



Stomach Infrastructure in His Name: A Critique of Pentecostalism

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 11 August 2015;

Received in revised form:

17 June 2016;

Accepted: 24 June 2016;

Keywords

Stomach infrastructure

Pentecostalism

ABSTRACT

“Stomach infrastructure” is a jocular slang that was coined in the heat of the build-up towards the Ekiti State gubernatorial elections that took place on the 21st of June, 2014. One interesting highlight of the campaign was the wooing of prospective voters with things that could appeal to the masses like foodstuffs, money, recharge cards, etc, by the gubernatorial challenger. He ended up defeating the incumbent in a landslide victory. Hence, the term “stomach infrastructure” is used widely to describe petty inducements and bribes. It is also used to describe materialism, and the love of pleasurable things. This paper seeks to examine Pentecostalism and the impact it has on the lives of Nigerians. It also seeks to clarify the role of material or worldly wealth in the Pentecostal brand of the Gospel.

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Introduction

In order to understand the presence and impact of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, we examine briefly the religious arena in Nigeria before the explosion of the contemporary Pentecostal spirituality. We have to categorize and identify the nature of Pentecostalism, its influence and impact on Christianity in the country. The global Pentecostalism is interwoven with various forms of “independent” churches in Nigeria. Our focus on the global Pentecostalism is highlighted by a nutshell presentation of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria. At this juncture, we attempt a synthesis of the impact and influence of Pentecostalism in Nigeria, as a contribution towards a renewed Christianity today. What began as an innocuous charismatic fervor in African Churches in the early 1980s had its humble origins in the university Christian fellowships of the preceding decade. The growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria was fuelled by the critical perception of most young Christian students in most Southern Nigerian universities that the mainstream denominations such as the Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and Catholic churches had become too cold, boring, docile, and devoid of the resurrection power that the Apostles of old received in the upper room in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Thus, the new age Pentecostalism which was initially confined to campuses began to grow in leaps and bounds, first in the consciousness of their members on campuses, and later extended beyond the limited confines of the country to other parts of the world.

The expansion of the reach of Pentecostalism was facilitated by the economic and political crises of the 1980s, which naturally and psychologically created adherents who were drawn from the pool of frustrated and marginalized people in the larger Nigerian society. The claim to ‘power’ by Pentecostal outreaches across the country was attested to by the numerous reports of instant healings and miracles and experienced by several attendees, devotees and testifiers. It was these “signs and wonders” that attracted the overwhelming crowds found at these gatherings. The authenticity of the miraculous feats of healing and restoration in some Pentecostal churches in Nigeria has remained questionable and debatable over time. There had been instances when exposes were published by journalists on some fake Pentecostal pastors who utilized charms and other diabolical means to manipulate and cajole their followers. As

many were exposed, and became obscure and cast into oblivion, several others often emerged to fill the gap.

Today, Pentecostalism has become a booming trade mark of a Christian evangelistic crusade in Nigeria. The messages of healing, miracles and prosperity have often received wider acceptance among the populace, especially the youth. Many Nigerians have seen the hope of the oil boom collapse into the spiral of economic decline, social and political decadence. Pentecostal churches in the country have continued to feast on the psychology of the masses that genuinely are desirous of relief or a means of escape from their sordid existential realities. True, while there may be some faithful Pentecostal pastors who are committed to the course of promoting God’s kingdom on earth, several others have continued to pursue their pre-occupation as a commercial venture, and utilize any means to accumulate profits. The onslaught by the Nigerian State against the menacing phenomenon of advance fee fraud and allied crimes seems not to have impacted on the new age ‘Hollywood Pastors’ in Nigeria, who in their haven of least resistance - religion, with all its emotive appeals - utilize extortionate and immoral means to milk or exploit their unsuspecting adherents. Recently, the National Broadcasting Commission in Nigeria (NBC) clamped down on the broadcast of unverified miracle claims by some Tele-Evangelists, in an effort to sanitize the airing of Christian religious programmes on the country’s numerous television stations. The action, NBC explained, was to protect innocent Nigerians against extortion by some notorious evangelists whose deception may have become public knowledge.

From the foregoing, it is clear that putting the phenomenon of Pentecostalism in Nigeria under the searchlight would be a worthwhile exercise. This paper will analyze the genesis of Pentecostalism and its interface with the socio-economic and political conditions in the country, drawing inferences from historical accounts of the conduct, crises and collapse of some Pentecostal churches and the growth and expansion of some others, with the overall objective of establishing the prospects of the widening pool of Pentecostal churches in contemporary Nigeria.

The Conditions That Gave Rise to the Birth of Pentecostalism

One of the essential characteristics of the nascent African

Christianity was the emphasis placed on prayer in the power of the Holy Spirit. The peculiar situation in the Nigerian society of the early 20th century contributed immensely to this spiritual consciousness. There was abundant poverty and terrifying diseases. There was an acute present of the demonic in the society and the epitome of the demonic was seen in witchcraft. Prayer was seen as the immediate way of combating these evils. These craved, as they had always done, physical and spiritual healing, and protection from the multitude of evils against which the poor are powerless. When African prophets arose who addressed these needs from the depths of their own religious consciousness, they counted their converts in hundreds of thousands. Their emphasis was on dreams and visions. Healing and exorcism were seen as logical consequences of the divine intervention through prayer. God reveals his plans and ordinances to those who pray and even reveals his personal name to them, empowering them with the spiritual gifts.

Many Pentecostal groups came simultaneously from various angles in this nation in a way conducive to most Nigerians, taking into consideration their culture, customs and beliefs and relating their God to the life of their people. These churches did not only introduce an intensive practice of prayer into Nigerian Christianity, but also seek to liberate Christianity from the western practices. They seek to indigenize Christian faith in the country through the religious parameters of African Traditional Religion. They believe that God was already present in Africa before the Europeans arrived and that many of the ways Africans worshipped then are better than the ways the missionaries taught them. The result is a thoroughly "Africanized" version of Christianity. With the accentuation of prayers and spiritual gifts by the emerging African Indigenous Churches, the Christian faith in Nigeria was given a Pentecostal direction. These churches marked the beginning of Pentecostal phenomenon in Nigeria.

