and wrongness of moral actions. In these days of increasing tensions that cuts across all areas of existential space of our nation an ethical study on their socio-cultural impacts on the religious community using Pentecostal faith as a case study is no doubt relevant. Nigeria as a pluralistic society has continued to be besieged by challenges that are driven by heterogeneity of interests which unfortunately is undermining her efforts to move at par with the community of advanced nations. A sociological enquiry of this nature would therefore serve as a resource base for identifying some ethical gaps working against the exploitation of Pentecostal Christianity as a development paradigm in Nigeria.

2.0) Theoretical Framework: Pentecostalism as earlier stated before relates to the manifestation of the life of Christ on earth through the power of the
Holy Spirit. In investigating the divine activities on earth from the platform of Christo-Centric spirituality several theories have been advanced. However this work shall be situated on the transformative theory. According to Albrecht and Howard (2014) the transformative feature of Pentecostalism is predicated on the activity of the Holy Spirit which consummates and transforms ordinary individuals and communities into a new people of spiritual behavior and identity. It is therefore a vehicle through which primordial culture and lifestyle encounter a transformation that is made evidence by religious experience referred to as Pentecostal spirituality. Ellington (2011) states that oral narrative, testimony; proclamation, prayer, song and dance, prophecy and speaking in tongues are some of the expressions that characterize the above experience. Furthermore Cartledge (2015) is in agreement to the above view when he avers that the heartbeat of Pentecostalism is the experience of the Holy Spirit and the attendant religious activities or spirituality by which it is expressed.

Against this backdrop transformative theory therefore relates to the vocal transformative influence whereby individuals are empowered supernaturally to speak in tongues. It emphasizes the communication aiding power of the Pentecostal Christianity. On the other hand the developmental dimension of Pentecostalism embraces it’s power component such as power to live holy, preach the gospel, heal the sick, cast out devils and to do miracles as well as grace to embrace community of brotherhood of all men. Pentecostalism as a developmental paradigm from the above context is a transformative as well as a communicative or language force. As a transformative force it promotes Christian ethics not just as a theology for intellectual consumption but as a practical way of life that must be embraced. Besides it represents religion as a forceful but non-violent change agent in dealing with the forces of sin, evil, sickness, oppression, wickedness and demonic activities on earth through the accessing of divine power for sign and wonders. This is put pointedly in
Mark’s gospel when he states that Pentecostal experience of speaking in tongues, casting out devils, healing the sick and having power to do miracles will follow those who believe in the name of Jesus (Mark 16:15-16).

3.0) Conceptual Clarification: In this section we shall examine the conceptual clarification of some key terms relevant to this study. This no doubt would help to provide the background understanding needed for better appreciation of the subject matter.

i) Pentecostalism: The term Pentecostalism is derived from the word Pentecost which comes from a Greek word meaning fiftieth day. The fiftieth day after the Passover of the Jews is the day of Pentecost, the Jewish feast of weeks (Deut.16:9, 10). It is this traditional Jewish feast of weeks (seven weeks) which culminates on the 50th day from which the idea of Pentecost originated. Douglas (1987) states that the feast is variously called the feast of Harvest (Exod.23.16) or the First Fruit Day which fell on the fiftieth day after the feast of Passover. Furthermore he observed that the event of Acts Chapter 2 was what transformed the ancient Jewish festival into a Christian one. Merril (1987) corroborates the above view when he posits that there is a symbolic connection between the first fruits of the ancient Israel Jewish Pentecost feast and the first fruits of the Christian dispensation represented by the three thousand souls plus one hundred and twenty disciples that received Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

Against this backdrop Pentecostalism is a term that relates to Christian movement that emphasize the primacy of the Christian experiences such as baptism of the Holy Spirit as well as manifestation of spiritual gifts as a hallmark of Christian identity and fruitfulness. Gwamma (2008) sums up the above view when he states that it is a concept that emphasizes the manifestation of the fundamental Christian experience of new birth and the enduement of the power of the Holy Spirit. Besides he posits that the Christianity of the twentieth century could be said to have ended on a
Pentecostal note, because Pentecostalism has become the fastest growing phenomenon in the Christian world in the last two decades such that it is posing major challenge to the so called orthodox or mainline Christian denominations.

