

HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ABUSES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA SOCIETY: A THEOLOGICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract: We are living in an age of growing threat to peace, of tragic escalation of poverty, and humanly imposed suffering driven by expanding coast of corruption, oppression and violence. The above scenario no doubt has made the issue of human rights issues a global struggle. However, the Nigeria situation which has made it to be ranked among the world capital of poverty driven nations in terms of the abuse of human rights globally raise a concern that should be the concern of all her citizenry. This work therefore seeks to examine human rights and social justice abuse in Nigeria and their theological challenges.

Keywords: Human rights, Social justice, Theology, Development, Society, Structures, Ideology.

Introduction

The issue of under- development and ideological aberrations in Africa have continued to expand the coast of human rights and social justice abuses in geometric progression. This no doubt has led to the astronomical rise of different forms of dehumanization of humanity being perpetrated in the region. Onwu (1992:76) posits that there is a global abuse of human rights and social justice currently that is posing inevitable and far-reaching challenges to all humanity and institutions worldwide. According to him this is pointedly pertinent in the growing threat to peace, the tragic escalation of poverty and suffering as well as rising profile of oppression and violent conflicts.

It is even more worrisome that Nigeria which has continued to claim the position of being the giant of Africa appears to be worse hit in human rights and social justice abuses in modern time. Writing on this highly ugly development in Nigeria, Amunnadi (2016) states that the country has become a nation where her leaders place personal interest above national interest a system which he observes has entrenched corrupt leadership as a norm rather than misnomer. According to him, political power in Nigeria is not employed to serve the fundamental human rights of her people but rather for their sustained impoverishment socially, economically and politically.

The implication of the above trend he observes is that ours is now a nation on a suicidal mission driven by the increasingly mad dish passion of her leaders for greed, falsehood, injustice and primordial acquisition culture that is fueled by corrupt judiciary.

The issues of social injustice and human rights abuse in the nation has become grossly overwhelming in the area of human security threats to lives and property in recent times. The above view is corroborated by Dayo (2011) when he states that human rights abuses especially as it has to do with discrimination and marginalization of some ethnic nationalities in the country the federal government appears not to be winning the battle against the rising human insecurity threats in the nation.

However, the initiator of Macedonian initiative, 2008, a researcher on religious terrorism submits that the issue of sustainable failure of federal government to wipe human security threats from the bud even in the face of constant supply of adequate intelligence network underscores the fact that those in political authority has a hand or are members of the conspirators fuelling insecurity challenges in Nigeria. In other words, he avers the above reasons of complicity on the side of the government for the above abuses as explaining why government fails to act proactively whenever they were informed of impending crisis. What this means is that human right abuses and social injustices in the country has come to stay as an evil instrument for perpetuating selfish political agenda by those in political leadership. The above view is corroborated by Nzarga (2014) when he states that as long as the government continues to fail in entrenching the rule of law by not bringing an end to the epidemic of police killings and other form of abuses in the country it will remain in the eyes of public opinion as the grand patron of

human rights abuses in the nation. Furthermore he puts the above view pointedly when he states that a number of obstacles militate against access to justice in Nigeria most of which have their roots in the political and economic system promoted by the ruling class. Against this backdrop he observes that it is ironical that Nigeria has become a nation where those that are supposed to safeguard and protect the rights of the citizenry turn around to trample upon and rubbish the rights of same. This work will therefore seek to examine the issue involved in this ugly development through theological appraisal. It is an attempt to investigate the theological implications of the rising rate of human rights abuse and social injustice in Nigeria with a view to charting the way forward.

Theoretical Framework: Scholars differ on the conceptualizations of the terms human rights and justice. However this work shall be situated on the theoretical perspectives of Bird as cited in Pesche (2009:234-238). Justice and human rights according to him are grounded in the following social good theory, and natural right theory. The social good theory holds the view that justice must be committed to the promotion of social welfare whether expressed, unexpressed or even contradicted by law. Besides he posits that the natural right theory relates to the rights which are not artificially gifted but rather emanate primarily and essentially from their as human persons. Simply put they are the inalienable rights due to human persons as creatures of God which must recognize and respected for all in order to secure sustainable peace and development in every society.

