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## **Prayer and Social Transformation in Nigeria: A Christian Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*Prayer has been misunderstood as an art in religion with very little or no influence on social transformation. This is because some sociologists think that transformations can result from direct social planning and not from unplanned human actions like prayer. The aim of this paper is to show how prayer can influence social transformation. The fact being that, social transformation emanates, more from unplanned actions as God cannot act against his nature and the principles he has established in the world but touches the hearts of praying people and then ushers in his purposes through prayer. This paper uses both the theological and sociological approaches. The findings in this paper are (a) that although the religious expression of prayer has long been found among Nigerians, what has been not quite so good is the emphasis of Government on the need for effective praying for social transformation. (b) Since 1960 to 2014 only President Shehu Shagari and President Goodluck Jonathan administrations have emphasized on prayer and the ethical dimensions of religion as means to Nigeria's social transformation. (c) All other heads of Government saw prayer not as the business of Government to be so actively*

*involved in tackling the Nation's social problems. (d) These heads of states mostly our military Leaders have focused only on the involvement of man in the task of transforming Nigeria and end up minimizing the sovereignty of God. The position of this paper is that the two important truths; the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man (Nigerians) have to be brought together in great harmony through prayer for the Nation to experience meaningful social transformation.*

### **Introduction**

*“God does nothing redemptively in the world except through prayer”  
(John Wesley in Higher 2014).*

Leaving prayer out of Nigeria's transformation Agenda is tantamount to ignoring the latent functions of religion in human society. No human society exists without religion. To understand the social behaviour that make them to continue as a group, community or society we need religion. The phenomenon is not a conservative force as some consider it to be in tackling social problems on the contrary, religion is a potential instrument that can produce dramatic social transformations in the country. The multi-religious nature of Nigeria does not give room for emphasis on the “other-worldly” religion which makes it a conservative force, thereby luridering radical social transformation. Religion is not more formation of myths for which specific empirical evidence is lacking. Those who are engaged in religion are not just accepting a variety of super empirical goals, which cannot be attained by any specific pragmatics test. Most people engage themselves in religion because it is for them an obligation, a necessity, the given means of coping with the world. Religion is what Nigeria needs to remain indivisible and corporate as a nation. Religious activity for example, prayer, allows various tribes to take cognizance of themselves as collectivities to symbolize their social order unity and gain an objective sense of their own society. Religion solemnized the social order by prescribing moral norms. It provides the kind of social control, cohesion and solidarity the country needs for meaningful social transformation. The aim of the paper is to show the power and potential of prayers in any social transformation in Nigeria.

### **Conceptualizing Prayer**

Perhaps we may begin this part of the study with a definition of religion which incorporates the activity of prayer. Omonegbe (1999, p.3) observed that in religions people engage themselves in reciprocal activities with the transcendent personal being they believe to exist. These reciprocal activities that establish a relationship, a link between man and the transcendent deity include prayer. Ekwunife (2007:6) said prayer is a spiritual means through which the religious man interiorly and externally communicated with God and all super sensible begins of his invisible world. Omaritian and Hayford (2003, p. 44) stated that when men face hopeless

situations in their relationships, business, work, finances, health, emotions or children, praying to God of hope can change the situation.

The word prayer according to Stamps and Adams (1992, p.540) refers to the multifaceted communication of believers with the Lord God. Prayer can be described as a religious spiritual outreach of the temporal religious man to the transcendent being and his agents (Ekwunife 2007).

Myles Munroe (2002:11) opined that prayer is a result of God's established authority structure between heaven and earth as well as a product of his faithfulness to his word. Munroe went further to say that prayer remains a very important aspect of religion. It has become one common ritual and practice in all religions of the world. It is mysterious and sometimes misunderstood amongst men. Also prayer is a result of God's established authority structure between heaven and earth as well as a product of his faithfulness to his word. Prayer is as simple as respecting God's authority. Prayer is man giving God the legal right and permission to interfere on earth's affairs. Prayer is man giving heaven earthly license to influence earth. Prayer is a terrestrial license for celestial interference. Prayer is man exercising his legal authority on earth to invoke heaven's influence on the planet.

Spurgeon (1988) defined prayer as the Christians life line to God and with it lives are changed for eternity. Jaja (2009, p. 34) saw prayer as a ritual copied by Christian from Jesus Christ who taught his disciple how to pray. It is a Christian weapon of defence and encouragement in life.

### **Conceptualizing Social Transformation**

Hornby (2000) said the word 'social' is used in connection to society and the way it is organized. A society is defined by Okwueze (2003) as a group of human beings sharing a self-sufficient system of action which is capable of existing longer than the life-span of a individual, the group being recruited at least in part by the sexual reproduction or (adoption, mine) of its members. Here the church is considered a society. Okwueze went further to say that the word society extends to those who live together within a geographical location. In the mind of this study, the church is one of the sub-units (systems) within the Nigerian society (system). Both the church and Nigerian are domains of social change-social transformation.

