
Ethnic Pluralism and National Cohesion in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigerian society is seriously afflicted by cultural, economic and political diversities. Sufficient efforts have not been intensified to inculcate in the citizenry a sense of national consciousness. Instead of emphasis on those things that can unite the different entities together, most leaders have sort to expend their energies and efforts on those things that differentiate the various ethnic groups, particularly important of those weapons of disunity they use are religion and ethnicity. Hence citizens tend to pledge their loyalty and allegiance to their ethnic group rather than to Nigeria. There are so many loopholes that remained unplugged in the relationships which have blocked reaching out to one another on the socio-economic and political terrain. A chain is as strong as its weakest link, like the chain all the various ethnic groups in the system are all needed and vital to the collective survival of Nigeria. But the various links are tense and have become very weak. Hence the socio political unrest experienced within the national system.

Keywords:: Ethnicity, Cohesion, Pluralism, Political Diversity

Introduction

Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no “Nigerians” in the same sense as there are “English,” “Welsh” or “French.” The word ‘Nigerian’ is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not. (Awolowo, 1947)

The expression above points to the maladroitness of the conception of colonial Nigeria and unfortunately, since then, no appreciable effort has been made to redress the issues so basic, and so fundamental to the architecture of the nation. Nigeria did not emerge from the general will of the constituent ethnic groups but an imposition by the imperialists; this is one of the obvious reasons why there has been deep mistrust, fear of domination of an ethnic group, sharp competition for political positions and ethnic patronage which have driven a dangerous wedge of fragmentation in the fragile unity of the nation.

Nevertheless, it is hard to find a country that is virtually untouched by one ethnic problem or another, but some cases are principally enlightening because of the way they shed light on general issues and because of their insightful implications. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation and therefore a strikingly plural society. Interestingly perhaps what may first startled the visitor is the medley of peoples—Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani, Ibo, Ijaw, Tiv, Idoma, Nupe, Urobo, Birom, Ibibio, Efik, Anang, Ebira, Ekiti and a lot more, that space will not allow to mention. Without any iota of doubt, it is in the strictest sense, a medley, because the peoples of Nigeria to a large extent mix but do not mingle in so many respects. It is not hard to notice that each ethnic group holds its own culture, language and religion, its own values, ideas and patterns of human relations.

At individual levels they meet and relatively associate in the 'market place' in buying and selling. Nigeria is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Evidently, there exists the likeness of division of labor along ethnic lines in economic and commercial endeavors. However, in contemporary time one factor that seems to unite the peoples of Nigeria is the game of football; they are found united when it comes to the act of playing and watching the game either at home or abroad. At this level there is no discrimination against any one on the basis of religion, ethnic, economic, political and other social proclivities.

The State failure in Nigeria

Without reverence for the political tradition, which helps to build reasonable unity among diverse peoples joined in a polity, political life becomes chaotic, and unsettled; a nation fails when there is lack of internal cohesion. Citing the Oputa Commission of Human Rights Fasheun (2003), observed that the three decades of military rule did untold and unimaginable harm to social, interpersonal, and inter-ethnic relationships in Nigeria; the harvest of which is ripe in our socio-political and economic lives. State failure manifests itself not only in the political and administrative spheres but also in provision and delivery of public goods and services. The state has also demonstrated its ineptitude in providing security of lives and property across the nation. The neglect of security to life and property of most Nigerians has led to a continuous rise in crime, mostly armed robbery.

Alemika (2003) maintained that: if failure persists, it can lead to the erosion of socio-political cohesion. He further stressed that state failure is often associated with economic crisis that triggers inter-communal (ethnic, religious and regional) rivalry and conflicts which if not effectively curtailed can evolve into ethno- religious violence that may lead to civil war, fragmentation, or disintegration and emergence of insurrection and war-lords in parts of a territory. To him the soft version of the usage of state failure is akin to the concept of the weak state. Buzan (1991) makes a useful distinction between strong and weak states on one hand and strong and weak power on the other. Accordingly, “when the idea and institutions of a state are both weak, then that state is in a very real sense less of state than the one in which the idea and institutions are strong”, therefore “weak or strong state, states will refer to the degree of social and political cohesion”.

In contrast, weak or strong powers will refer to traditional distinctions among states in respect of their military and economic capability in relation to each other ... strength of a

state neither depends on, or correlates with power". Several indicators of a weak state have been identified. The important ones are:

- High levels of political violence.
- A conspicuous role for political police in the everyday lives of citizens;
- Major political conflict over what ideology will be adopted to organize the state;
- Lack of hierarchy of authority;
- A high degree of state control over the media;
- Absence of "domestic political and societal consensus of sufficient strength to

Eliminate the large scale use of force as a major and continuing element in the domestic political life of the nation (Buzan, 1991).

All the elements above need not be present but at least a majority of them must be present before a state can be classified as weak. These indicators are largely present in Nigeria. Although Nigeria is said to have a free press, the condition is attributable more to the boldness of the media practitioners' than the media laws in the country which are in many respect obnoxious (e.g. Newspapers Registration Decree) and where they are not, they shield the government from accountability (e.g. the Secrecy Act). The large scale and conspicuous use of force is evident in the deployment of armed military and police personnel all over the country to combat crime, as escorts to public officials and to maintain order during most civil activities. The Nigeria state is facing contestation from diverse sources and lacks non-coercive bases for maintaining order and cohesion. The contest over the character and direction of Nigeria Federalism is an ideological disputation. In essence, Nigeria is a weak state (Alemika, 2003). An important feature of State failure is ineffectiveness in the delivery of public goods. According to Stoddard (2001:8):

A failed state results when the leadership and institutions of the state are weakened and discredited to the point where the state can no longer fulfill its responsibilities or exercise its sovereign power over the territory within its borders. The concept of the state is not confined to government and political systems but encompasses the basic structures on which political, civil

and economic life is conducted. The major responsibilities of states reside in the provision of public goods. In other words, a functioning state must be able to maintain law and order and protect rights within its borders, defend against threats from without, and provide (at a minimum) the infrastructure to allow for economic activity

The above conditions, as it does not imply the state of collapse, which is the terminal point of process of failure, are apt for Nigeria's situation. Some other specific indicators of state failure have been developed. The social, economic and political indicators show vulnerability of a failed state becoming a collapsed state (Onishi, 1998). According to Alemika (2003), the indicators below are symptomatic of Nigerian situation.