Definitions of Concept: Human rights and social justice are used in this study as a set of inter-related concepts that guide the direction and mode of inquiry. In this section we shall attempt to define the key concepts in order to provide a background understanding of the above subject matter.

1) Human Rights: Human according to Onwu (1992) as defined by scientific materialism defines human as a person who serves as the standard for everything. From the above definition he states that from the ideological position of humanism the idea of human or man is the object who is responsible for creating God, morality and everything else. What this mean is that the term human refers to the being that serves as the centre of this universe. However, he posits that from the context of Christian theology man or the human person refers to the being created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). The above definition he asserts repels the humanist ideology that man is a machine or a highly developed animal – whether expressed in terms of psychological, biological or behavioural adaptations.

Against this backdrop the term human rights refers to those conditions that are fundamental and indispensable for the individual or group to live and function as human beings. They are those claims which individuals or group make on society with some having legally backing while others remain as ideal aspiration to be attained in future. These rights according to Iwe (1986) can be classified as follows: civil, political, social, economic and cultural.

Civil and political rights include the following right to life, right to self-determination, freedom from torture, and inhuman treatment, freedom from slavery, and forced labour, right to liberty and security, freedom of movement and choice of residence, right to fair trial, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of association etc. On the other hand economic, social and cultural rights embraces such rights as the right to work and just conditions of work, right to adequate standard of living, the right to organize, form and join trade unions, the right to social security, right to property, education, right to participate in cultural life etc. They therefore relates to those rights and obligation required of individuals, groups and government in securing dignified, safe and a just society.

Therefore, Onwu (1992) submits that what makes a person human is not limited to the distinguishing attribute of rationality, culture, civilization, science and arts but to the fact of divine claim of humanity sharing their origin from God and of his inescapable demand for a response to that claim (Ps. 139). The above view is put pointedly when he states that what makes human essentially human relates to the following:

- 1) The inherent relationship of man to God as his creator which he refers to as the core of his/her **humanities** which identities him as his debtor.
- 2) The inherent responsibility of man to God as his creator (God lay claim to man's purpose as his source).

Furthermore he avers that human as a term that owes his origin and purpose to the divine being raises the question or concept of duties/obligation and so forth. Simply put he states that from Biblical theology human rights derives from human responsibility to God (Gen. 4:9). These rights he notes are not charities due to others

but duty to them (Deut. 5:11; 1 Tim, 6:17; Gen. 4:10, 2Kings 21:19).

In its own contribution theadvocatesforhumanrights.org posits that human rights relates to those fundamental values that guarantee people the means of enjoying or satisfying their basic needs such as food, housing, and education so they can exploit their full potential in life. According to it, human rights by providing people with platforms that secure their life, liberty, equality, and security it therefore serves as a shield that protects people against abuse by those who are more powerful.

2) Social Justice: The virtue of justice is grounded in the divine origin of man(Genesis1:26-27). Etymologically speaking justice is derived from the Greek word dikaione which relates to the term a just person and a latin word justitia which means righteousness or equity. The above word in Hebrew thought relates to two words namely tsedek and mishpat which could mean righteousness or judgment. In the Judeo-Christian Scriptures the word justice has to do with faithfulness to the covenant and the responsibilities of a relationship. Ghai (n.d:2) corroborates the above view when he defines justice as the art of “bonding or joining or organizing people together into a right or fair order of relationship”. Furthermore he states that social justice has to do with the justice which strives to provide equal opportunities to everyone to develop his inherent qualities.

Therefore social justice as used in this context relates to the application of justice as a tool for dismantling all forms of inequalities and injustices in order to entrench justice for all. It is the recognition and the promotion of a society where all citizens are deserving of equal treatment and protection before the law. The above view is captured succinctly by termpaper.com and socialworkers.org when they posit that social justice has to do with justice which ensures that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities irrespective of their ethnic, nationality or tribe, colour, religion, political affiliation, economic status or social background.