Transformation refers to complete change in somebody or something. In the context of this paper society is the something that must experienced transformation. Human society is being organized through transformation with a sense of its former state, present state and future state. There is always the notion or need for a shift in direction-away from dependence on its present state to either returning to its former or moving towards a future state. In this way transformation is a social process involving social change.

Igbo and Anugwom (2002) while referring to the *Dictionary of the social sciences* stated that social change is the significant alteration of social structures (that is, of patterns of social action and interaction), including consequences and manifestations of such structures embodied in norms (rules of conduct) values, and cultural products and symbols. According to Igbo and Anugwom, social change is simply any variation from a previous state or mode of existence. It connotes something that is markedly different from its original version. The terms social transformation is used interchangeably both in religious and social spheres. Theologians call it 'revival', while sociologists refer to it as social change. Transformation takes place within a social system, exerting its influence on the individual as well as a group. A social system, according to Igbo and Anugwom provides a general guide for behaviour and interaction among individuals and groups in the society. The social system of a society is made up of all the idea patterns of behaviour within that society. The notion of social system extends to sub-units in the society, that is, systems in a system.

The terms social transformation, social change and revival are used interchangeably to explain the significant alternation of social structures within a social system. Sometimes the need may arise within a social system of change in Norms, Values, cultural, products and symbols from their present state back to the former state. This kind of backward shift in direction in moral and ethical standards by society is referred to as revival within religious circle. Revival is an experience in the church. Hughes (2014) has observed that revival is just that God flooding a locality or a community of his people, stirring up the complacent and producing the conviction and conversion of a great number of people. It is a work which God does for man. Revival takes place when we experience times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

### **Nigeria and Social Transformation**

Several attempts have been made to transform Nigeria, ethically and infrastructurally since the country gained independence. Imaekhai (2010) traced the history of Nigerian ethical revolution from January 15, 1966 when major Kaduna Nzeogwu seized power with the agenda to tackle the ills of tribalism, nepotism, corruption and favouritism. Yakubu Gowon from 1966 to 1975 also accused Aguiyi Ironsi of tribalism, favouritism and nepotism. He had as agenda, reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconciliation to maintain the unity of Nigeria after the thirty months of civil war. However during Gowon's regime the government became enmeshed in corruption.

Murtala Muhammed seized power in 1975 accusing Gowon's administration of corruption, incapability to check the excesses of his officer, indecision and drift. Gowon so concerned about the ethical problems of Nigeria, formulated the Decrees

and Edicts used to try corrupt military officers and the 1979 civilian ‘constitution’ which set forth a code of conduct for public officers and the code of conduct tribunal.

Olu Segun Obasanjo stepped in to power to continue in the same administration following the death of Murtala Muhammed in Dinka’s coup. He tried to correct the social ills of the society through the setting up of Public Complaints Bureau, Mass Flush out and cutback in the public service, support death penalty for armed robbers, introduced low profile and operation feed the reaction and called on public servants to quite secret cults.

Shehu Shagari succeeded Obasanjo as the second Republic civilian president from 1979 to 1983. To put corruption and other social vices in check, he called for Nigerian Ethical Revolution, because according to him “a nation that placed no value on moral standards was like a body without soul”. He set up committee to promote an ethical revolution in Nigeria, a National Orientation Committee to study and synthesize Nigeria’s ethical values. Based on the recommendations of these committees, Shagari called on all Nigerians to re-dedicate themselves anew to those enabling values and social ideals that have made the various communities in the past a shining example of enduring value. He identified those pre-colonial and pre-military Nigerian ethical values as follows, dedication to work, intellectual, honesty, increased productivity and the cultivation of the spirit of selfless service and love for everything Nigerians.

Buhari and Idiagbon seized power from Shagari in 1983 to resume military rule in Nigeria. The duo, fashioned out a decree on War Against Indiscipline (WAI) to fight indiscipline exhibited by Nigerians, corruption, and political unrest. Buhari’s (WAI) was aimed at inculcating probity, moral and ethical values in Nigerians.

Babangida regime replaced Buhari and Idiagboh for eight years. His administration in an attempt to tackle National ills designed several programmes such as; ‘MAMSER’, meaning Mass Mobilization for social and Economic Recovery, directorate of social mobilization for the execution of the programme. He planned a political transition programme, held elections and annulled the election on June 12, 1993. His annulment of the election that year put Nigeria into worse political and social problems. He “stepped aside for Ernest Shonekan’s Interim National Government.