- High incidence of political (ethnic, religious and other) violence, including violent crime, state violence etc.
- Failure to provide or deliver essential political, social and economic goods and services, reflected in low allocation of resources (% of GDP and national budget) to the social sector – particularly health, education, and social welfare (Social Safety);
- Environment degradation (oil spillage and gas flaring resulting in marine, land and air pollution in the Niger-Delta; desert encroachment in the Northern states that are associated with failure to develop non-wood source of energy for cooking, deforestation in the southern and central parts of the country);

- Intrusion of ethnic and religious extremism into governance;
- Failures of development (poor economic growth, stringent or declining per-capital income, wide income disparities, high inflation, high level of unemployment among different categories of people, high external debt and debt service ratio, high and un-serviced domestic debt, depreciation of national currency, low wages, low capital inflow and high capital outflow, disinvestments, keeping poverty both in scope and intensity).

From the series of measures and indicators discussed above, the Nigerian state is weak and failing. In this study, reference to Nigerian state failure will only be in the soft connotation of the term. But even at that the effects of the failure or weakness of the Nigeria State have been wide-ranging, harsh and importunate. In its strong term, state failure refers to terminal condition where state is characterized by severe ethnic and religious violence and civil war such that the central government lacks total control over parts of its territory to 'rebels' and warlords. Examples of the countries that fit into the strong term usage of the term are Somalia, Sudan and Liberia where central authority is weak and is not in control of a sizable part of the nation's territory. Nigeria has not reached this point since the end of the civil war when the term appropriately applied to Nigeria (Alemika, 2003).

Nigeria is currently acutely divided along ethnic, religious and regional cleavages. The division manifests in lack of cohesion and violent religious ethnic and communal conflicts that have been experienced in different parts of the country in which thousands of people were killed. Ethnic and religious violence involving loss of many lives have been recorded during the past four years in many cities, including Kaduna, Lagos, Jos, Kano, Aba and Warri (Alemika and Okoye, 2002; HRW, 2001). The white paper on the report of

judicial commission of Inquiry into Kaduna State Religious Disturbances of February 2000 revealed ‘that a total of 1,295 persons died, unspecified number were buried unidentified. While some others were declared missing’. In addition, “individuals collectively suffered a loss of N4, 927,306,603.00, while organizations suffered loss of N1, 445,881,151.00” (Alemika and Okoye, 2002: 15). In spite of the reported colossal loss during the February 2000 crises over the introduction of Sharia criminal law, another equally devastating crisis occurred in May 2002 (Alemika, 2003).

According to Alemika and Okoye (2002), State violence in the form of collective punishment for attack on security officials by some members of community has also persisted on intensified scale. Under Obsanjo regime, two communities were sacked, several people killed and scores of houses were burnt by security agencies as reprisal for attacks on security personnel by some members of community. During the invasion of Odi (Rivers State) in November 1999 and ZakiBiam (Benue State) in October 2001 by security personnel of the Federal Government, hundreds of people were killed and hundreds of thousands were rendered homeless (OMCT/CLEEN, 2002). These cases of state violence lend support to the argument of Rotberg that a failed state often preys on its citizens and “becomes criminal in its oppression of its citizens” (Rotberg, 2002).

Anyone familiar with the plight of Nigeria cannot fail to observe those conditions of state failure enumerated earlier. Alemika also observed that in spite of Nigeria’s independence and enormous revenue from oil from the 1970s onward, the “nations” economy remains underdeveloped, distorted and disarticulated,” and consequently “the society is plagued by a very high level of illiteracy, mortality rates, absolute poverty; waves of crimes and violence, poor and inefficient but largely unaffordable transportation; communication, education and health care services” (Alemika, 1988).

Corruption is a very potent factor in the conditions of a failed state. Rotberg in his argument, says, failed “states have unparalleled economic opportunity, but only for a privileged few. Those who are close to the ruling oligarchy grows richer while the less-fortunate brethren starve” (Rotberg, 2002:89). In three consecutive surveys by the transparency International since 1999, Nigeria was rated either as the most corrupt or second most corrupt nation. Nigeria image has been tainted by corruption.

Corruption flourishes in failed states often on an unusually destructive scale. Petty or lubricating corruption is widespread. Levels of venal corruption escalate, especially kick backs on anything that can be put out to bid, including medical supplies, textbooks, bridges; unnecessarily wasteful construction projects solely for the rents they will generate, licenses for existing and non-existing activities, the appropriating by the ruling class of all kinds of private entrepreneurial endeavors, and general extortion. Corrupt ruling elites invest their gains overseas, not at home. A few build numerous palaces or lavish residences with state funds. Military officers always benefit from these corrupt regimes and feed ravenously from the same illicit troughs as their civilian counterparts. (Rotberg, 2002)

Several hundreds of billion dollars had been got from the sale of crude petroleum during the past three decades or so, in Nigeria, but there is absolutely nothing to show for the accrued income. The successive rulers stole and wasted the national wealth through corruption. To sustain the corruption; repression and co- optation of opposition were widely pursued by the civil and military regimes. Corruption flourishes in Nigeria, not because of inadequacy of law but because of the weaknesses and failures of the Nigerian state, where the basis of accumulation among the nation’s rulers is corruption.

No wonder then, the rising spate of ethnic criminal violence, insecurity, exploitation of the vulnerability and deprivation of the less privilege citizens, violent ethnic militias/vigilantes, cult

violence, economic sabotage and religious intolerance in Nigeria. Viewing Nigeria precarious condition, Justice Aguda in a press interview in 1994 said inter alia “everything is wrong with Nigeria”

Ihonvbere (2003) posits that the continuing crisis of power and governance, the inability to construct hegemony or national project and depriving socio-economic crisis are all precipitates of state failure even state exclusion in certain spheres.

He went further by saying: The State-Nigeria-has never been able to build an appreciable degree of confidence among Nigerians, ensure some discipline within the ranks of the State elites, manage the economy in the interest of the people or construct the much needed platforms of inclusion, tolerance, and participation. As well, the state has been captured and privatized by a tiny fraction of the elite that use public institutions and resource to terrorize non-bourgeois communities, abuse human rights, and loot public funds and mortgage the future of the citizenry. Perceived as wicked, aloof, insensitive, corrupt and distant force, Nigerians relate to the State as an enemy. It is seen as an enemy that must, as opportunity permits, be subverted, avoided, cheated, dismantled and destroyed if the interests of the majority of the citizenry are to be guaranteed (Ihonvbere, 2003). The overall result of all this is not only the erosion of democratic values but also the subversion of the national project and intensification of conflicts. Ihonvbere, lamented, that at the eve of the twenty-first century, Nigeria has no national hero (es), hardly enjoys stability, no national identity, and the rate at which the youth abandon the country for foreign lands remains alarming. He stressed that at all levels, economic, political, social and ideological, even spiritual, the State and its custodians have failed woefully. Since political independence in October 1960, this has been the sad experience of Nigerians. The condition of marginalized nationalities in Nigeria comes from these described patterns above.