Scope of Human Rights and Social Justice Abuses in Nigeria

The increasing trend of human rights and social justice abuses in Nigeria in recent times has continued to assume profundity in terms of its scopes and consequences. In this section we shall however be considering its scope briefly.

1) Economic Abuse: Commenting on the economic abuse driven by political ineptitude Oru (2014) had this to say:

Which country should be richer, for instance like Nigeria where a government agency is alleged to have not accounted or remitted to the public treasury oil revenue worth six trillion naira just from 2009 to 2012; a country where public servants loot billions of dollars indiscriminately without the country knowing it... yet the same country has no adequate road and those it has are simply death traps (p.4).

Furthermore he posits that it is for the above reasons that same country has no functional and modern health facilities for health of her people and even what she has in place as the educational system for the same reason given above is not working. From the foregoing, economic deprivation and subjugation through structurally imposed economic system is greatly aggravating the cost of human rights and social justice abuses in Nigeria in the following areas: First it is preventing healthy infrastructural development such as provision of roads, electricity, hospitals and state of art educational system needed to put the Nigeria on the path of growth and development. This is because when public officials in connivance with those in political authority promote and foster the plundering of the common wealth for the interest of the privileged minority, the citizenry suffer tremendously as revenue meant for the development of public institutions and provision of dividends of good governance are diverted into private accounts for the building of their selfish empires. The above infrastructural neglect predicated on gross abuse of economic rights of the citizenry no doubt compounds the economic deprivation of the citizens as bad roads, lack or poor electricity supply limits the industrialization of the nation that usually should have serve as a spring board for reducing poverty and unemployment. Besides more poor health facilities mean more people die for lack of health care and inability to foot high cost of medication charged by scarce private health facilities. The result is that the nation is made poorer as much productive manpower is lost out of neglect of the health of the citizenry. The catalogue of our poverty in these areas namely roads,

electricity, educational, welfare, health or put simply in basic infrastructure in Africa to which Nigeria in a microcosm is not because the common wealth is meager but is predicated on the looting culture of our corrupt government functionary and their cronies. The result is that poverty becomes entrenched as resources and institutions that should help hard working citizen to break from vicious penury and lack is non-existent or where they exist are only in name.

2) Political Abuses: The rape of political rights of Nigerian citizens has become increasingly unimaginable that the contemporary Nigeria society has become a hot-bed for all kinds of criminality such as kidnapping, Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen insurgency, drug and human trafficking, prostitution, armed robbery, youth restiveness and vandalism. Nmah (2012: 272) as cited by Nmah (2013:2) captures the above view when he states that the gross abuse of human rights and social justice in the nation has led to the breeding of ethnic and religious nationalism as against national consciousness and patriotism. The result he notes is the sporadic rise of all forms of religious and ethnic extremism that has continued to pose threats of immediate disintegration of the entity called Nigeria. Moreover he states that this ugly situation has led to increasing call for sovereign national conference as a way of charting the way forward. From the above scenario one can infer that the political abuse of the human rights and escalation of social injustice in the Nigeria can no longer be treated with a wave of hand as doing so will be like one sitting on a keg of gun powder.

3) Educational Right Abuses: The fact that the political class plunder our common wealth and use their ill-gotten proceeds to train their children in the best universities and schools abroad leaves much to be desired in terms of the abuse of the educational rights of our young generation. Not only are revenue meant to establish quality educational system from the cradle to tertiary level in terms of quality facilities and quality teachers are diverted, the poor are often left at the mercy of well established private schools whose exorbitant fees are only meant to accommodate the minority rich among us. The result is that the majority of our young generations are denied quality educational development which will help to lift them above poverty and lack of relevant skill and knowledge. Oru (2014) captures the above view when he posits that the result of the cluelessness and political wantons of our national leadership driven by their selfish propensity is the cause of overt penury, pain and ugly experiences that has characterized the life of our polity. Without educationally well-equipped citizenry the results he notes is that violence becomes the order of the day as our young men and women increasingly resort to violent crimes as the only way of survival.