Despite the failings of the Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, they have still recorded some positive feats. The following are some of the positive impacts of Pentecostalism in the contemporary Christianity in Nigeria. These are nevertheless, exclusive to the Nigerian situation; they could be noted wherever the Pentecostal spirituality is fostered. They helped the people to appreciate and give due attention to these dimensions or aspects of the Christian faith. The African context makes them interesting and desirable in the churches. These should be encouraged for an effective Christian witness today.

Holy Bible

Pentecostalism has reawakened a general desire and love for the Bible as the written word of God, and as a perennial document of authentic Christian moral life. Many Christians are nowadays taking the Bible seriously and it is no longer considered as a book meant for the clergy. There are many Bible study groups in the mainline churches in Nigeria and some of them are operating vital ecclesial ministries. For instance, Catholics are finding biblical support for much of the presupposed doctrinal and devotional practices of the Church. It is now common to hear from Catholics and mainline Protestants alike: "the Bible says," and many biblical passages are becoming a regular prayer motives for many Christians. This awakened interest in the Bible is helping people to realize that prayer is not a monologue but a dialogue between God and his children. The Bible remains an authoritative word of God and it is through the Bible that God dialogues with a believer.

Music

Religious music in Nigeria has witnessed a remarkable innovation since the outburst of Pentecostalism. Many people had discovered a new dimension of being a Christian through the so called gospel music. The fluidity of Pentecostal rhyme and rhythm has made it easy for people to sing and play the same tune in various languages and in diverse cultural ambiances. Pentecostal music is homogenizing the cultural spectrum of the country. The youths of various ethnics background and religious affiliations can now come together to sing and enjoy a common religious tune.

According to Columbanus Udofia: "Music is a central part of African culture and especially in African religious culture Pentecostalism has really fostered the flourishing of African rhythm in Christian worship, making the Church more at home in the African soul. The presence of Pentecostal music and accompaniments has helped many young Africans to realize that religious services can be "pleasurable" and has created a common identity for people of various denominations and ethnics in the one big family of God. Moreover, Pentecostal music has reawakened the religious life of the people. Many churches are now giving attention to the formation and training of choristers in the church. Resources are being allotted for the provision of a state of art musical instruments as singing and dancing is becoming an integral part of the liturgy. Pentecostalism has led to the integration of African music into Christian worship in a very significance manner and style.

Spirituality and Prayer Life

There is no doubt that Pentecostalism has awakened in Nigerians eagerness for spiritual life in the secular world, and a desire for an experiential communion with God in prayers. People are now giving serious attention to their prayer life. There is a noticeable guest for a spirituality based on a personal relationship with the Lord, which for instance in the Catholic Church is manifested in love for private

Eucharistic Adoration

Pentecostalism is noted for encouraging a spirituality that abhors confinement and standardization, while provoking an intimate experience of the Holy Spirit. Many Nigerians are now after a spirituality that is manifested in power, since an in breaking of the divine in the ordinary is a proof of the validity and authenticity of a religious life of an individual. In this context, Achunike observes that: "People are looking for men of God and Spiritual masters and the results their encounter with these men of God will yield for them."⁸⁹ To this end, religious pragmatism is becoming a feature of spirituality and prayer in Nigeria.

Preaching – Proclamation – Teaching

One of the outstanding impacts of Pentecostalism is a general interest in the preaching, proclamation and teaching of the Christian faith in the country by the mainline churches. Unfortunately much of these are done from apologetic or polemic. "Also of positive values are their biblically based hymns, songs, and choruses. They may lack proper theology...

Charismatic Hymns, choruses and praises and chants have gained entrance into Catholic Liturgy. Priests now start preaching with singing. Homily punctuated with sensible Charismatic singing should be encouraged. Scripturally based hymns, when rendered in African rhythms, are always inviting and melodious"(H. C. ACHUNIKE, *The Influence of Pentecostalism on Catholic Priests and Seminarians in Nigeria*, 106).

Nevertheless, there is an earnest effort to expound the Christian faith and moral, which has led to much evangelistic renewal across churches. The attention that is given to the Bible by the Pentecostals as the sole authoritative source of preaching the good news and of teaching the Christian faith and morals have provoked theologians and pastors of the mainline churches to give a new zeal to the ministry of the Word. This zeal for evangelization has led to the incorporation of courses in evangelization - methods and techniques of evangelization - are becoming more conspicuous in the curriculum of seminaries and theological faculties in the country.

According to Donatus Udoette, "Many bishops and priests are not teaching the people what they are supposed to know about God and his word. They do not give the faithful the needed understanding that the Eucharist is word celebrated; that it is the word of God that gives meaning and significance to the sacraments." This desire for a renewed commitment to the preaching and teaching of the Christian faith is a contribution of Pentecostalism. Many preachers in the mainline churches were educated and sophisticated salesmen in possession of the best products in the market, but woefully lacking in skills and disastrously unable to market their products. It is the success of the pentecostals that brought this observation to lamplight, and in the last few years, the situation is fast changing and the pulpits in the mainline churches are becoming fountains of enrichment and nourishment for the faithful.

Liturgy – Worship

According to Hilary Achunike: "Liturgy deals with the way people worship God. Pentecostals take worship seriously and allow it to penetrate and influence their lives. Indeed for the Pentecostals, worship is a 24- hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week experience of God."⁹⁵ The Pentecostals attention to worship and vibrancy of Pentecostal celebrations have led to a change of attitude towards liturgical celebrations in the mainline churches. The faithful are responding to the call for active participation at the liturgical functions due to the stimulus from the Pentecostal churches. Many Nigerians Christians generally welcome the pentecostal styles of worship, since this seems to respond to African religious sentiments. Donatus Udoette observes:

It is not long... since the Catholic Church introduced into her liturgy the singing of choruses, playing of local instruments, clapping of hands and dancing. Hitherto it was forbidden by an unwritten law to do these things. The Church was supposed to be as quiet as possible so that one would not distract the presence of God in the Spirit.

Lay Participation

Closely associated to the empowerment of women at the liturgical functions, is a general commitment of the laity to their Christian callings. The era when the Church was the exclusive affairs of the clergy is fast coming to an end. The platform of this awareness and vivification is the realisation that there is no sector of the people of God that is endowed with the monopoly of the spiritual gifts. The Church grows where there are manifestations of spiritual gifts, whether among the laity or the clergy, for the good of the whole community.