Sani Abacha’s government replaced Shonekan’s interim National Government. In 1993, Abacha’s regime replaced MAMSER with National Orientation Agency (NOA). Abdulsalam Abubakar became the New Head of a Military Government following the death of Sani Abacha. He conducted a general election that brought into power Olusegun Obasanjo as a third republic civilian president from 1999 to 2007. He established the independent corrupt practices and

other related offences commission (ICPC) backed up by an act of the National Assembly in 2000. The ICPC investigated the principal officers of the National Assembly in 2003. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) which play the role of regulating the affairs of both private and public organizations in Nigeria with a view to ensuring that transparency reigns supreme in Nigeria organizations dealings.

Umaru Musa Yar'Adua succeeded Obasanjo in 2007 as the president of Nigeria. Musa Yar'Adua's administration identified the greatest problem bedevilling Nigeria as a Nation as power, Agriculture, Education, Health, Transport and Communication, Science and Technology and Security. His administration fashioned these 7 point agenda to re-direct and re-position Nigeria towards the accomplishment of vision 2020 of making Nigeria one of the twenty biggest economics in the world. To ensure security in the Niger Delta the crude oil producing region of the country, Yar'Adua granted amnesty to the militants.

In May 2010, the then vice president in Yar'Adua's administration, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan was sworn in as president following the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua after a protracted illness. President Jonathan followed the transformation agenda of his predecessor but pruned down the 7 point transformation agenda, focusing on key areas like Electoral Reform, Energy Security and Electricity Generation because he has barely twelve months to end that administration he had continued (house to house retrieved 2014). Within the twelve months, his government signed the Electoral Act on August 20, 2010 and appointed an Independent National Electoral Board (INEC) headed by Prof. Attahiru Jega for the conduct of the general election of 2011. On energy security he ensure that relative peace reign in the Niger Delta region through the sustained amnesty programme. His efforts in this sector resulted in increased oil production and other multiplier effects on the economy. On Electricity Generation his administration launched a Road map to power sector reforms on the 26th of August 2010, which spelt out in detail plans for improving on power (FML.gov.ng 2012).

On 11 October 2011 Dr. Jonathan after he was democratically elected and sworn-in, launched the Transformation Agenda of his New administration based on a summary of how the Federal Government hopes to deliver projects, programmes and key priority policies, from 2011 to 2015. The then Minister of National Planning, Shamsudeen Usman was appointed as coordinator of the Transformation Agenda. He was sacked along with eight other cabinet ministers amid a rift in the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

On 26 August 2011 UN building in Abuja was bombed by Boko Haram, on 14 May 2013, Jonathan declared a state of emergency in three north-eastern Nigerian states, Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa to curtail the activities of Boko Haram. Although

his government has offered amnesty to supporters of Boko Haram the security situation in the country has remained intolerable until the time of this study. The wind of terrorism is blowing stronger with corruption.

Imaekhai (2010) has observed that each succeeding government in Nigeria promised to eradicate corruption and other social ills and improve on our ethical values but this has been impossible. In the history of Nigeria transformation programme, it was only the Shehu Shagari administration that attempted to emphasis on the ethical dimension of religion as a means to Nigeria's development and self-realization as a model for Ethical Revolution for the Nation. But his administration's ethical revolution to Nigeria social problems generated heated debates. Opponents claimed that it was not the business of government to be so actively involved in the moral life of the Nation. Perhaps, this informed the Buhari and Idiagbon seizure of government from Shagari. The President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's administration drove a paradigm shift from his military predecessors only in the areas of infrastructural and economic transformation but maintained the same view of not involving government actively in the moral life of the Nation, rather leaving the moral sphere to religion. Our leaders have continued with this Nation in which there is a separation between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of Government (man). Probably because our Nation's Constitution states that there should be separation between the state and Religion due to the pluralistic and multi-ethnic, multi-religious Nature of Nigeria. The Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan led administration has not only driven a paradigm shift from his predecessors in goal setting to achieve his aforementioned government threshold but he has purposely made conscious decision to break with the past in the areas of bringing together in great harmony, the two important truths – the sovereignty of God and the involvement of man (government) in the implementation of the transformation Agenda of his administration. Perhaps, he has learned from the words of John Wesley that 'God does nothing redemptively in the word except through prayer' (Wesley in Hughes, 2014). According to Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor (2012) the Federal Government of Nigeria under the leadership of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, asked the church in Nigeria for prayer when the Federal Government seems to be at a loss as to how to adequately counter the forces of violence and terrorism in the Nation. This study is aimed at examining the role of Christian prayer for the Jonathan's transformation programme.