4) Demographic rights abuse: There is increasing rate of internally displaced persons in today's Nigeria. This is predicated on the fact that those in the politically leadership lack the will or capacity to stem the tide of violent conflicts that are destroying people in hundreds of thousands and their property and business worth billions of naira are constantly under siege. The result is that most people in such vulnerable places flee from their ancestral homes and places where they have spent many years for residence and business. The above ugly developmental no doubt carry gross implication of promoting so many social, cultural and psychological implications when people are forced not by choice or war to migrate outside their established niche of existence to camps where they are often treated as industrial pigs and not as persons.

Theological Appraisal: Theologically relationship defines the vital link between divinity and humanity. Christian theology categorizes this into vertical and horizontal relationships. Our vertical relationship relates to the divine and human's plane of interaction and their attendant privileges and obligations. It unveils God's covenant relationship with man within the context of divine promises of blessings, and human responsibility of obedience. The horizontal space covers man's relationship with man and the attendant responsibility relating to same. Jesus summed up the demands of the above vertical and horizontal relationship with one word love. (Math 22:36-40) According to Him man owes his creator and fellow man love as his supreme responsibility to God his maker and a show of his sense of value to his fellow man as co-creatures created to display God's manifold wisdom and love.

The above violations are offshoots of individuals or groups denial of love to those who deserves it on account of being creatures made in the image God. By such acts people are reduced to things or objects which has no claim to inherent dignity or honour which unfortunately goes against the position of the Psalmist when he avers as follows:

When I consider your heavens the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour. (Psalm 8:3-5)

From the foregoing, victims of human rights abuses are not only denied of their self-worth within the context of divine economy they are equally denied justice which is the foundation for enjoying intrinsic and extrinsic peace. What this means is that as long as some people are denied peace in their internal corridor of reality, their hearts, they end up giving their society no peace. The result is that in trying to destroy the weak and the vulnerable in the society due to selfish reasons the strong and the powerful end up equally destroying themselves and the society. Human rights abuses and social injustices no matter how small therefore must not be condoned by society for a popular adage states that an injury to one is injury to all. Government bodies, Churches, schools, media, families and non- governmental organizations must therefore operate in synergy in the fight against all forms of human rights abuses if we are going to secure the individual and public peace.

In divine economy the strength of human rights is measured by the extent of care that the weak and vulnerable can access in the society. This is stated pointedly in Christological teaching which states inter alia:

Then the King will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine you did to me... They also will answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you. He will reply, I tell you the truth whatever you did not do for one of the least of these you did not do for me. (Mathew 25: 40-45)

It is against this backdrop that families, organizations and government must recognize that their strength lies not only in their commitment to the safety and wellbeing of the strong and powerful among them but also to their weakest members. Ele (2020:272) captures the above view pointedly when he states that the justice due all humanity irrespective of status or position is rooted in their theogenic origin.

According to him man as a creature of God is endowed with justice as a natural right which should be protected for the good of all.

Conclusion: The above paper has attempted to investigate some of the human rights abuses and social injustice in Nigeria today. The study became necessary as no nation can continue to survive under gross violations of the right that foster development, growth and stability in modern times. Besides the popular axiom by the Great Divine Teacher, Jesus Christ, that every house/kingdom divided against itself cannot stand is most pertinent in our quest for understanding why nation states fail and the way for evolving a sustainable Nigerian nation. It identified economic, political, educational and demographic right abuses and injustice as the issues that demand the concern for all if we are going to break from the vicious cycle of criminality, poverty and disintegration that is fast looming on us.

Recommendations: The following recommendations were made as the way forward.

- 1) The church community should serve as vanguard of human right and social justice advocacy in the country.
- 2) The church community should champion the integration of fundamental human rights as measurable indices which should form part of our statutory laws and for which those in political leadership can be held accountable.
- 3) The citizenry must insist through pressure groups to put in place a restructured Nigeria state that ensures that political ineptitude that subjugates the majority of the population economically, politically and otherwise through institutionalized structural injustices are dislodged totally.
- 4) Our educational system should promote ethics education and enforcement that ensures that citizens develop proper character mindset necessary for good governance and entrenchment for just society from the cradle to the tertiary levels of education.

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