Clerical and Lay Formation

The onslaught of Pentecostalism had called the mainline churches to review the programme of formation of their pastors, in order to respond effectively, to the present situation in the country. And apart from the ministerial training in the seminaries and theological faculties, there are various denominational and interdenominational centres for training and

formation of the faithful either for evangelical works or for their general Christian formation.

Use of Mass Media

Another aspect of this response is the development of communication departments in various mainline churches, to inform the public about the works of salvation. Many bishops and priests are now regular guests in television and radio stations, in their attempt to carry the gospel beyond the pulpit. Church programmes and spiritual activities are given wider publicity in the mass media.

The Pentecostals have encouraged the use of mass media for religious programmes, and this is fast becoming normal for the mainline churches in the country.

Ecclesial Consciousness

Pentecostalism has really influenced the ecclesial consciousness of many Christians and their identification with their churches is becoming very strong. This ecclesial solidarity is now influencing the moral life of people in the society, since they believe that their actions or inactions will be attributed to their churches. There is a kind of spontaneous desire for an adequate ethical life, in order to meet up with the ethical standard of their churches among committed Christians. This demands holiness and proper moral life, both from the sanctuary and the pew. The Pentecostals teaching of born-again has much impact on the mainline churches, since every authentic Christian is expected to live a new life in Christ and to be guided by the Spirit. Since there is no church that is contrary to holiness and righteousness of her members, many are compelled by their ecclesial consciousness to demonstrate an acceptable Christian moral standard in their public life, at least so that they do not tarnish the image of their church.

Church Support (Tithing)

The Pentecostal churches are often indigenous congregations and as such there are no "mother churches" or "funding agencies" for their financing and sustenance. The support of the church rests solely on the local members. The commonly adopted means of supporting the church is tithing. The biblical practice of tithing is generally accepted by members, even when it is very demanding on the individuals. This approach has proven to be useful and effective for the survival of Pentecostal churches in the country. Many Christians in the mainline churches are also realizing the "spiritual usefulness" of tithing, and are therefore, paying their tithes to support their churches.

Devotional Practices

Pentecostalism is challenging some of the churches' traditional pious practices that are ineffective for meeting the spiritual needs of today. Members of the mainline churches are incorporating from the Pentecostals, new religious practices or devotions that seem to respond pragmatically to their religious and spiritual necessities. The general result is a kind of syncretistic devotions by many Christians, in their search for a devotion that "works." Many protestants for example pray the Catholic's rosary, and do the station of the cross, while some Catholics are now practicing "dry fasting", "seven/forty days fasting," tarring nights, camp prayers sessions in bushes, etc., depending on their religious disposition and the gravity of their spiritual problems.

One of the religious practices in Pentecostalism that has come to stay in the Nigerian Christianity is speaking in tongues. Even though some mainline Christians do not allow speaking in tongues in their public liturgy, it is becoming a common phenomenon in organized Para-liturgical functions of various

churches. There are priests and ministers who now openly encourage their members to pray in tongues even at liturgical celebrations. Another Pentecostal practice that is incorporated by many mainline Christians is voluptuous praise. Priests and pastors now urge the faithful to praise the Lord, and dancing before the Lord is fast becoming a pious practice.

Aesthetic of Religious Ambience

In the words of Achunike: "Pentecostals have a very high sense of aesthetics. This is evidenced in the architectural beauty of their churches and their interior decorations." Pentecostalism has succeeded tremendously in influencing the aesthetic set-up of the mainline churches in Nigeria. One cannot but admire the beauty around the "sanctuary" of the Pentecostal churches, which very often is state-of-art. Even personal dressing codes or habit of many Pentecostal pastors will not leave much to be desired from a gentleman. Therefore both the church set-up and the person of the pastors are influencing the mainline churches positively. Many Christians now pay attention to the beautification of their churches, and many priests and ministers in the mainline churches now pay more attention to their public decorum and posture

Looking at the above influences of Pentecostalism on mainline churches, it is obvious that Pentecostalism is a force to reckon with in the contemporary Christianity. It has created permanent impact on the churches, and the Christian faith and practice cannot be the same after the explosion of Pentecostalism. It needs an honest and prayerful disposition to assess whether Pentecostalism is a blessing to the Church, waking the Church from her ivory tower and imperial romance to the reality of her mission as a spiritual entity, whose sole s (cf. 2 Tim. 4:2).

The Consolidation of Pentecostalism in Nigeria

One cannot deny the fact that the sensationalism of healings, miracles, signs and wonders contributed immensely to the growth sport experienced by Pentecostal fellowships in Nigeria. It is beyond the scope of this paper to prove the veracity or otherwise of claims of the miraculous feats claimed to have taken place in the numerous Pentecostal churches that are mushrooming in the landscape of Nigeria. However, there have been several reports regarding the doubtful intentions and machinations of some dubious Pentecostal pastors who engaged in magical acts to bamboozle their unsuspecting devotees. Pentecostalism may have become so entrenched in Christian circles in Nigeria, to such an extent that prospective planters of churches utilize the Pentecostal identity for galvanizing popular followings. The psychology of Nigerian Christians is one that attributes importance and legitimacy to the Pentecostal label on the grounds that it indicates purity and the whole truth exemplified by the Bible. Little wonder that Pentecostal churches enjoy immense recognition as many Christians openly identify with programmes and situations highlighted by Pentecostal churches or pastors. The power of evangelization in Pentecostal outreaches has often been hinged on the demonstration effect of miracles which were claimed to have been wrought by the so-called 'powerful men of God'. The attribution of the miraculous to some soon began to create an aura of omnipotence and supremacy around the personality of these men. It gave them a cult-hero status. Their utterances were mostly regarded as the "voice of God". Thus, any open crusade organized by any of the acclaimed 'miracle-working pastors' - and there are so many of them in Nigeria - has often evoked a tumultuous reception which cut across several of the Christian denominations that pervade the country. The mixed multitude

that characterized the Pentecostal assembly in Nigeria could be a reflection of the liberal outlook of the adherents of Christian faith in the country who are only desirous of definite and prompt Solutions to their myriad problems of socio-economic survival in a country that has continued to slide precariously since the 1980s towards the abyss, where life has become solitary, brutish and short.