### **Link between Prayer and Social Transformation**

The link between prayer and transformation in human society is inseparable. Transformation of any kind is initiated by God. When God intends to transform a society he involves man whom he has created in his image and likeness for that purpose. According to Hughes, God is not dictatorial or capricious. Whenever he

wants to bring his purposes to pass here on earth he does not act arbitrarily or independently of the principle of prayer. God touches the hearts of praying people, placing a burden of transformation on their hearts and then ushers in his purposes across the bridge of prayer.

Myles Munroes (2002) God will ever respect the principle of prayer in anything he does on earth because prayer was born out of God's arrangements for man's assignment on earth, it happened when the creator spoke two words during the creation process 'let them' these words are recorded in the first chapter of the first book of the Bible.

Then God said let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creature that more along the ground (Gen 1:26-27 emphasis added).

From this declaration God gave man the mandate to dominate the earth. Man became the legal steward of the earth domain. Although the authority given to man is a delegated type, nothing will happen in the earth realm without the active or passive permission of man who is its legal authority. John Wesley has put this truth in this way "God does nothing redemptively in the world except through prayer". The sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man have to be brought together in great harmony in prayer before and meaningful social transformation could take place.

The power and potency of prayer in social transformation are replete in history and the Bible. Before God could pardon the sin of rebellion of Israel and deliver them, Moses and Aaron Caleb and Joshua have the burden and prayed. (Number 14:1-20; Exd. 32:11-14; Num 11:2-12:13; 21:7; 27:5). Before the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt and the city fortified, God involved Nehemiah and gave him the burden to pray. For four months Nehemiah fasted and prayed with many tears because of the trouble afflicting God's people in Jerusalem and Judah (Neh. 1:3-11; 2:4; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). Before the sins of the world could be removed, Jesus Christ had to bear a burden and prayed (Luke 19:10, 41; John 17:6-26, Luke 23:24).

Mick Brooks (2014), word of introduction on Hughes theme "Revive us again" reviewed the stories of the 1904 Welsh Revival, how miners being overcome with conviction, falling to their knees to rise with completely transformed lives, of alcoholics miraculously transformed; of people going to public meeting to laugh and heckle but staying to pray and leaving transformed. Max Weber in his argument against Karl Marx and some sociologists who felt that religion is a conservative force, explained how religiously inspired movements have often produced dramatic social transformations. Protestantism, particularly Puritanism, according to Weber was the



source of the capitalistic outlook found in the Modern West. The early entrepreneurs were mostly Calvinists. Their drive to succeed which helped initiate Western economic development was originally promoted by a desire to serve God. Material success was a sign of divine favour (Giddens et al, 2003) Max Weber's writings were on the connection between religion and social change.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The study has shown the power and potency of prayer in social transformations that some Nigeria leaders have failed to use. It has also established a link between prayer and social transformations. The missing link is that Nigerians over the decades have focused only on the responsibility of man in their social transformation programmes and have ended up minimizing the sovereignty of God. Social transformation which comes through men prayer within the church and flow into the larger system or society, for example Nigeria, is complete, while the one that occur without prayer remains incomplete. When both God and man are involved in social transformation then it becomes complete. Complete social transformations are those religiously inspired through prayer; promoted by a desire to serve God. Western economic, (capitalist economic) which Nigeria emulates came from religiously inspired social transformation. People who are transformed through prayer are often times calm, placid, patience and with other ethical and moral values that serve as ingredients of meaningful social transformation. These people imbed such virtues from their leaders who were transformed through prayer as well. They were leaders who acknowledged God as their maker and source of power and yielded to God's burden for prayer for transformation of their land.

### **Recommendations**

Firstly, the church should be considered by Nigerians both the ruled and the rulers as God's agent in the society through which meaningful transformation could come. This is because God is deeply committed to working through the church to demonstrate and express his plans and purposes on earth.

Secondly, the church as a sub-unit of the larger society called Nigeria remains the domain of social transformation. The great respect God has for the church makes it a potential place for transformation of the individual and group when they pray. Transformation that happens in the church will always have great influence on the social society, since the church is in society and the society is in the church.

Furthermore, the neglect of the church (Religion) by Nigeria leaders which is essentially making their policies and operations secular will not bring about a complete social change. The church remain the domain of social change because trait of individual behaviour or group, some characteristics of interpersonal relationship,

consciousness and motivations that are built into the structure of economic, politics and patriotism before social transformation are rooted in the church.

Again, Nigeria transformation programme is going through a 'fermentation' period. A period of excitement, anxiety and confusion and it is only religion (church) that can provide the men and women too patience, tolerance, sacrifice, calm and placid spirit required for meaningful social transformation.

Lastly, the church and the state should remain inseparable. Both the God's sovereignty and man responsibility have to be brought together for complete social change in Nigeria.

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