ii) Socio-Cultural: The term socio-cultural relates to two words society and culture. Culture according to Okafor (2017) is primarily used to connote to tillage of the ground—as in *Agri-culture* and later to the tending of natural growth. Moreover he submits that from the middle of eighteenth to the early nineteenth century culture as a thing in itself came into being as ‘general state of habit of the mind’ closely allied to human perfection such that the cultured person has to do with the person whose character or behavior cannot be impeached. Culture from the foregoing has to do with broad spectrum of ethos or values that cuts across human civilizations such as social, economic, political, religious, scientific, technological which have contributed tremendously in the shaping of human survival and development. The term society or social as defined by Allen and Schwarz (2004) relates to life in an organized community, growing or living in communities. Socio-Cultural from the above context simply refers to the issues concerning the societies and their culture.

iii) Ethico-Philosophical: The term ethico-philosophical is a compound word that relates to ethics and philosophy. Morals or morality came from the latin word ‘*mores*’ meaning custom or usage, while ethics comes from Greek word ethos roughly the same thing. Morality is grounded in ethics as mathematics is grounded in numbers. Ethics is a branch of moral philosophy or simply put a science of morality. Morality according to Oduenyi (2017) is a product of man’s free and rational nature which makes him a responsible agent accountable for his conducts and actions. Ethics therefore he posits is the study of morality to identify the underlying determinants of a right or a wrong action. It is the branch of philosophy that investigates the rightness or wrongness of human conducts or actions. It is
a normative science that studies the underlying principles of right and wrong human conducts and actions. Ethics from the foregoing is the study that distinguishes bad behavior from good behavior, as well as wrong conduct from right conduct.

The subject of philosophy according to Omeregbe (1993) is whatever can be known by reasoning ranging from God, the universe, man to the human society. Moreover he states that philosophy is concerned with the generality and universality of things as against their particularity or individuality. Ethico-Philosophical as used in this study relates to philosophical inquiry from ethical perspective. It is therefore an investigation on ethical and philosophical underpinnings relating to the socio-cultural challenges facing Pentecostalism in Nigeria.

4.0 Socio-Cultural Challenges of Pentecostalism in Nigeria: In this section we shall examine some of the socio-cultural challenges posing challenge to Pentecostal brand of Christianity in Nigeria. These include but are not limited to the following: prosperity gospel, leadership, authenticity and abuse of prophetic ministry.

i) The Challenge of Prosperity Gospel And Clerical Flambuoyancy: In spite of the great emphasis of prosperity gospel by the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria the poverty level in the country continues to soar daily both within and outside her fold. This is even made more irritating and confusing when in the camp of this Pentecostal fold only a significant few of their clergy appears to be commanding unusual affluence in the midst of impoverished majority of her followership. Rotimi, Nwadialor, & Ugwuja (2016) is in agreement to the above view when they posit that it is against this back drop that most of her critics have increasingly become skeptical about the Pentecostal prosperity message. Part of the reason for this skepticism they note stem from the fact that some of the Pentecostal clergymen manipulate their congregation into a culture of giving
sacrificially to support both Church and their personal projects by challenging them with the argument that “givers never lack” while in the real sense it is a ploy meant to enrich a fraction of the clerical (priestly) authority. They argue therefore that the prosperity messages are not adding values to the hearers rather it helps to pauperize them the more by enriching the pockets of the preachers. For instance in a situation where you see the big pastors cruising in a jet, living in big mansions, training their children abroad and establishing schools where their average Church members cannot afford to send their children/wards to acquire quality education is highly regrettable. Ukpong (2020) observes that the above prosperity gospel is undermining the traditional socio-cultural values of the Nigerian society such as integrity, hardwork, accountability, patience and suffering by enthroning material prosperity as a standard proof for divine blessings. This is made more explicit by the African proverb which states that ezi aha ka ego (good name is better than silver and gold). According to him a situation where once economic worth is used as a parameter for defining his spiritual worth forces people to strive to get rich quick by all means in other to secure the so called good life like others. Unfortunately no society or nation progresses economically on the long run by cutting corners to get rich. The Holy Scriptures is in agreement to the above view when it states that wealth acquired by fraudulent means do not last.