The growth of the Pentecostal churches can be explained variously. Aside from the spiritual rebirth experience by those who were swayed to turn from their confessed evil ways, several others were enticed to Pentecostalism by the appealing and soothing messages that portrayed prosperity, holiness, and blissful living as attainable heights in Christendom. Thus, through the vehicle of Pentecostalism, adherents expected to realize their cherished dreams. Pentecostalism entails the pursuit of Christian religious obligations in anticipation of not only eternal heavenly rewards but earthly ephemeral ones just as the body consists of flesh and spirit. As the economic adversity of the country began to deteriorate even further, the focus of Pentecostal churches shifted somewhat from the spiritual to the physical needs of their adherents, essentially with the intent of remaining relevant to the aspirations and demands of the numerous underprivileged, disillusioned and dispossessed members of the Pentecostal congregations. The situation in Nigeria over the years, in which the wealthy people who had acquired riches to the detriment of the ever-widening low-class of the dispossessed and poor people, continues to influence the doctrine values and focus of the church. This is not surprising because every socio-cultural institution is embedded in the sub-formations of the country's economy. It is the identification of Christian churches, particularly the Pentecostal assembly in Nigeria, with the socio-economic and political atmospherics that has in no small measure accounted for the expansive growth of Christianity in the country since the 1980s. With umbrella associations such as the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Christians in the country have been given a collective voice to challenge government's repressive and exploitative policies. While the CAN comprise 'Old Missionary' churches such as Methodist, Catholic, Baptist, Anglican, etc, the PFN is made up of 'new generation' Pentecostal churches. The two associations try to instill discipline among their affiliate bodies and to scrutinize the operations of their members with a view to ensuring that the Standard of Christianity is neither whittled down nor compromised. According to O. B. E. Josiah Amata: "The founding fathers of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria had in mind a common objective which is, to bring together under one umbrella Holy Spirit filled Christian Churches and organizations that believe and are into the practice of the full gospel message of the Acts of the Apostle chapter two, in an independent and autonomous Christian fellowship..."

Nevertheless, not all congregations, ministries or churches that are considered Pentecostal belong to this organization. Membership of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria is a voluntary identification of such groups with the universally or nationally organized Pentecostalism. The PFN does not necessarily exercise authority over all Pentecostal bodies in term of doctrines and practices. It is rather an avenue for the coming-together of like-minded individuals in order to foster an integral vision of Pentecostalism in the country. It is a cooperative body of the approved Pentecostal churches and groups in the country. It is not a legislative body to any congregation, but rather a coalition for the furtherance of the "Pentecostal gospel".

The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, even though it does not exercise legislative authority, has certain doctrinal parameters for all churches or groups that are willing to identify with the organization, and consequently with the global Pentecostalism. These parameters serve as the fundamental articles of faith of all Pentecostal churches in the country, without necessarily setting a standard for individual congregations' articulation of her doctrines and beliefs.

Unfortunately, there is some amplification of beliefs that may push an individual pastor or founder outside the confine of Pentecostalism and as such may not be recognized by the Fellowship. Unfortunately, because the PFN has very few members and does not enjoy the acceptance of the numerous independent Pentecostal churches which resent its hegemony, it is not in a position to regulate the practices and conduct of non-members. And it is from the expansive pool of non-members of PFN that striking aberrations are often observed. Two frontline non-members of the PFN are the Christ Embassy, and the Synagogue Church of All Nations. These two have gained prominence through their utilization of broadcast media to popularize their programmes and miracle claims. The Christ Embassy Ministries with its headquarters in Lagos has Pastor Chris Oyakhilome as its General Overseer. The Atmosphere for Miracles which airs on many African stations is anchored by Pastor Chris Oyakhilome. The programme airs video clips of miraculous feats are shown in a manner depicting the Pastor as an embodiment of God's power. Prophet T.B. Joshua of the Synagogue Church of All Nations also has a healing and deliverance broadcast programme, which is widely televised across Africa. These enigmatic and suave preachers make use of business principles in discharging their pastoral responsibilities. They also have an intense interest in profit-making. Understood that way, it then becomes clear why the tele-evangelists have advertised themselves to the world at great cost, since they are confident that their investments in religious advertisement would yield tremendous dividends in pecuniary terms in the immediate future. The unbridled interest in profit-making could itself be explanatory of the zeal the tele-evangelists display in evangelizing the gospel for the enlargement of their congregations.

The foregoing does not reveal the whole character of Pentecostalism in Nigeria but is a critical perspective on the phenomenon. There are indeed some other Pentecostals who are self-effacing and whose miraculous feats are not self-publicized in a manner that conjures up an image of self-glorification. The publicity of miracles in this category of Pentecostal assembly is carried out by a retinue of the recipients of miracles who unconsciously do the foot work to testify to non-members about the presence of God's power in their assembly. It is in this category that the sincere Pentecostal fellowship, in consonance with the standards of the Bible, could be situated. According to the Bible, even though Jesus Christ performed hundreds of miracles in his lifetime, he was so opposed to publicity that he had to warn the recipients of miracles not to publicize their miracles, but to give glory to God, who had used him to dispense the miracles to them.

It is between the two groups of 'publicity-seeking Pentecostal pastors' and the 'self-effacing, publicity-shy pastors' that the Nigerian Pentecostal ministry finds its character. The dominant global perception of Nigeria's Pentecostalism, in this regard, is a function of the ability of each of the groups to authenticate and legitimize their professions in the light of the requirements and prescriptions of the Bible, which is the only

common instrument of evangelization available to the two groups.

