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**LIVED SPIRITUALITY: EXAMINING GRASSROOTS CHRISTOLOGIES
IN PUBLIC SPACE**

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Abstract

This study was conducted among Christian prayer groups in Garki International Market (in Garki District) and Wuse Market (in Wuse District), all located within Abuja Municipal Area Council in the Abuja metropolis; the research explored how informal or non-creedal understanding of the personality and work of Jesus Christ (i.e., Christologies) is expressed by members of these Christian prayer groups. Grassroots Christologies offer robust insights into theology based on people's everyday experiences. The aim of the research is to investigate and understand dominant Christological beliefs and practices common among members of Christian prayer groups in Garki and Wuse markets. A qualitative research approach was adopted as a method, through which data were collected through participant observation, interviews, and administration of questionnaires across the aforementioned markets. Findings revealed that grassroots Christologies are shaped based on everyday experience. Jesus is understood as the source of material blessings and that he rewards only those who are faithful. He is also perceived as the warrior who empowers Christians with power to fight demonic powers and enemies. Evidently, these Christian prayer groups in the market have striking differences with mainstream denominations; while prayer groups emphasise quick or immediate supernatural intervention in daily life, mainstream denominations, on the other hand, advocate for patience in anticipating answers to prayers. It was also established that Christological beliefs and practices of these prayer groups engender unity and shared identity, which leads to building a network of support for one another. The study concludes that grassroots Christologies express a theology that is practical, based on people's everyday experience.

Keywords: Christology, Poverty, Blessings, Agunechemba

Introduction

Christological discourse about Christ is no longer limited to theologians and academics; Christologizing is common among laypeople just as it is among clergy and theologians. Such reflections are obvious in songs, prayers, and chanting among Christians at the grassroots about the personality and work of Jesus Christ; people have continued to reflect on what Jesus Christ means to them—in their everyday experiences which is different from the creedal perspective. In other words, discussion on the subject of Christology is not confined to or monopolised by the academic or trained theologians—it is as well present in the grassroots. From Christian traders in the market to those who are unable to read or write, their articulation of Christ comes in the form of songs and prayers—as they ponder upon the Scriptures (Stinton 29).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research method to explore grassroots Christologies in public space. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to understand meanings, beliefs, symbols, practices, and lived experiences through which ordinary Christians interpret and express the person and work of Jesus Christ in everyday life in public spaces such as markets, streets, transport hubs, and informal prayer gatherings. Rather than measuring variables statistically, this study aimed to interpret how Christ is imagined, named, experienced, and invoked within concrete social settings. In addition, the research also utilised participant observation; the researcher attended several of Christian prayer groups' meetings in both Wuse and Garki international markets.

Results/Findings

Participants described Jesus Christ as Rewarder, Jesus as fountain of wealth, and Jesus Christ as warrior; other themes include peculiarity of Christian faith, Christian faith as means of unity, and Prayer groups as means of Identity and Community

Discussion

Christ as Rewarder

Participants 89.36 per cent maintained that Christ is the source of wealth, success, and personal empowerment, emphasizing financial blessings and prosperity as signs of faithfulness. Jesus Christ is conceived as provider, emancipator, or liberator from poverty, who serves as the reservoir of material bliss. Christ is understood as the rewarder of good and faithful deeds of his followers. From above perspective, salvation of the human soul is only implied, as against being the primary role of the advent of Christ. Because material possession (s) for the respondents is indicative of a Christian's cordiality with the divine; by inference, anyone who is poor or poverty-stricken is likely to have wronged God, or such an individual must have committed certain wrongs that have barred him/her from receiving such blessings.

From the data delineated above, it is obvious that such mentality of "faithful adherent" being blessed materially may not be divorced from African Traditional Religious worldview, whereby it is often believed that benevolence and material abundance are often a mark of one's right standing with the gods (or mostly with the ancestors); and any sickness or suffering (even in form of lack) is mostly (if not always) adjudged as such individual having done wrong and is likely being punished by the gods.