The national question and the disparaging unity

In the urge to create political unity the tendency has been to negate ethnic, regional and cultural diversities rather than recognize them as building blocks in the construction of a civil society. The result has been often a façade of seeming unity at the cost of many unsettled wounds and denied identities. (Mustapha, 1995)

What is national question? Ever before the coming of the British rule in Nigeria, the entire land space now called Nigeria was according to Akinyemi (2003), occupied by autonomous and independent nation based on clearly defined nationalities. These nationalities were in a state of war, some were in varying states of economic cultural and religious relationship. He stressed that they were never in a subjugative relationship among themselves even though the colonialists subjugated them. The British themselves have been involved in the question of how to define what the relationship among these different nationalities should be. Agbaje(2003) asserts also that communalism in public life is a second thread of continuity in the invention of the Nigeria tradition. He said, before the colonial rule was imposed, cleavage conflict in the areas now known as Nigeria tended to occur more within, rather than between, geographical zones occupied by ethno-regional constituencies now considered to be culturally united and homogeneous entities with colonial rule. However, what happened was ‘a freezing of history as means of creating a governable state’. Thus, ‘ethnic identity was regularized and manipulated to invent or at least rigidify tribal boundaries and divisions’ with colonial historiography selectively emphasizing “inter-tribal”, rather than “intra-tribal” conflicts (Ekeh, 1978).

Akinyemi (2003), maintained, that Nigerians were not originally consulted when the British overlords rolled out the various constitutions that were imposed to govern Nigeria, for example, the 1947 Richard constitution was imposed on Nigerians without consultation, no wonder, the constitution failed. At

this, the Colonialists learnt and believed that a Nigerian constitution freely negotiated by Nigerians was the best option in order to avoid any further mishaps. It was right from the beginning of the constitutions, the Nigerians and the British confronted frontally the national question.

The proposals submitted by the British bore two questions encapsulating the national question.

- Do we wish to have a full, centralized system with all the legislative and executive power concentrated at the center, or do we wish to develop a federal system under which each different region of the country would exercise a measure of internal autonomy?
- If we favor a federal system should we return to the existing regions with some modifications of existing

regional boundaries, or should we form regions on some new basis such as the many linguistic groups in Nigeria? It is on these two questions that the national question lies. One thing that is important to note here is that in different historical instances Northern leaders were successful in their use of brinkmanship according to Agbaje (2003), to extract concessions from the British Colonial regime while the only instance in which Southern elements initiated brinkmanship met with failure and this in the words of Ayoade (1973), 'sowed the seeds of future grievances in the other parts of the Nigeria federation'.

From this point onward there was deep-seated resentment of the preferential treatment of the North by the colonial administrators, the cumulative effect been a privileged position for the North in the political Calculus after independence, and southern views that now was the time to renegotiate the terms of Nigeria federalism, questioning the fragile sovereignty handed over by the despotic colonial power (Agbaje, 2003).

The last experience with brinkmanship according to Agbaje was and ironically triggered off under military rule and under Buhari's successor, General Ibrahim Babangida, in the context of a botched re- democratization process intended to end a decade of military rule. Babangida's decision to annul the result of

the presidential election held on June 12, 1993 to democratically elect a successor to him brought once more to the fore strong ethnic-regional sentiments and took Nigeria literally back to the pre-civil war years of the 1960's. The situation was not helped because it was the first election to have been won by a Southern Candidate (from the West) in the country's history and by the inability of Babangida, a military officer from the North, to offer credible and acceptable reasons for annulling the result of an election widely acclaimed by both local and international observers including Babangida himself as having been free and fair. Babangida's successor, General Sani Abacha, heightened ethnic-regional tension in his bid to perpetuate himself in office, using the forces of state terrorism against the Yoruba and other oppositional groups, in the process igniting forces that led to the formation of a Yoruba self-help security group christened Oodua People's Congress (OPC) which has been re-christened by the government of the day as an ethnic militia (Agbaje, 2003).

Kukah (2003) argued that when the state fails to continue to serve as a platform for the individuals to attain their potentials, human beings tend to find alternative means of creating a sense of belonging. Disengagement sets in according to Kukah, as men and women adopt new survival strategy ranging from belonging to armed gangs, cults and extreme religions or cultural groups, or they adopt false nationalist agenda cast in tribal and religious moulds. They then continue to unleash all forms of terrors on the state, its citizens and agencies.

Addressing the United States senate foreign relations committee in October 1997, William Twaddel, former United

States ambassador to Nigeria depicted Nigeria as a state in which:

Rampant corruption, the lack of transparency in decision-making, rule by military decree and the precipitous decline of government institutions undermine prospects for Nigeria as a coherent state. Instability or worse in Nigeria could have profound humanitarian, political and economic consequences for West Africa and other regions including the United States.

There is no doubt, that there have been repeated communal, ethnic, religious and debilitating intra- governmental conflicts since the transition to democracy in 1999. Olukotun (2003) averred that; the debates over the politicization of Sharia, over resource sharing, frequent communal affrays and contentions over ethnic and sub-ethnic arithmetic of appointments at federal and state levels suggest a milieu in which the prospect of democracy and of Nigerian project cannot be taken for granted (Momoh and Adejumobi, 2002). In spite, of the military strength of the state and the expansion of its security services, it remains completely incapable of providing leadership and direction towards the creation and nurturing of values, interests, aspirations, institutions and processes, which would support the cause of nationhood. People just dissolve directly and/or indirectly into their respective particular organizations, which begin to compete with the state for the loyalty, support, emotions and patriotism of citizens.

The national question is believed to be at the root of the crisis of the Nigerian state and the problem of peaceful co-existence. This question varies in time and in space, but may be viewed in two angles (Adejumobi, 2002):

The first is inter-group relations. That is the tensions and contradictions that arise from this relationship dwelling on the issues of marginalization, domination, inequality fairness, and justice among ethnic groups. The second is the class dimension. That is the exacerbation of class inequalities and

antagonisms in society between the rich and the poor, the affluent and underclass, or to use the Marxist parlance, the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The latter sometimes reinforce the former and do increase ethnic conflicts and antagonism in society.

The two perspectives are apt for Nigeria but the former gain currency in the contemporary discourse of the national question in Nigeria.

The main issue of the national question in Nigeria is how to structure the Nigeria Federation in order to accommodate groups and guarantee access to power and equitable distribution of resources (Osaghae, 1998). The background to it is the perceived domination of some ethnic groups by the other engendered by the structural nature of the Nigerian Federation, the heavy lopsidedness in center-state relations, which to Wole Soyinka is highly “unbalanced, exploitative, and acquisitive” and the growing impoverishment, frustration and disillusionment of the people, which is viewed as a direct consequence of power structure and ruling class politics in Nigeria (Adejumobi, 2000). On the final analysis, Momoh noted rightly, that “the national question is fundamentally related to the question of rights of nations and peoples particularly in the context of oppression” (Momoh, 2002). The under-listed issues are very vital to the national question (Adejumobi, 2000).