Explaining the Spread of Pentecostalism in Nigeria

Although there are three broad categories of religious inclinations in Nigeria - Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion - the advent of the Pentecostal revolution in the country has succeeded in expanding the frontiers of Christianity in regions that hitherto were dominated by Islam or African Traditional Religion. The following are some of the reasons for the growing influence of Pentecostalism in Nigeria:

Nigerians are Religious

The progressive expansion of poverty, ignorance, hunger, disease, unemployment, exploitation, alienation, oppression and dispossession in Nigeria since independence has continued to influence the resort of Nigerians to a search for the spiritual essence of their being. The socio-economic and political adversities in the country provide a fertile ground for the planting, germination, growth and balkanization of all forms of religion. The zeal of Nigerians for religion, like wine, waxes very strong with age. Thus, forty-four years after independence, the only sector that has been experiencing growth and expansion is the religious sector. Churches and mosques are widely to be found on every Street corner, and are drawing new converts and adherents regularly. Although it is often said that Nigeria is a secular country, its Constitution explicitly provides for the right of Nigerians to freedom of worship as contained specifically in section 38 (i) of the 1999 Constitution, which declares that 'every person shall be entitled to manifest and propagate his religion or belief in worship, teaching practice and observance'. The Constitution is an attestation to the propensity of Nigerians to religion. Religion, to most Nigerians, is a means of inviting the Intervention of the Divine and Celestial in the affairs of humans. This helps explains why religion - whether traditional, Christian or Islamic - occupies a central domain in the consciousness of Nigerians. In the periods of military dictatorship, Nigerians trooped to the churches and mosques and other prayer houses to seek help from God. Christianity, in particular has raised an active voice against military dictatorship in Nigeria. The Pentecostal groups were more overt in their call for spiritual liberation of the country from the hold of satanic forces that had continued to derail the course of development and truncate the destiny of the country. The challenge for the Pentecostals during those dark days of military rule was to break the yoke of military dictatorship, and sensitize and raise spiritually and politically conscious Christians to fulfill the task. No doubt, the emergence of several Pentecostal churches in seasons of anomie, as in the case of Nigeria in periods preceding the advent of democratic rule in 1999, played a positive role in the sense that the development facilitated the maintenance of order and stability in the face of extremely depressed economic conditions in the country. Thus, rather than spur the people to revolutionary action against their perceived oppressors, the Pentecostal Christian spirit that was sweeping through the country, melted the stony and dormant religious consciousness of the oppressed and converted them to spiritually active Christians whose focus changed from the ephemeral and mundane affairs of this world to the heavenly kingdom.

Today in Nigeria, the expansion of Pentecostal outreaches has not abated. There are more Pentecostal churches in the country than schools. But, ironically, the crime rate has been soaring with almost the same percentage as the growth rate of Pentecostal churches. So worrisome has been the incidence of crime that even churches with their hallowed sanctity has not

been spared. Cases of church attendees losing their valuables to armed robbers within the precincts of the church have been reported. Cases of scandals from immorality to divorce are also rampant. It sounds paradoxical that Pentecostal pastors who are presumed to be imbued with awesome power would preside over churches where miscreants and criminals could easily infiltrate. The Pentecostal revolution of the 1980s began with the vision of building and expanding the horizon of faithful Christians who would create the platform for the transformation of the country. The fiery evangelistic fervor of the 1980s which rigidly stressed holiness, sanctification, purity and other Christian virtues, soon gave way in the late 1990s to diluted teachings tolerant of the excesses of the social system. Today, the focus is on prosperity, restoration, healing and family life, which are seen as dividends of the kingdom of God here on earth. This paradigm shift, unknown to the Pentecostal pastors, is harming the reputation of the Church.

In all, the religiosity of Nigerians is not in doubt. The problem of religion has been the conversion of the hearts of men from evil works to heavenly values. In an attack on the churches in Nigeria, the renowned playwright and novelist, Onuorah Nzekwu stated that:

"The churches have failed this nation. I don't think there is any nation in the world that has the same number of churches as Nigeria. But it is unfortunate that the more the churches multiplied the more evil we become".

Pentecostal churches in Nigeria can be described as the habitation of the good, the bad and the ugly. Expectedly so, because the churches reside in Nigerian society, and cannot be completely impervious to the influences that derive from the structure and character of its operational milieu.

The globalization of Western Values

The emergence of a global cultural system which is the consequence of a variety of social and cultural developments, can to a large extent explain the growth of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Pentecostalism connotes spiritual rebirth and its origins are traceable to the stimulating influence of the Holy Spirit, but the expansion of its outreaches and spheres of influence can be explained by physical factors. In fact, the Pentecostal movement in Nigerian universities in the 1980s most certainly must have been greatly influenced by a similar development in Western Europe and the United States. In a sense, the tide of Pentecostalism filled the void created by the exit of socialism from the lexicon of world politics, subsequent to the fall and balkanization of Soviet Union. In this regard, there is a sense in which the 'born again' ideology of Pentecostalism could be said to be a substitute for the socialist ideology which has continued to compete with other value Systems for the souls of men. Thus, the global wave of Pentecostalism is providing the ideological underpinnings for the consolidation of the capitalist order which has emerged as the dominant mode of production in the world system. This linkage between religious morality and the prevailing socio-economic order has been found to be a vital feature in epochal changes, since religion is required to legitimize the emergent social order.

What remains to be proved is the degree of influence of the Western world on the rise and spread of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. It is incontrovertible that the development of a similar phenomenon in Europe and the United States in periods preceding the 19th Century was exemplary and influential. But as it impacted on other parts of the world, the expansion of Pentecostal churches and their outreaches has been far in excess of the influence wielded by the same phenomenon in

Contemporary United States and Europe. There is obvious, visible evidence of the influence of western values on Pentecostalism as demonstrated by the taste and style of Nigerian Pentecostal pastors and their flocks. Regarding the corrupting influence of the western world, an internet source observes that:

Sadly, in Africa and other parts of the Third World, there has arisen especially in the 1990s some groups who have copied the sin-compromising attitudes of those western churches who preached easy belief system and cheap grace. Such third world groups are usually great boasters of their 'revivals' also. Such 'revivals' are only imitations of the real thing. Therefore, if Nigerian Pentecostalism is to be considered a reflection of the authentic requirements of heaven-bound spirituality, as enshrined in the Bible, then there is an urgent need for revival in most of the Pentecostal churches in the country. The failings of some so-called Pentecostal churches evident in the worldly and carnal dressing of the womenfolk in those churches, and the loose and unethical social conduct of most church attendees, are a lurid manifestation of the reckless imitation of Western cultures in an African setting. The point to make here is that while globalization continued to assault the cherished and sacred values of Africans, the Pentecostal churches intent on attracting large following also were obliged to compromise, in most cases, their standards to align with the dominant world values. It is this compromise that has robbed the Pentecostal churches of their power, and has reduced most of the Christian assemblies to mere social gatherings. To purge the churches of worldliness is to restore Christianity to the era where Christian ethical standards and African morality were mutually reinforcing, and values mattered greatly.