Concurring with the above claim, a participant maintained that: "Market (commercial activities) flourishes when you are in right standing with God, when you obey the commandments that Jesus has given to his followers. Those who live a wayward (immoral) life usually go poor or broke even after making it (i.e. getting wealthy) in life" (Okoye). Her position conveys a common understanding

that Christians at the grassroots level hold regarding Christ and material sufficiency or provision; however, such a position pitches Christ (subtly or otherwise) as a transactional saviour who only provides material things when an adherent is faithful. Or, worse still, salvation is reduced to a mere key that grants access to tangible things, without which one's salvation seems not genuine.

Further examination demonstrates that the above view can be associated with the wave of popular teachings common among Pentecostals on "prosperity gospel." Such teachings promote the idea that a child of God (i.e., a Christian) cannot be poor. It is reported in one of the popular Nigerian tabloids that a popular televangelist boldly asserted that Jesus never associated with or visited any poor person, because Jesus dislikes poverty. Hannah Johnson in Punchng.com/video, quoted him as saying that:

Jesus never visited any poor person in his house; check your bible. That means he hates poverty. He visited Lazarus; they were not poor; they were giving him food. He visited a sinner, Zacchaeus, who was rich. Tell me one poor man: Jesus entered his house. He hates poverty; that's the meaning. He hates poor people. He died for you not to be poor. . . . You can come poor, but you're not permitted to remain poor (Punch, n. p.)

The above opinion is injuriously pervasive in the Pentecostal setting of Nigeria. However, taking a leaf from the pastor's submission, Christ's advent, death, resurrection, and ascension are reduced to a means or source of material gains; nevertheless, more worrisome is the narrative of Christ's disdain for poverty- and by extension the poor (as contained in his argument). Such teachings greatly distort Christ's position of aligning with the poor—and the marginalised.

Situating the thought in Nigerian society, it is a fact that due to numerous factors, poverty in Nigeria is near-normal. Iroanya averred that:

In Nigeria, poverty and unemployment levels are extremely high and are two of the nation's most pressing problems. Poverty has been rising steadily over the years and seems to have become a way of life for many Nigerians. This is due to stagnation, unemployment, and poor quality of life arising from shortages of essential goods and facilities, an unhealthy environment, and government insensitivity (857-858).

Contrasting the earlier position of the Tele-Evangelist with Iroanya's thought, it is correct then to state that Jesus is not happy (to put it mildly) with Nigerians. That is against the backdrop that "Nigeria has the awful distinction of being the world capital of poverty, with 71 million Nigerians living in extreme poverty, surviving below \$1.90 per day, while 133million are multi-dimensionally poor" (Iroanya, 858). It is not surprising to find most members of these prayer groups thinking in the direction of material things or possessions being the hallmark, evidence, or validation of one's faithfulness to the divine realms.

Jesus as fountain of financial blessings

In furtherance of this discourse, divergent perspectives among respondents showed that 56.36 per cent hold the conviction that Jesus is the source of financial success and well-being, blessing faithful believers with wealth, success, and opportunities for growth. That view has similarity with earlier submission, in which 89.36 per cent of participants viewed Christ as one who rewards faithful believers with wealth, success, and health among other things; on this note, participants believe that Christ is the fountain of wealth and health.

It is deducible from the foregoing that most members of these prayer groups believe that wealth or material gains are the bottom line of believing in Jesus Christ: faith in Christ is, to a large extent, to better one's lot in life (materially). Putting it differently, Jesus is thought of as a "magic wand" or an "automated button of wealth" that once an individual confesses to the Lordship of Christ, he/she is

sure that wealth will abound. Christ then is reduced to a cash cow (kind of), who satisfies his followers with everything good.

Nevertheless, it is important to interpolate that Christian faith far outweighs material gains. Matthew 6:25-34 (New King James) is indicative of the fact that God is well aware of human needs and would not leave believers without such necessities; it is therefore significant to see Christian faith beyond being a means to acquiring perishables that lack eternal value.