What this means is that Pentecostalism in Nigeria must go beyond parading itself as an instrument of economic liberation and prosperity if she is going to break from the rising hostility against her big pastors who are seen by many as money doublers who promise so much but deliver little or nothing to her clients. She must go beyond prosperity gospel of ‘givers never lack’ to evolving the theology and practical education that would reduce the problem of entrenched poverty within her fold in particular and in Nigeria in general.
ii) The Challenge Of Authenticity: The proliferation of Pentecostal churches under different names in recent times is posing great threat to the authenticity of this brand of Christianity. The above view is corroborated by Ojo (2018) when he avers that the proliferations of these new churches and their activities offer many challenges to the society. One of such areas in on the threat of fake spirituality which employs magic and witchcraft dressed in the form of deliverance ministry to dupe and manipulate the undiscerning public. Ojo posits that many people becomes easily gullible to fake Pentecostal hawkers because Pentecostalism in Africa is driven by emphasis on healing to counter difficulties of life as well as deliverance from every form of malevolent spiritual forces that obstructs one from breakthrough and prosperity in life. What this means is that genuine Pentecostalism is on trial in Nigeria as many people today find it difficult to accept someone on face value just because he claims he is a born again Pentecostal believer. This agrees with Igbo adage which states that ‘mekanik ekwero ka amara ndi ara’ (mechanics has made it difficult by their dressing for one to differentiate them from the mad people).

The above view is corroborated by Onyechere (2017) when he states that there are contradictions in the teachings and practice of Pentecostals as far as ethical responsibilities are concerned. According to him a good number of Pentecostal churches that established their own universities through the sweat and toil of their poor church members such as Covenant University, Benson Idahosa University, Babcock University, Bowen University and Redeemer’s University often charge very high school fees that make it impossible for the same poor church members that sacrificed heavily to build the universities to send their children to such schools. He then queried how can the Pentecostal justify such actions from ethical perspectives? Moreover with increasing negative public perception arising from reported cases of deep rooted corrupt practices such as theft, embezzlement and sexual sins within their constituency Pentecostalism in Nigeria must rise up to face the challenge of authenticity and public
accountability. It must strive as a major social force in the country to remove the contradictions from what it preaches in the form of values and principles of living and what it does in reality.

iii) The Challenge of Perversive Leadership: The word perverse means to be turned aside, to be turned away from the (morally) right, to be willfully erring. The unending trend of perversive leadership that allows two captains in a ship within Pentecostal Christianity in Nigeria leaves much to be desired. This ugly trend which currently subsists in one of the leading Pentecostal church in Nigeria is to say the least very detrimental to the promotion of orderly society and good government more so when the church community are supposed to provide the divine template for excellent leadership in the world. The Christological perspective that underscores the danger of divided leadership in a society puts it pointedly as follows: ‘A house divide against itself cannot stand’. Furthermore the rising trend of proliferation of new Pentecostal churches merely on the ground of disagreement among the leadership of a given group or between the leadership and their members does not pave way for a cohesive driven nation as such splinter churches continues to see one another as enemies and unhealthy competitors several years after. Adesoji(2016) in his contribution notes that the Pentecostal Movement in Nigeria, like other organizations driven by the lure of privileges of leaders, leadership visibility and leadership style have tended to encourage their members to form new organizations of Pentecostal churches and ministries each seeking relevance and influence not minding that they have Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria as an umbrella organization that should regulate their activities. The result is that Pentecostalism in Nigeria is enmeshed in leadership challenges which invariably affect the wider society adversely.

The greatest problem undermining the development of our nation has been identified as bad leadership. However the problem becomes more compounded when adherents of Pentecostal Christianity who by their
claim and teachings are supposed to be light bearers to the world as far as justice, fair play and exemplary leadership are concerned end up being agent of perverse, unjust, and warped leadership.

**iv) The threat of Electoral Prophetism:** There is a rising trend of Pentecostal witchcraft which seeks to promote the use of prophecy to predict the aftermath of electoral results in Nigeria. The typical instance is the current political war between the national chairman of APC, Mr Adam Oshiomole and the current governor of Edo State Mr Obaseki, for the soul of Edo state where so called Pentecostal prophets are busy prophesying who they feel God has revealed to them would win the election. Both parties are currently engrossed on a very volatile war path on who will have his way in the next governorship election coming up before the end of this year. According to Ikem, Ogbonna, Oggunubi(2020) professional pollsters in advanced countries forecast electoral outcomes with varying degrees of accuracy, but unfortunately this role appears to be hijacked by some religious leaders operating under Pentecostal gifting of prophetic office to predict electoral results. These electoral prophetism which has been described by some as a form of Pentecostal witchcraft, thrives because those who deploy it do so not only for economic reasons but also as a tool to manipulate public opinion in other to favour their paymasters. Moreover, they submit that the above development is promoted because the nation is dominated by sub-regional religious and tribal interests which often deploy prophets of their own to promote their selfish agenda in the name of divine revelation. What this means is that Pentecostalism in Nigeria is fast turning to an instrument of subverting public opinion especially with respect to fostering healthy democratic culture. The worst scenario was the use of a charismatic preacher in Enugu state to predict the Supreme Court judgment that eventually upturned the democratically elected governor of Imo state this year. The above incident was widely condemned as many accused the prophet of collecting money from APC controlled national government in other to use prophecy to give a divine outfit to the subversion of the rule
of law that denied the democratically elected PDP governor, Mr Ihedioha of his political victory at the Supreme Court.