Style and Comportment of Pentecostal Pastors

The mode of presentation adopted by most Nigerian Pentecostal Pastors in advancing the cause they are championing and in popularizing their ministries to their ever-increasing audience, can show an attractive face. Their style of language-use, phonetics, dressing and mien portray them, at face value, as the epitome of modernity and suaveness. Reuben Abati captures the approach and appeal of the new age Pastors in Nigeria in the following words:

The new generation pastor is a spellbinder; he dresses well, he rides very flashy cars, he even carries a gun, just in case; he is a part-time businessman. He doesn't need to have attended any Bible College, as long as he can quote passages from the Bible and report to a bewildered congregation about what his Daddy told him in the night, he would get a captive audience. The Nigerian Pentecostal pastors in a bid to hold their audience spellbound seem to have perfected the art of public communication. They are excellent orators radiating with an audacious air of sophistic erudition. They operate on the psyche of the congregation. They are great motivators and cunning manipulators at the same time. Most of them are products of Nigerian Universities with sound backgrounds in the academia. The experience they garnered in the course of their training has become an asset they have found useful in their evangelistic pursuits in a country where the literacy level is still very low. No doubt, the educational attainment of pastors has a direct influence on their perspectives, as much as their level of acceptance. The perception by the leadership of the requisite steps for promoting the growth of the church is a function of the level of exposure, experience and the personal ambition and vision of the overall head of the church. But the vision of the

leadership has much to do with the insights and knowledge-acquisition of the pastors.

In this regard, the Nigerian Pentecostal pastors seem to be gifted in the management of their outfits for effecting maximum impact on the society and promoting durability and institutionalization of their outreaches. The adoption of business-like principles in which the dividends are ploughed back into the business has led to the meteoric expansion of many Pentecostal churches in Nigeria. In this category of rapidly expanding congregations are the Living Faith Church, Redeemed Christian Church of God, Deeper-Life Bible Church, Apostolic Faith, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Latter Rain Assembly, etc. These churches are now venturing into purely business concerns such as the establishment of Universities, Secondary and Primary Schools, Medical Centres, Banks, and Conference Centres, with the intent of generating additional revenue and extending their sphere of influence. Explaining the rationale for the establishment of Covenant University - a private university, licensed by the Nigerian Government on 2 February, 2002 - the presiding Bishop of the Living Faith Church, Dr. David Oyedepo, said the university was designed to be a departure from Form to Skill; a departure from figures to future-building; a departure from legalism to realism; a departure from points to facts; a departure from 'mathematics' to 'life-matics'. Of course, several other Pentecostal pastors would also justify their foray into extra-religious concerns. The objective of diversifying the sources of income of the church, as plausible as it sounds, may in the long-run expose the church to the carnal world and its negative influences. The tendency exists that the church may become profit-oriented at the risk of undermining the original spiritual concerns of its leadership. With the emergence of extra-religious institutions, the responsibilities of the leadership become divergent, daunting, and indeed distracting. The original focus, with its spiritual essence, may give way for the new and more-mundane agenda, with the possibility of whittling down the communion between the church leadership and God.

The growth of Pentecostalism is evidently more physical than spiritual, and this could be the resultant effect of the observable shift in the focus of the leadership of the Pentecostal churches. However, where the focus is intact without any diversification, it may be so because the church lacks the wherewithal to pursue distracting ventures. The growth of Pentecostal churches ought to be evident in the number of people whose lives have been positively impacted both spiritually and physically, but the situation in most Pentecostal churches is that many people are thronging to Services but very few are actually touching the Power of God.

Wherever one looks in this great nation of ours, there is an abundance of human misery. The four dreaded evils of disease, squalor, want and ignorance are mercilessly ravaging our societies, with children, the elderly, the disabled and the sick, bearing the brunt of the impact. Our cities are teeming with homeless people and unemployed adults, disabled and sick people, who have become full-time mendicants, whilst our hospitals are crowded with children and young adults from poor homes, dying unnecessarily from curable diseases simply because they cannot afford the costs of their remedial medication.

The mendacity of a vast majority of the pastors is beyond adjectival qualification. Their capacity to use "hope" to extract money from their very eager congregation is worthy of study by the most accomplished American salesman. The Christian faith

in particular emphasizes the pre-eminence of charity in Christ-like behaviours - to love our neighbours. It is an unambiguous admonition of our Lord Jesus Christ to provide food, shelter and clothing for the sick, widows, children, the prisoners, the elderly and all those who are suffering. Many of the new Pentecostal Churches in Nigeria are no different from sole businesses. The only major difference is that the pastors take money from their hapless followers who revere them and accord to them a 'demigod' status. There is absolutely no accountability. What theological or moral justification can there be for a pastor in Nigeria, through the congregation's tithes and donations (majority of who cannot afford school meals for their children), to build a multimillion Naira mansion for himself, buy a holiday home in the United Kingdom or the US, drive a top of the range 4x4 car, and sending his children to a fee-paying public school abroad? The truth is, this is no exaggeration. The fact is, from the founding of early Christianity to the modern age, genuine Christians have carried with them, a beneficial concept of charity that has had, and continues to have, a substantial impact on humanity. Many of Jesus Christ's teachings emphasize the role of caring for the poor in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 25:35-40). Your expression of love for the poor and disadvantaged is an expression of love for God.

Luke 14:13 says "When you give a reception, invite the poor, the disabled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous". It is preposterous that many of these pastors are aware of the penurious living conditions of many of their congregation members and choose to do nothing about it. They would even brain-wash them into giving up their last penny for the kingdom so that things would improve for them. There have been arguments about "elitist" schools and universities being set up by some churches, charging exorbitant fees which are beyond the reach of 99% of the population, who incidentally form the majority of the congregation. Ironically, these institutions were established with the tithes and offerings of the congregation. What is wrong with a church using its surplus funds to provide food and shelter for the poor? Many people go to church on empty stomach, not knowing where or when the next meal is going to come. Many church members have been sick without the church doing anything about it. There are many orphanages needing funding. There are so many street kids, and so many people are destitute. It is in the midst of all this squalor that some Pentecostal pastors are only interested in building magnificent edifices and buying private jets.