Elucidating further, Jatau avouches that:

. . . True disciples of Jesus Christ understand that the lives they live here have eternal repercussions. They do not live for this life only but also for the life beyond death, which is what really matters the most. They understand that they are just pilgrims here on earth. Their real home and treasures are in heaven, not in this world. Wealth does not guarantee the extension of life, nor does its possession secure eternal life (9).

Analyzing Jatau's conviction, it is obvious that the primacy of Jesus' advent, death, resurrection, and ascension does not revolve around material gains; otherwise, Christ's advent may be a near waste of time.

Jesus as "Agunechemba" (a warrior)

Another perspective of the discourse is the belief that Jesus Christ is the spiritual warrior who fights against evil forces, protecting his followers from harm and granting them victory in spiritual battles. Such a view is not unlikely among members of the prayer groups, the reason being that it is common for Africans to associate one event or occurrence with the influence of one power or spirit: it is a common worldview that African space is pervaded with a pantheon of spirits (of which many are mostly malevolent). In view of such thought, there is always the need to be associated with a stronger force or power that can ward off such malevolent spirits. Hence, Christ is accorded the role of a protector—who watches over his people to ensure their wellbeing from any form of harm (Mbiti 74-81).

Symbolically, titles are used to connote the role that Jesus fulfils in this dimension. Another participant in an offered that: "Jesus is Agunechemba. He is the lion that conquers but cannot be conquered; he always watches over his people" (Ogu). Succinctly advancing Ogu's view above, Bediako enunciated that the daily songs, prayers, and other (informal) theological persuasions portray Christ as present with the people; he gave an instance by stating that:

Jesus is the grinding stone
On which we sharpen our cutlass,
before we perform manly deeds.
We have risen at dawn
To take our weapons of war
And join the battle.
Nkrante brafo, You are the Sword Carrier . . .
Hero incomparable...

If you go with Jesus to war
No need for a sword or gun.
The word of his mouth is the weapon
Which enemies turn and run (8-9).

Bediako's Christological imagery of Jesus is that of Christ being the source of sharpening weapons in preparation for war, and obviously Jesus, who is the "Hero Incomparable," takes over the battle; much confidence is expressed in Christ-Warrior's personality (i.e., his ability to fight, conquer, and

save when one's life or that of the community is threatened). He is dependent upon as the source of victory over evil forces.

Peculiarity of Christian Prayer groups

Data obtained from the field shows that participant population with 87.76% out of the total respondents, stated that urban market prayer groups differ from mainstream denominations because there is an emphasis on direct, immediate miracles and supernatural interventions by Jesus in daily life, while mainstream denominations focus more on structured sacraments, liturgy, and long-term spiritual growth.

Analysing the data, it is deducible that the mind-set of members of these prayer groups is that of an immediate divine solution to any challenge that might confront any individual. It appears (hypothetically speaking) that the mind-set of hustling and making ends meet tends to push members of these groups into a state of miracles being expected (or sometimes demanded) at light speed whenever a request (through prayer) is made. On the other hand, mainstream denominations emphasise patience while waiting on God for answers to prayers and the need to grow into maturity in the process; these groups believe more in a Jesus that respond speedily to their requests.

Obviously, Christ is believed and trusted based on the experiences that members encountered; the relevance of Christ in that stance can be said to be measured by his perceived power to change circumstances or situations. Contrastingly, the mainstream denominations hold on to a doctrinal and historical Christology, which is Jesus as the Son of God, who redeemed the world through his death on the Cross. Though there is the acknowledgement of his healing-miraculous power, more emphasis is laid on creeds and tradition in the mainstream congregations.

Another differing point between these prayer groups and mainstream denominations might be in the spontaneous prayers, belief and practice of prophetic utterances, belief in constant fasting, and having deliverance sessions during worship time; there is belief in engaging in warfare prayers in which Jesus is invoked, as he is conceived as the commanding figure who empowers believers to defeat demonic forces and enemies. While in mainstream churches the situation is not the same; liturgy is structured, and Christ is encountered through formal rituals. Physical or visible signs and miracles are not given much emphasis; rather, reflection on God's word is encouraged.