v) Pentecostal Sentimentalism: The quest for experiential religion and increase share in the market space of competition for membership is driving Nigerian Pentecostalism to undue emphasis on religious sentimentalism. According to Ukpong (2020) it is a development that seeks to make religion real by reducing it to a culture of feeling and touching such that appearances and sentiments prevails over reason and spirituality. Furthermore he notes that the body is a vehicle of expression through which man can explore sensations that can let loose unconscious eroticism. However when human body are harnessed to access positive or negative feelings which runs contrary to reason or divine logic it opens humanity to dangers of magic and occult. A typical contemporary religious sentimentalism is where church members are made to believe that as long as they are putting on an apron, wrist band or any other effigy from their Church leaders they can never encounter a misfortune such as sickness, accident, business failure etc. This was the error of sentimentalism that the religious leaders in the time of High Priest Eli were parading among their citizenry but for which they paid dearly as they were woefully defeated with the sons of the High Priest namely Hophni and Phinehas, as well as thirty thousand Israelites soldiers killed in the war while the Ark of Covenant which they thought was a magic wand for winning all wars was captured and confiscated (1Sam. 4:10-11).The Holy Scripture is replete with the use material objects as instruments of triggering faith in God, however when they are elevated to a position of indispensability they are invariably made to assume the place of divinity which is nothing but idolatry. It is no wonder that many Pentecostal preachers are now finding it easy to place heavy monetary tags on different faith link objects such as holy water, special handkerchiefs, aprons, special anointing oil amongst others which unfortunately divert the mind of their undiscerning congregation from
seriously seeking for genuine spirituality that is rooted in faith and knowledge of Christ.

5.0) Conclusion: The above work shows that there has been a steady growth in the membership of Pentecostalism in Nigeria while other Christian denominations are fast losing members. Unfortunately the above development has doors opened doors to socio-cultural threats in the nation which are negatively undermining the overall growth of Christianity in the country. Some of these challenges are listed below: the challenge of prosperity gospel and clerical flamboyancy, the challenge of authenticity, the challenge of pervasive leadership and the threats of electoral prophetism and Pentecostal sentimentalism

6.0) Recommendations: The following recommendations were made with respect to advancing ideas on the way forward with regards to the above challenges.

i) Pentecostalism must promote economic and moral paradigm shift that strives to dismantles both institutional and personal lifestyles that poses as obstacles to both material and spiritual prosperity of all. Their salvation message must embrace holistic truths that address the tripartite needs of body, soul and spirit of man.

ii) The preachers of Pentecostal Christianity must walk their talk by ensuring that their lifestyle agrees with their message. They should shed themselves of deceptive gospel if they hope to mobilize spiritually vibrant followership.

iii) Partisan politics should be separated from Pentecostal Christianity by establishing regulatory bodies among them that sanctions the abuse of prophetic ministry for economic, ethnic and political manipulation and advantage.

iv) Members and non members of Pentecostal Christianity should be open to the preaching of God’s Word but should however subject them to independent study of same with a view to discovering for the
unbiased truth as revealed in the Holy Scriptures since God’s Word is an open book that invites all to search and discover the truth (2Tim 2: 15). Pauline theology commended this approach as a guide to checking error when he stated that the Berean believers were more honourable than those in Thessalonica in that they not only received the word of God they also searched the Scriptures daily to confirm their truthfulness (Acts 17: 11).

v) Leadership crisis among Pentecostal Churches should be discouraged by their adherents through serious sanctions that prohibit the emergence of multiple General Overseers or Presidents for one organization at the same time.

vi) Government should assist Pentecostal churches to promote stability in their leadership by protecting their elected leadership from undue assault and impeachment.

References