This is unfortunate, to say the least. Christ teaches us humility by his actions. He washed His disciples' feet (John 13:5) and even went and touched the leper (Mark 1: 40-42), to show his concern for the outcast, the downtrodden and indeed, the seemingly untouchables of society. The New Testament book of Acts records that the Jerusalem churches established a common fund for the support of widows (Acts 6:1-6). Christians are further enjoined in James 1:27 "to care for orphans and widows in their distress".

The Bible is quite clear about the need for practical support for the needy. James 2:15-16 says "if a brother or sister is without clothing and is in need of daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that?". These poor children of the Almighty God, who are being systematically defrauded of their widows' mites, should begin to ask questions of their pastors. We cannot be in the midst of the

unimaginable destitution that plagues our society and feel contented with the excesses, frivolity and uncaring detachment of the so-called pastors.

Luke 14:13 says "When you give a reception, invite the poor, the disabled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous". It is preposterous that many of these pastors are aware of the penurious living conditions of many of their congregation members and choose to do nothing about it. There have been arguments about "elitist" schools and universities being set up by some churches, charging exorbitant fees which are beyond the reach of 99% of the population, who incidentally form the majority of the congregation. What is wrong with a church using its surplus funds to provide food houses for the poor? For members to volunteer to come and cook and wash up and do all that is necessary to make the kitchen run. Many people go to church on empty stomach, not knowing where or when the next meal is going to come.

How can we profess to follow Jesus Christ of Nazareth who said "suffer little children to come unto me ..." and our children are starving in the gutters, right before the eyes of our pastors and no one cares? Let our pastors lift these helpless and most vulnerable ones, for the sake of pure love, into the arms of God, for we are all His creation. The government cannot do it all, even in developed countries. There is a place for the Church of God. There is a void in the society that the church must fill. This is where those who have the love of God, who have been mightily blessed, follow the examples of Dr Thomas Barnardo (1845-1905) and others who were inspired by Jesus' respect for children and the poor to establish an "ever open door" home for children where shelter, food, clothing and medical attention are provided at any hour of the day or night. This was once home John Fashanu, the ex-footballer. The International Red Cross was established by a Swedish Evangelical who was moved by compassion after witnessing the leftover carnage of a battlefield. Let our pastors and churches begin to show some compassion and give back to their communities in the forms of practical social provision.

We have examples of Nigerians (non-pastors) engaged in charitable activities beyond their family or ethnic backgrounds. These are individuals practicing practical Christianity. Let our churches and pastors take their rightful place in blazing the light of Christ in the relief of distress to disabled children and adults, provision of shelter, food, clothing and health for the elderly, orphans, widows, prostitutes, prisoners and the chronically poor and sick in our midst. Nigeria will be a better place as we await the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Millions are flooding to join Pentecostal churches in Africa where vows of miraculous healing and promises of pending fortunes attract the overwhelming population of sick and poor on the continent. In particular, the West African nation of Nigeria is experiencing the fastest growth in Christianity in Africa with Pentecostal churches playing a large role in this development.

Nigeria is said to have the world's third largest population of Pentecostals with 3.9 million members, following Brazil with 24 million and the United States with about 6 million adherents, according to the World Christian database. But what makes Nigeria as well as other African nations unique is their heavy emphasis on miracles, which incorporate traditional African beliefs, and material blessings. Pentecostals today represent about 12 percent, or about 107 million, of Africa's population, according to the World Christian Database. Charismatic

members of non-Pentecostal denominations make up another 5 percent of the population, or about 40 million. The proportion of Pentecostals and Charismatic combined was less than 5 percent just over three decades ago.

Exploitation or Edification?

It is a difficult question to ask whether or not the Nigerian Pentecostal churches have been exploiting their members. This is so because the Pentecostal churches are diverse in their orientations, doctrines, and leadership structures. As we have noted in the preceding sections in this article, the adoption of the Pentecostal label by most church planters to describe the focus and essence of their ministries was, in most cases, a ploy to cajole, or deceive the unsuspecting devotees into believing that their churches were built on the pillars of righteousness, holiness and other Christian virtues that would edify them and prompt the manifestation of God's power in their lives. The attendees of Pentecostal churches are full of expectations that the miraculous would continually manifest itself in their assemblies. To determine therefore whether or not the 'masses' - and these consist of both the rich and poor attendees in the churches - are exploited or edified by the ministrations of their pastors, requires finding out whether their expectations have been fulfilled or are being fulfilled. Opinions are bound to vary from one person to another and from one church to another.

It is apparent that any enquiry regarding the benefits derivable from the attendance of Pentecostal churches broaches the responsibility of both the church leadership and the attendees. The issue raises matters such as the funding of the church by attendees, and the power possessed by the pastors to minister to the spiritual and physical needs of their flocks.

On finance, the Pentecostal pastors emphasize the importance of sowing 'faith seeds' to their flocks during ministrations. The emphasis placed on the financial obligation of the Pentecostal devotees to 'God's work' contrasts sharply with what obtains in the main-stream churches. The biblical injunction in Malachi 3:10 is commonly quoted to back this up:

Bring ye all the tithes into the store house, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the Windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing.

The pastors anchor their request for monetary assistance on the above scripture which is portrayed as a non-negotiable financial obligation of the devotees. The obligation is known as the 'tithe' - which means 10 percent of the income of each devotee. In most Pentecostal churches in contemporary Nigeria, the pastors have designed other means of increasing church finances in addition to the receipts from tithes. Levies for church building, procurement of musical instruments, welfare for the needy, church planting within and outside Nigeria, and so on, have often served as complementary sources of generating funds. We also hear terms like "thanksgiving offering", "first fruits", "seeds", "breakthrough offering", "prophetic offering", and "honorarium". The list, in fact, is endless.