Additionally, while mainstream denominations maintain a worldview of a futuristic (i.e., eschatological) hope and fuller manifestation of God's kingdom, Christian prayer groups, on the other hand, focus on the immediate or present-day intervention of Christ in life's issues (e.g., business success, marital stability, and health, among others); Christology from this standpoint becomes a matter of survival.

Noticeably, one striking difference between mainline churches and market Christian prayer groups is the fact that no special training is required before one can head or lead a prayer group; however, theological training is a basic requirement before an individual can manage the leadership and oversee daily administration of the church. Observably, among all the leaders who are heading various prayer groups in urban markets that were investigated, the highest form of training any of them have had is basic discipleship—a mentoring class of just about three (3) months, and in some cases none of such training has been had. On that note, therefore, anyone who is perceived to be dedicated to the activities of the prayer groups may well be appointed a leader of any of the Christian prayer groups.

Christian Faith as means of Unity

Further examination of responses from participants indicated that 59.57% believe that Christological beliefs and practices of Christian prayer groups may foster a sense of unity and shared identity,

leading to stronger networks of support and collaboration within the broader Christian community in Abuja. Inferring from the respondents' views, certain factors may account as reasons for their response in that direction. It is obvious that though these groups may differ in certain beliefs and practices, the core of their beliefs is the personality and work of Jesus Christ; and by implication, they have a shared belief in the person of Jesus Christ.

That is not far-fetched from earlier responses reported above where Jesus is viewed as the rewarder of faithfulness with material blessings, and he is also the source of all blessings. It can be added that though there may exist differing beliefs, they are nevertheless not strong enough to cause divisions among members of those different Christian prayer groups in urban markets of Abuja. In other words, believing in Jesus as Saviour, Healer, Deliverer, Warrior, and the like far outweighs the denominational, ethnic, or socio-economic differences that maybe existent among members of these groups.

In addition, it can be inferred from responses that prayers that are said among members centres around Christ: whether these prayers are geared towards seeking solutions for personal, communal, or national issues, it is the name of Jesus that is invoked. This shared dependence in Jesus' name creates an avenue to cultivate spiritual and emotional bonding, which translates into giving a sense of family and solidarity among Christians in these markets; it is also worthy of noting that worship practices may engender and strengthen the groups' cohesion and identity. It was keenly observed among members who fellowship in some of the prayer groups that, only few attendees share same denominational affiliation while others are members of other denominations and that notwithstanding, the unity of the prayer groups appears unquestioned despite differences in denominations.

Another implication of the respondents' opinion is that various teachings and practices of these Christian prayer groups strive to imitate Christ in his show of love and service. Members of these groups strive to mirror such virtues as found in Christ's personality and work. This is in the form of showing material or emotional support to one another, visitation, and encouragement; these can help strengthen interpersonal ties and mutual trust among members of these groups. Maduka revealed that "Among traders there is provision where any member who suffers loss in business or a loved one is supported in many ways. Any member whose business is going down without any financial strength to boost himself can seek support from the group. And in a case where a member dies, other members rally round to make financial commitment and emotional support to the deceased family" (Maduka). Stressing further, it suffices that the groups' existence is an enabling ground for building networks and collaboration among members. Since Christological beliefs lay emphasis on unity in the body of Christ (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12), prayer groups are most likely to reach out to the broader Christian community to collaborate in fellowship activities (Ogu).

Various testimonies of Christ's intervention in members' lives serve as another shared point of communal identity among group members. Common in these groups are testimonies of how Christ delivered one from an accident, how an individual experienced divine healing through the power of Jesus, or how one trusted in God for provision and miraculously received answers to prayers. These stories/confessions boost or reinforce a common identity among different members of these prayer groups. It is glaring that christological beliefs and practices, from approaches to prayer to confessions and proclamation of the power of Jesus Christ, such practices and beliefs serve as bond-builders, with no critical differences being overlooked. Christ becomes the centre of convergence for what these different prayer groups believe or stand for.