- What should be the component units and tiers of government in the Nigeria federation?
- How should they be constituted, based on ethnic contiguity or administrative expediency?
- How should political power and administrative responsibilities be shared among the levels and tiers of government?
- How should the ownership of economic resources be structure in the Nigeria federation?
- What should be the acceptable formulae for sharing federally collected revenue?

- What should be the nature of inter-governmental relations in Nigeria?

In Nigeria today virtually all the various ethnic groups talk about marginalization and domination, hence all the ethnic groups are affected one way or the other by the national question. Momoh illustrated this thus:

For the Niger Delta and oil producing minority it is exploitation and environmental degradation; for the Igbo it is marginalization; for the Hausa Fulani, it is uneven development; for the minorities of the North, particularly the Middle Belt it is one of internal colonialism; for the Yoruba it is power exclusion. Hence everybody is demanding empowerment on the basis of one assumption – xenophobia. (Momoh, 2002)

The fears and demands of ethnic militias have basically revolved around the issues of National question. For instance, the concern of MASSOB is marginalization of the East in the power equation in Nigeria; OPC is about “power shift”, and restructuring of the federation and the quest for self-determination by groups such

as MOSOP, MEND and others in the Niger Delta region is based on the social injustice, neglect and marginalization that the area suffers in the Nigerian nation. In an important sense, these ethnic militias are offshoots of the national question in Nigeria (Adejumobi, 2003).

Most of the ethnic nationalities share the same ideas with the civil society organizations on how to resolve the national question. For most of the groups, the immediate solution is through the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC). Osaghae noted; that the SNC would discuss the major issues and problems of the Nigerian federation. These include, “Northern domination, which became more vexing after the annulment of the June 12 1993, presidential election, believed to have been worn for the first time by a southerner, majority

domination and oppression of minorities, the security of the state and the rise of religious fundamentalism, resource allocation, power sharing, distributive Justice” (Osaghae, 1995). He continues:

Such a conference is justified on the grounds that a federal union is a voluntary union and that the Nigerian federation as it presently exists is an anomaly because the various groups have not been allowed to decide whether they want to continue to belong to it or not since the British “forced” them into union in 1914. (Oshagae, 1995)

The government in power during this time headed by General SaniAbacha criminalized the Sovereign National Conference (SNC); his government became paranoid about the SNC that he was prepared to systematically eliminate leaders of the group canvassing for the idea just as he eliminated some leaders of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). This is why National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) and Oodua People’s Congress (OPC) had to operate underground during Abacha’s days.

The presidency in the current dispensation shares the position of National Assembly on the issue of a SNC, According to it, those clamoring for a SNC are either idle people, or those bent on fomenting trouble in the country. Its response to the national question issue is to institute a constitutional review process aimed at reforming the 1999 constitution. This view is just a window dressing offer, proposed to sweep the major and basic problem of Nigeria under the carpet, waiting for the umpteen time for it to explode with deleterious consequences.

An editorial of one of the Nigerian newspapers, the National Concord sums it up thus:

It is our view therefore that these issues cannot just be swept under the carpet. To do so is to indulge in an act of self-deception. It is politically wrong to foreclose discussion on such

a grave national question as the mode of government under which we hope to live. Our country is a multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic nation. This means that we are all stakeholders in the Nigerian Project. This confers on us the right to discuss the mode of our relationship... Unless the issues that threaten to tear our nation apart are frankly discussed, our nation may not know peace, which is a vital condition for economic development and national progress. It is our opinion, that unless the issues of the national question are solved a more ban on the ethnic militias by the government will on the long run give strength to these groups to resurface for a renewed agitation. (National Concord, February 12, 2001:12)

The state of bondage in which we find ourselves in Nigeria is not imposed by nature but by man. It is however, the natural impulse of men to seek for freedom, an impulse unacceptable to the beneficiaries of the unjust status quo. It is a fact that the benefactors who make peaceful change impossible will also make violent changes inevitable, thus the alienation, subjugation and obvious marginalization suffered by the other ethnic nationalities in the hands of the ruling ethnic group and their military allies, led to agitation and the fight for self-determination.

The rise of any marginalized group in any part of the world against the power block could be attributed to injustices and inequity which so many militias are still fighting in Nigeria. Adams (2003) a factional leader of the OPC said “We in the OPC, having also understood the contradictions and prevailing crisis in Nigeria, took the pain to challenge the force responsible for the massive repression, injustice, victimization and gross underdevelopment of our fatherland”. It is therefore, clear that before there could be a fertile ground for any militia to germinate there must be a perceived or real injustice by one section of the society who has a way of expressing themselves other than the means recognized by international community as stated in No. 2 of Article 20 of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights to which Nigeria is a signatory: “Colonized or

oppressed peoples shall have the right to free themselves from the bonds or domination by resorting to any means recognized by the international community". The desire of the OPC to fight marginalization of its people the Yoruba emanates from the words of the great sage Chief ObafemiAwolowo, who said in one of his writings that:

"In order that she (Nigeria) may attain her natural birthright and destiny, Nigeria must be re- made and recreated. Every aspect of her existence must be revolutionized..."

Fasheun (2003) believes in his writing too, that the national question must be properly addressed without which Nigerian unity will be futile and a chasing of the shadow. He said, "Nigerian Unity is a function of the tribes. Ignore the tribes and there is no unity, no nation. A strong reason the tribes must turn up at some venue to address their problems". To contextualize the National question, Ekeh (1997), in his work, says: Historically, Nigeria's 'federalism' has passed through several phases. First, there was a phase in which social and cultural barriers were imposed on other people to give them a stigma of "strangers" (example, is the colonial inspired creation of Sabon Garis). Second, duality was created between the north and south, following from the protectorates. Third, when regionalism was imposed and the realities of Nigeria were viewed from the point of a trinity: North, West and East. Finally, the minority element became factored into the political calculus. This minority element has two sides to it, a political hegemonic and dominated element. The Fulani in the North, the Efik and Ijaw in the east and Delta region were all minority hegemonic groups in pre-colonial Nigeria (Ekeh, 1997).

Momoh (2003) was of the view that many of the elites of the dominated minorities are in the forefront of and the politics of the current quest for restructuring of Nigeria. This is partly because they account for a sizeable proportion of the nation's wealth and yet they are victims of exploitation without any commensurate compensation, representation and social

amenities. Worst still, the Nigeria state creates the impression that it is wrong, if not criminal, of them to complain against their social and political condition.