The cupidity of Pentecostal pastors is not confined to their churches alone, even on crusade grounds - where there are mixed multitudes with different orientations and perspectives, - the pastors are not discreet in their urge to amass wealth. At a crusade in Lagos, in November, 2002, where thousands of Christians converged at the crusade ground of Victory Holy Ghost Mission, to receive miracles and deliverance from satanic bondage, the ministering Evangelist, and renowned televangelist, and a respected Pentecostal who enjoys acclaim and recognition in Pentecostal circles, Rev Uma Ukpai, was quoted

to have admonished the congregation to come forward to sow 'seed faith' as a necessary condition for divine blessings from God. Ukpai warned that those who refused to sow seed faith would not prosper, and he exclaimed: 'If you are not a giver today, you shall be a beggar tomorrow'. Consequently, half the worshippers at the crusade ground - estimated to be about 20,000 - were reported to have responded by trooping out to sow seed faith. This trend has become an institutionalized style in Pentecostal assemblies across the country. The urge to accumulate wealth to support the high tastes and extraordinary sophistication of the pastors has continued to mean that the business of soul-winning, which ought to be the primary concern of Christian evangelistic mission, is actually a profit-making venture. Perhaps, the pastors are desirous of building financial empires here on earth - where moth and rot consume to the detriment of their flocks who had built undue dependence on them.

The second level of analysis is to determine the claim to power by Pentecostal pastors, on the basis of the degree of the occurrence of the miraculous in their congregations. Opinions vary regarding the perception of the role of the urge to power and authority of Pentecostalism in Nigeria. There are those who believe that the version of Christianity exported to Nigeria through the missionary exploit of the Europeans, was devoid of power, because as they claim, the traditions and values in which the power of the religion lies were lacking. Expatiating on the powerlessness of African Christianity, and the resort of some Pentecostal pastors to the utilization of occult powers in order to stay relevant to their congregations, Onuorah Nzekwu remarked that:

...the pastors are another case entirely. Several have communion with the devil. Some went to herbalists to request for medicine they will use to draw people to their churches.

Under such circumstances, how much work do you think the Holy Spirit will be able to do?

There have been several exposes on some miracle-working pastors who were indicted for being neck-deep in occultist practices and rituals. Such names as Primate Olabayo, (Evangelical Church of Yahweh), Prophet T. B. Joshua (Synagogue of All Nations), Pastor Chris Oyakhilome (Christ Embassy), and the late Pastor (Founder) S. B. J. Oschoffa (Celestial church of Christ), etc. had been linked to occultist practices.

The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) passed a resolution to 'stop broadcast stations across the country from airing religious programmes with unverified miracle contents in them, on the basis of the reports it received'. The intention of those 'miracle-working pastors' is to attract large followings and resources to themselves. But since the pronouncement of the clampdown order on March, 30, 2004, which understandably was aimed at sanitizing the presentation of Christian religious programmes on the country's numerous television stations, the NBC has taken a dive into controversial waters, a development that has ranged it against most of the Pentecostal pastors.

The President of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), Bishop Mike Okonkwo, expressed disappointment when he said that the PFN was worried about the infiltration of those 'who have modernized occultism by injecting the name of Jesus Christ into their largely unbiblical practices into the PFN fold'. It is the infiltration of the anti-Pentecostal pastors that has continued to delegitimize the claim of Pentecostal churches to Christ-like righteousness, holiness, and sanctification, through their misrepresentation of Pentecostalism.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that Pentecostalism as the driving force of Christian revival in Nigeria has been fraught with misrepresentations and human frailties. Many church planters had used the identity of Pentecostalism to mobilize followers and attract immense financial resources to themselves. Some, on the other hand, had used it to build a body of radical Christians who are less concerned about the affairs of the world. In this category, however, are very few churches. We noted that a good number of large Christian Pentecostal assemblies in Nigeria today are more concerned about life here on earth with little attention to the hereafter. The shift in the focus from heaven-bound indoctrination to prosperity on earth may not be unconnected with the globalization of capitalism and western values, which have had a tremendous impact on the consciousness of the Pentecostal pastors in the country.

The future of Pentecostalism in Nigeria is dependent on the effectiveness or otherwise of the Pentecostal churches in attending to the spiritual and physical needs of their flocks. Many are in church today because they either desire relief from the socio-economic miseries of their existence or deliverance from some demonic forces. The Pentecostal churches that wish to remain relevant beyond the present era are those presently investing in the tutorship of their followers regarding the eternal value of Christian virtues, not on miracles and mundane rewards, but on immortal existence beyond the physical one.

What becomes of Pentecostalism cannot be divorced from the forces of post-modernism which apparently have held sway in virtually all areas of human endeavour, in which there is no absolutism but relativism, and truth is regarded as an opinion that can be challenged. It is these forces that have continued to influence religion with their syncretism. The visible syncretism and apostasy that seem to pervade some Pentecostal assemblies in the country, if history is a good guide, would end up the way its forebears ended - cast into oblivion. Since the demise of Pastor Oschoffa of the Celestial Church of Christ, this institution, which had grown to world acclaim, soon became dismembered in the face of seemingly interminable crises. Primate Olabayo of the Evangelical Church of Yahweh (of the Taborah Fame) who launched himself to prominence through his yearly predictions and his claim to the possession of the Holy Spirit has since vanished off the scene since late 1990s as a result of his confinement to a wheelchair. Time will legitimize or delegitimize the Pentecostal pastors and their ministries, on the basis of their sincerity to the cause they profess. Until that happens, the two-faces of Pentecostalism - Holy Spirit-filled, and demon-inspired - may still continue to blossom.

To discourage these vices in the House of God, there should be an awakened spiritual consciousness. People should emulate carefully the life of Jesus Christ, who didn't seek to amass wealth when he was on earth. He was full of compassion for the needy.

The Churches of old were efficient in this regard. They educated the children of the poor. They catered to the needy. They treated the sick. They visited prisons and established orphanages.

Pastors should be salaried and there should be proper accountability with all church accounts audited by independent firms of registered accountants and auditors. All acts of charity by the church should be reflective of our Lord's expansion of the scope of obligation as exemplified by the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) which goes beyond members of one's family, religious affiliation, ethnic, social or racial class. Many

of the pastors in Nigerian churches who claim to engage in charitable activities of some sort are doing nothing more than an exchange of favours or sheer politicking. True charity is an act of graceful giving when you have no expectation of getting anything in return. More so, when the recipient has no known means of ever repaying.

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