Prayer groups as means of Identity and Community

Data obtained from the field showed that 71.80% of respondents believe that Abuja's markets bring together people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Christian prayer groups offer a sense

of identity and community for Christians, helping them stay connected to their faith amidst a diverse environment. Their responses are indicative of the fact that Abuja urban markets are also places for cultural and religious convergence, and Christian prayer groups provide some sort of stability for members of the prayer groups.

Furthermore, the data reveals that urban markets in Abuja metropolis are spaces that showcase the representation of Nigeria's rich diversity in terms of ethnicity and religion, among other things. It is important to add that daily dealings of people from different orientations may create both opportunities and uneasiness or tension. Looking at their responses from another dimension, Christian prayer groups in Abuja markets are much more than just another religious gathering, because these groups play the role of providing a safe space for strengthening members' identity—and, by extension, building communities. Christian prayer groups in Abuja metropolis also serve as a social support system in an environment where individuals are most likely to become overwhelmed or feel alone in their daily struggles. The data also show that these groups help traders to maintain spiritual focus and moral grounding through various religious activities of prayer groups in the market space.

Examining various views obtained during the survey, participants' responses imply that Christian prayer groups in markets surveyed lean towards functional Christology; as much as Jesus Christ is implied as the saviour, however, judging from songs, prayers, and other confessions, Christ is believed and trusted for what he can do or has done already.

Conclusion

Market spaces are basically known for economic or commercial activities; however, data have shown that there are other activities aside from commerce. Urban markets in Abuja metropolis are not an exception to the advent or existence of Christian prayer groups; in light of the above, it is obvious from the findings and can be concluded that these groups bring people of diverse ethnic and denominational affiliations together for common and divergent reasons as well. These Christian prayer groups offer a sense of identity and community to members, especially seeing that they live in an environment of divergent religious, ethnic, and commercial interests or economic pursuits.

In addition, these Christian prayer groups also serve as a platform for the expression of grassroots understanding of who Christ is (and what he has done) in urban public space; the groups also provide a vital support system for believers, which also strengthens the identity of members as they find a sense of togetherness in the community. Consequently, the existence of these Christian prayer groups is a prove that Christian beliefs and practices are no longer too limited to traditional Christian setting, but it is actively lived out in everyday life (even in public space).

Recommendations

There is no doubt that Africa is witnessing biblical reinterpretation and reconstruction of teachings (or better stated doctrines) that pertain to the personality and work of Christ. In other words, Christology in the Global South (and Africa in particular) has witnessed a growing trend of both theologians and lay people trying to make sense of the person of Jesus Christ as well as his work; it is in light of the above that grassroots Christologies have become a Christological dimension worth considering. In view of the foregoing, the following recommendations are given:

1. There should be support and recognition of these prayer groups in urban markets of Abuja metropolis. Religious as well as academic institutions should accept the reality that Christological formulation is no longer limited to creedal confessions or proclamation, or exists just within the confines of organized institutions, but that even the local communities of theologically untrained or unschooled individuals also Christologise. Therefore, these prayer groups should be acknowledged for the roles they play in fostering unity, peace, and moral values in settings like Abuja urban markets.

2. Scholars and Christian leaders should take time to study how Christian identity is shaped in informal, grassroots settings just like in Christian prayer groups in urban markets. This step can help the broader Christian community (particularly the church) to respond more appropriately and effectively as well to the realities of life in urban settings.
3. In view of the above, the researcher is recommending that basic or minimal training programmes should be provided to equip leaders of these prayer groups with skills bordering on pastoral care, conflict resolution and counselling. That is because, just as it is with any human relationship, members of these groups have needs that require basic pastoral skills to handle.
4. Churches and academic communities should make an effort to document and study grassroots Christology to understand and analyse how Christian faith is lived out in everyday life in urban informal environments. That will help in understanding theology from a practical point of view in Africa.

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