One very central point, that must not be lost sight of, is the argument that the Nigerian 'Federation' has never been previously as threatened as it is today and the cardinal reason for this partly has to do with the militarist values and structures of the Nigerian State. This has overtime not only thrown overboard the gains made in the development process and consolidation of the attempts at nation-building or federalism, but it has in addition created centralizing and authoritarian values, institutions and structures that have posed a threat to the Nigerian 'Federation'. In one word, it is hard to talk of Federalism within militarist rather than democratic framework (Jega, 1997; Suberu and Agbaje, 1998). Federalism has always been statist prerogative and all attempts to root it in the people have been aborted by the ruling class, who turn around to claim being the mouthpiece of the toiling people.

Conclusion

The persistent ethnic and religious crises that straddled Nigeria socio-political and economic façade have forced in a wedge of division and fragmentation on the hitherto fragile unity, due largely to the successive administration's aversion to true federalism, equity and good governance. The sheer number of different local languages in Nigeria and the consequent cultural and religious pluralism makes the Nigerian political scene very complex. This immense cultural diversity tends to make the country look increasingly fluid and paranoid. Ethnicity has been found to be one of the most powerful forces shaping the political and social relations in Nigeria. On the basis of historic antecedents and the current crises in Nigeria, the nation has a very feeble internal cohesion; its diverse ethnic nationalities always look inward for political clientele support and survival in an inchoate and incoherent polity. Socio-political

fragmentation was further encouraged by chauvinistic tendencies.

The survival of Nigeria as one and indivisible nation is unequivocally hinged upon solid and unwavering cooperation and solidarity among the constituent ethnic groups, particularly the tripod ethnic stands on which the Nigeria superstructure and relations within it are based. This can be achieved through the coming together of all the stake holders on a round table, to discuss the modalities of unity and internal cohesion instead of parading unhealthy and ridiculous palliatives. The present mutual fear of possible domination, subjugation and loss of power in Nigeria political space among the various ethnic groups should be put in the front burner and agreeable solution found.

The Holy Bible says in the book of Proverb 11:4 that riches profit not in the day of wrath and I think particularly, the wrath of the masses and the down trodden. Only justice and fair play can deliver our rulers from the impending conflagration that might be triggered by postponing or sweeping under the carpet the call for a National Sovereign Conference, where all the ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria can come together to discuss how they want to be together. Unity is not inherent in man but built through conscious efforts of men in their daily relations.

Recommendations

The people and government of Nigeria must rise up to the challenges posed by the structure of the Nigeria Federation in order to accommodate groups and guarantee access to power and equitable distribution of resources. The diversity in the nation should be used for strength and not for political polarization and ethno-religious conflict. For unity, stability and internal cohesion in Nigeria the different peoples must come together to discuss and decide the modalities of relating and associating together as one nation. Brotherly love and harmonious relationship should be the watch words of all and

sundry. Anything short of this will lead to perpetual conflict and cataclysm.

Nigeria needs bold, selfless and disciplined leadership that exudes unambiguous refusal to corruption. These virtues will then radiate powerful sensations of well being and pride through the nerve and artery of national life upon which competence and merit are held as national values and ethos, instead of its adumbrations and the mendacious celebration of mediocrity. Justice must be seen to prevail, the welfare of all the people rather than the advantage of a few must be the cornerstone of public policy. It is my candid opinion as I have said before that the benefactors who make peaceful change impossible will also make violent changes inevitable.

Sources

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Ecclesiology: The Church's Identity in a Postmodern World

Felicien Ngirnyu Mumbah

Abstract

The postmodern era has introduced profound shifts in cultural, philosophical, and social paradigms, challenging traditional conceptions of ecclesiology. The Church, historically understood as a stable institution grounded in Scripture, tradition, and sacramental practice, now finds itself negotiating identity within a fragmented, pluralistic, and fluid cultural landscape. Postmodern thought destabilises notions of absolute truth, authority, and universal narratives, raising questions about the Church's role, mission, and communal life. The paper was obtained through a qualitative analysis of books and journal articles relevant to the subject matter. This paper explores the dynamics of ecclesiology, examining how the Church's identity is reshaped by postmodernity while remaining rooted in theological foundations. Drawing on biblical, historical, and contemporary theological perspectives, the study highlights the tension between continuity and change. It considers how ecclesial identity is challenged by relativism, consumerism, and digital culture, yet also enriched by postmodern emphases on diversity, relationality, and contextuality. The paper argues that the Church must embrace a missional and dialogical posture, engaging postmodern society with humility, authenticity, and theological depth. Ultimately, ecclesiology in a postmodern world requires reimagining the Church as a

community of witness, hospitality, and prophetic engagement.

Keywords: Ecclesiology, Change, Identity, postmodernism

Introduction

The Church, once seen as a stable institution, now faces the need to redefine itself in a world that values diversity, subjectivity, and materialism. This dynamic context presents both challenges and opportunities, requiring the Church to remain faithful to Christ while adapting its witness to engage society authentically, inclusively, and relevantly. This paper, therefore, provides conceptual clarification of ecclesiology, the features of postmodernism, the challenges of postmodernism, the implications for the contemporary Church, and the ecclesial response to postmodernism, as well as some recommendations for Christian living.

Conceptual Clarification of Ecclesiology

To understand the Church's role, one must first understand what the Church is and its essence. The Church is not just a building but a community of believers called to embody the gospel in their daily lives and in their witness. According to Van Gelder, the Church is called to represent the redemptive reign of God via examples and deeds.¹ It is essential to note that this embodiment is not confined to internal practices but extends to how the Church engages with the community around it and society at large. The Church of Jesus Christ is a community

¹ Van Gelder Craig, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2001), 2.

shaped by the good news of God's salvation, living out the values of the Kingdom of God in every aspect of its existence.² The Church is patterned on a Christology of wisdom and desire that draws together Scripture and reality in a community of love that overflows in mission to the world.³

The Church is unique, as Gelder further asserts, because it is created and formed by the Spirit. It is a unique Spirit-led gathering that demonstrates the redemptive work of God, changing people within the local Church and those around them in the community and society.⁴ Furthermore, Tizon states, the whole Church does not mean a perfect Church; it means a humble Church in a bold mission. It means submitting to God's work in our own lives, even as God sends us out to bear witness to the whole and reconciled gospel.⁵

Ecclesiology, derived from the Greek "*ekklēsia*," meaning "assembly," refers to the theological study of the Church's nature and mission. The modern ecclesiology reflects the diversity of Roman Catholicism, Protestant traditions, Pentecostalism, and African Indigenous Churches, each shaping leadership, worship, and community life.⁶ The term "*ekklēsia*" (congregation) appears only twice in the Gospels (Mt 16:18; 18:17). It has a rich background in the Septuagint and translates the Hebrew term "*qahal*," the

² Craig, 2.

³ Andy Lord, "Wisdom Ecclesiology: Renegotiating Church in the World" *Journal of Anglican Studies* No.3, (2019): 6

⁴ Craig, 2-5.

⁵ A. L. Tizon, *Whole and Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018) 9-11.

⁶ Heidi A. Campbell and John Dyer, *Ecclesiology for a Digital Church* (London: SCM Press, 2022), 1-2.

assembly of Israel.⁷ In Acts, it refers to the first community (Acts 5:11) and other Christian communities (Acts 8:1; 9:31; 14:23). Paul uses the term “church” in relation to both a local congregation (1 Cor 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1) and regional churches (2 Cor 8:1); Paul also speaks of the Church in a generic, universal sense (1 Cor 12:28; 14:35; Gal 1:13).⁸ Therefore, the Church is a people who are of one purpose, which is the purpose of God.

Among the many images of the Church in the New Testament, the three most common are the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.⁹ The Church is a visible entity and can be seen because those who have been saved will live together in discipleship.¹⁰ Wayne Grudem asserts that the Church is the community of all true believers for all time.¹¹ Essentially, the Church is the people of God in all ages. Notice that the Church is people, not buildings, although it is right that the people have buildings in which to meet.¹² Another concise definition is that of Emiola Nihinlola, who views the Church as the assembly of Christian believers called by God the Father from the world, saved by the Lord Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.¹³ Here, the

⁷ Champbell, 1-2

⁸ V.-M. Kärkkäinen “Eccleiology” In *Global Dictionary of Theology* ed. William A. Dyrness (England: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 714.

⁹ Kärkkäinen, 714.

¹⁰ W. A. Dyrness William A, Dyrness V.-M. Kärkkäinen “Eccleiology” In *Global Dictionary of Theology* ed. William A. Dyrness (England: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 340.

¹¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 2820.

¹² John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2013), 1178.

¹³ Emiola Nihinlola, *Theology for Living: Essays in African Context* (Ogbomoso: Kingdom Impact Publishing and Media Ltd, (NBTS), 2021), 207.

triune God is actively evident and at work in men to build the Church of God.

Another image associated with the Church is that of Moses Audi, who asserts that the Church is the community of believers and a pilgrim community.¹⁴ In Akinwale Oloyede's book, the Church is only for the regenerated members, not necessarily the regular attendees.¹⁵ The language in African theology received an ecclesiological formulation through the African renewed image of the "Church as Family of God." This renewed image of the Church as the family of God is the most recent result of theological reflection in Africa, which has found great reception among Africans.¹⁶ If the Church is all these, then there is a need to defend the Church against the postmodern view that undermines its doctrinal authority.

John Enyinnaya describes the Church as a clan and asserts that God's clan communicates four essential truths. First, it affirms that God is the founder and sustaining leader of the Church; its existence originates in Him. Second, it emphasizes the unity of Christians across cultures, denominations, and social divisions. Third, it clarifies that membership in the Church is grounded in faith in Christ rather than ethnicity, heritage, or cultural identity. Fourth, it explains why the visible Church may include individuals who do not share its inner spiritual life.¹⁷ Understanding the Church in this way not only

¹⁴ Moses Audi, *The Church as a Pilgrim Community with Insight from the Nomadic Life of Fulfulde Fulani* (Lagos: Soltel Enterprises, 2014), 14-15.

¹⁵ Akinwale Oloyede, *Essentials of Christian Doctrines in African Context: A Guidebook for Theological Students, Researchers, Church Pastors, and Teachers of God's Word* (Osogbo: Hirise Celebrity Publishers, 2025), 82.

¹⁶ W. A. Dyrness, 102.

¹⁷ John Enyinnaya, *God And The Church: Explorations In Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011), 1-10.

affirms that God is a member but also that He is the founder, builder, sustainer, and head of the Church.

In all, postmodernity with its features is the Church's greatest challenge. The Church ought to create spaces where individuals can belong before they believe and emphasize authentic relationships over formal membership requirements.¹⁸ In other words, the Church must become a living demonstration of the Kingdom of God, where justice, peace, and reconciliation are visibly and authentically practiced.

Concepts of Postmodernism

The term “*postmodern*” has existed for over a century, first used in 1870 by painter John Watkins Chapman to describe post-Impressionist art. Over time, artists, critics, and scholars applied it to various cultural shifts. In 1970, thinkers like Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler, and Ihab Hassan gave the term its modern meaning, marking a significant change in American culture and a critical shift from modernism.¹⁹ Today, the term carries two main meanings. *Postmodernity* refers to the historical period following modernity, while *postmodernism* describes a cultural movement that consciously reacts against modernist ideas.²⁰ This distinction helps clarify discussions about cultural and intellectual changes in society.

Postmodern is a broad term used to refer to both postmodernity and postmodernism. *Postmodernity* is the period after modernity, and postmodernism is the movement challenging modernist principles across literature, art, and philosophy. These concepts reflect how

¹⁸ Wahba Wafik, *Lecture 8, The Community of the Church* (Class notes, Tyndale University, Toronto, June 25, 2024).

¹⁹ Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God: God's People in the Western World, Volume 3* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2021), 915-917.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 915-917.

culture and thought have evolved over time.²¹ Richard Gamble asserts that the rise of postmodernism had its roots in nineteenth-century anti-Christian thought in historical and philosophical thought, and that postmodernism lies dormant within modernism itself. He further argues that World War 1 and its massive destruction also seem to be important contributors to the rise of postmodernism.²² One can say that many factors contributed to the rise of postmodernism.

Postmodernism emerged from shifts in human thought and culture, challenging modernism's focus on reason and absolute truth. It emphasises diversity, personal perspectives, and shared meaning. Instead of one fixed truth, postmodernism values multiple viewpoints, creativity, and spirituality.²³ Postmodernists, at least those from the continental tradition, believe that metanarratives are no longer necessary; in this respect, the end of metanarratives marks the end of the tyranny of history and the aggressive domination of science.²⁴ Postmodernism aims to divide the truth, the standards, and the ideals into what has been deconstructed and what is intended to be deconstructed, by denying a priori any new doctrine, theory, or revelation, and by claiming the right to replace the abandoned rules of the past and fundamentally identifying postmodernism as a sign of disintegration and faith in the Enlightenment project.²⁵ Thus, postmodernism is presented as an escape from

²¹ Ibid, 916-917.

²² Ibid, 916-917.

²³ John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2025), 504.

²⁴ Cristian Sonea, "The Orthodox Church and Postmodernity: Identity, Pluralism and Communion" *SUBBTO* 63, No. 2 (2018): 5-17.

²⁵ Sonea, 5-17.

rationality, a way of feeling liberated from the socially constructed limits and norms.

In postmodern thought, truth is no longer seen as absolute or objective. While modernism relied on reason and experience to define truth, postmodernism emphasises subjectivity, pluralism, and relativism. Truth becomes personal; what is true for one may not be for another. This shift reflects skepticism toward universal claims, extending relativism beyond morality to all areas of life, shaping culture and faith.²⁶ Modern thinkers replaced medieval dogmatism with rationalism, treating reason as the new absolute. Postmodernism critiques this by deconstructing the dominance of scientific rationality, which reduced society to rigid, calculative systems. Instead, postmodern thought challenges the idea that reason alone defines truth, exposing its limits and emphasising diversity, plurality, and the richness of human experience beyond logic and objectivity.²⁷ This implies that the Bible is not the final authority for Christian teaching, since others may still be authoritative.

Postmodernity challenges both faith and morality. While spirituality remains sought after, the lack of firm foundations makes ethical development fragile, leaving young people exposed to confusion and instability in their search for meaning.²⁸ Youth in a postmodern world face existential confusion. Endless opportunities and enticing

²⁶ Allen, R.J., B.S. Blaisdell, and S.B. Johnston (eds.), *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth, and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 1-20.

²⁷ Ian Pinto, "Reclaiming Youth in a postmodern world" *Research Journal of Recent Sciences*, Vol. 13 (2), (2024): 19-24.

²⁸ Pinto, 19-24.

influences from technology and media often misguide their search for identity. Social media and “selfie culture” create shallow models of selfhood, leaving young people struggling to form authentic morality and stable character.²⁹

In defining postmodernism, two facts must be taken into consideration. A more moderate version of postmodernism claims that we know nothing; we can only interpret, and our interpretations can express only partial and narrow perspectives.³⁰ A more radical version of postmodernism holds that we know nothing for sure and that our claims to universal knowledge are hegemonic, meaning that our ability to interpret only from our partial and narrow perspectives is a liberation from this tendency towards hegemony, as it is clearly reflected in science and rationality.³¹ This claim also contradicts scriptural truth because Christians know Christ for sure.

Challenges and Characteristics of Postmodernism

Among many claims of postmodernism, this section further explores essential challenges or some characteristics that undermine the Church’s identity, thereby helping to better understand its perspective.

Rejection of Absolute Truth: One of the most defining features of postmodernism is its rejection of absolute truth and universal principles. Postmodern thinkers argue that truth is not fixed or objective but rather depends on

²⁹ Ibid, 19-24.

³⁰ Sonea, 5-17.

³¹ Ibid, 5-17.

personal perspective and cultural context.³² This means that what one person or group considers “true” may not hold the same meaning for another. Instead of accepting a single standard that applies to everyone, postmodernism insists that truth is relative, shaped by individual experiences and viewpoints.³³ This approach challenges traditional beliefs that rely on universal rules, often leading to skepticism toward claims of certainty. Thus, postmodernism denies absolutes and opens the door to multiple interpretations, but it also risks creating confusion when no shared foundation exists to guide collective understanding.

Focus on Personal Experience and Diversity:

Postmodernism places strong emphasis on personal experience and diversity, elevating individual perspectives over collective agreement. It values each person’s unique viewpoint and resists the idea that common standards or shared truths should bind communities.³⁴ Diversity is celebrated as a strength, but this emphasis can sometimes undermine unity, since no single principle is seen as binding for all.³⁵ In practice, this means that subjective experiences are prioritized, while objective facts are often questioned or dismissed.³⁶ The result is a culture where differences are highlighted and respected, but where

³² Edward Inem Onyeije, “An Investigation of Postmodernism and Its Implications for the Contemporary Church”, *International Journal of Religious and Cultural Practice*, Vol 10. No. 3 (2025): 21.

³³ Robbert Audi- Ed. The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, (Cambridge: University Press, 2011), 690.

³⁴ Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland ed., *Handbook of Religion: A Christian Engagement with Traditions, Teachings, and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014) 13-15.

³⁵ Terry C. Muck, Harold A. Netland ed., 13-15.

³⁶ Gamble, Volume, 924-925.

achieving agreement becomes difficult. While this openness fosters creativity and inclusivity, it also creates uncertainty because there is no clear framework for reconciling conflicting opinions.

Questioning Authority: Another key aspect of postmodernism is its tendency to question and challenge authority. Traditional sources of power, such as institutions, leaders, or long-standing customs, are often viewed with suspicion.³⁷ Postmodern thinkers argue that authority is not neutral but shaped by social and cultural forces, which means it can be oppressive or limiting. As a result, people influenced by postmodernism are more likely to resist rules or standards imposed by institutions, whether in politics, education, or religion.³⁸ This questioning can encourage critical thinking and independence, but it can also lead to rebellion or instability when authority is undermined without offering alternatives. In religious contexts, for example, church leaders may find their authority challenged by members who have absorbed postmodern ideas, leading to debates over truth, relativism, and power.

Breaking Down Social Norms: Postmodernism also works to deconstruct social realities and the shared norms, values, and principles that traditionally guide societies. It views these structures not as fixed truths but as human-made constructs that can be questioned and reinterpreted.³⁹ This means that widely accepted standards, such as moral codes or cultural practices, are treated as relative rather than absolute. Postmodernism

³⁷ Gamble, Volume 3, 915-920.

³⁸ Gamble, Volume 3, 920-950.

³⁹ Ibid, 20-33.

encourages multiple interpretations of reality, allowing individuals to define their own meanings. While this can foster freedom and creativity, it can also lead to confusion, as no single path or principle is considered binding.⁴⁰ In this way, postmodernism resembles a laissez-faire approach, in which every choice is valid, and no decision is final. The breakdown of social norms can liberate individuals from rigid traditions, but it may also leave them without clear direction or stability.

Rejection of Metanarratives: Postmodernism resists “grand stories” or overarching explanations of reality, such as the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Instead, it argues that all stories are local, fragmented, and culturally bound.⁴¹ For Christians, this is troubling because the gospel itself is presented as God’s universal story for humanity. When metanarratives are dismissed, the authority of Scripture as a coherent revelation is undermined, leaving faith communities vulnerable to relativism and skepticism.

Language as Power, Not Truth: Postmodern thinkers often claim that language does not simply describe reality but constructs it. Words are seen as tools of power rather than carriers of truth.⁴² This perspective suggests that biblical language is just one cultural expression among many, not divine revelation. For Christians, this challenges the belief that God’s Word communicates

⁴⁰ Ibid, 20-33.

⁴¹ Timothy Hynes, “Postmodernism and the Church: An Opportunity and a Challenge”, *The Person and the Challenges, Volume 6, Number 2*, (2016): 67–85.

⁴² Hynes, 67-85.

objective truth.⁴³ If language is reduced to power games, then preaching, teaching, and even prayer risk being viewed as manipulative rather than transformative.

Moral Relativism: Postmodernism tends to deny universal moral standards, arguing that ethics are culturally or personally defined. This creates tension with Christianity, which teaches that God's moral law is binding for all people.⁴⁴ When morality is treated as relative, practices clearly opposed in Scripture (such as dishonesty, sexual immorality, or injustice) may be excused as "personal choices."⁴⁵ This weakens the Church's ability to call people to repentance and holy living.

Elevation of Experience over Revelation: Postmodernism prizes personal experience as the highest authority. Feelings and subjective encounters are often valued more than Scripture or tradition. While Christianity acknowledges the importance of experience, it insists that revelation from God provides the ultimate standard.⁴⁶ When experience is elevated above revelation, faith risks becoming self-centred and detached from God's objective truth.

Pluralism and Syncretism: Postmodernism promotes religious pluralism, suggesting that all faiths are equally valid paths to truth. This ideology is characterised by rejecting any metanarrative that can explain everything for all time. Nothing is set in stone; everything depends on a

⁴³ Onyeije, 20-33.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 20-33.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 20-33.

⁴⁶ Onyeije, 20-33.

particular frame of reference.⁴⁷ This directly challenges the Christian claim that salvation is found in Christ alone (John 14:6). In practice, it can lead to syncretism, blending the Christian faith with other beliefs, diluting the gospel and confusing believers about the uniqueness of Christ.

Fellowship Undermined: Christian fellowship depends on shared values and biblical truth. Postmodern relativism erodes these foundations, making gatherings feel meaningless. Worship becomes fragmented as individuals pursue personal interpretations of truth.⁴⁸ Without commitment to Scripture, fellowship loses depth, and the Church struggles to remain a unified body.

Ecclesial Responses to the Challenges of Postmodernism

At this stage, this paper needs to offer an ecclesial response to the challenges posed by postmodernism. Among many others, below are a few responses.

Affirmation of Absolute Truth in Christ: While postmodernism denies universal truth, the Church insists that truth is ultimately found in Jesus Christ (John 14:6). Christians respond by grounding their faith in Scripture as God's revealed word. They are reminded that truth is not relative but is anchored in God's character.⁴⁹ This means teaching and preaching must continually

⁴⁷ Felix Ajedokun, "Reaffirming Biblical Authority and Absolute Truth in Postmodern Era," *International Journal of Religious and Cultural Practice*, Vol. 10. No. 4 (2025): 283-291.

⁴⁸ Onyeije, 20-33.

⁴⁹ Ajedokun,

emphasize that God's truth is timeless and trustworthy, even in a culture that questions absolutes.

Balancing Experience with Revelation: Postmodernism elevates personal experience above all else. The Church acknowledges the value of experience but insists it must be tested against Scripture.⁵⁰ Christian leaders encourage believers to interpret their experiences through the lens of God's Word, ensuring that feelings and opinions do not replace divine revelation. This response thus presents postmodernism as an escape from rationality, a way of feeling liberated from the socially constructed limits and norms that help believers avoid confusion and remain rooted in biblical authority.

Rebuilding Trust in Authority: Since postmodernism questions authority, churches must model servant leadership and integrity. Pastors and leaders are called to exercise authority not as domination but as service and reflect Christ's example (Mark 10:42–45).⁵¹ By demonstrating humility, transparency, and accountability, church leaders can rebuild trust and show that authority, when exercised biblically, is life-giving rather than oppressive. Ajedokun asserts that the absolute truth is that Christians' belief that biblical truth rests on the timeless, changeless reality of God. The pursuit of absolute biblical truth in the postmodern era is plausible. For Christians, to conceive the idea of revelation is to think biblically.⁵²

Strengthening Community and Unity: Postmodernism celebrates diversity but often undermines unity. The

⁵⁰ Onyeije, 20-33.

⁵¹ Ibid, 20-33.

⁵² Ajedokun, 283-291.

Church responds by emphasising the biblical vision of unity in diversity, one body with many members (1 Corinthians 12).⁵³ This means fostering genuine fellowship, encouraging mutual accountability, and celebrating cultural differences while remaining united in Christ. The Church becomes a countercultural witness to the possibility of unity grounded in love and truth.

Clear Moral Teaching: In response to moral relativism, Christians teach that God's moral law is universal and good. Churches must provide clear ethical guidance rooted in Scripture and prove that holiness is not optional but central to Christian life. This involves discipleship and pastoral care that help believers resist cultural pressures and live faithfully. Moore, cited by Padgett, asserts that morality cannot be reduced to a description of the way the world is; what ought to be is different from what is.⁵⁴ Morality, therefore, ought to be the standard for living, not what the world gives to people.

Engaging Culture with Apologetics: Postmodernism often dismisses metanarratives, including the biblical story. The Church responds by engaging in apologetics, explaining and defending the faith in ways that connect with postmodern audiences. This means presenting the gospel not only as truth but also as a story that gives meaning, hope, and identity. Thinkers like John Frame

⁵³ Onyeije, 20-33.

⁵⁴ Alan G. Padgett and Steve Wilkens, *Christian and Western Thought: A History of Philosophers, Ideas and Movement*, Vol. 3 (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009), 40-41.

emphasize that apologetics must be relational, contextual, and rooted in Scripture.⁵⁵

Embracing mission in a Postmodern World: Rather than retreating, the Church is called to engage postmodern culture with humility and creativity. This includes using art, dialogue, and storytelling to communicate the gospel in ways that resonate with people who value diversity and experience.⁵⁶ Mission becomes less about imposing truth and more about witnessing to Christ through authentic relationships and service.

Christ-centeredness: The Church's identity must remain Christ-centered, drawing authority from Jesus rather than institutional power. It must be missional and equip believers to live as witnesses in everyday life. Community becomes central, as authentic relationships and inclusivity reflect the gospel's relevance to diverse backgrounds.⁵⁷ The Church also embraces a holistic mission and addresses reconciliation, justice, stewardship, and peacemaking alongside spiritual renewal.

Implications of Postmodernism for Contemporary Church

Postmodernism has created a culture in which authority is constantly questioned, and this has deeply affected the Church. In earlier times, church leaders, traditions, and Scripture were respected as sources of truth and guidance.⁵⁸ Today, however, many people, especially

⁵⁵ Frame, *History of Western Philosophy and Theology*

⁵⁶ Onyeije, 20-33.

⁵⁷ Gambel, Volume 2.

⁵⁸ Onyeije, 20-33.

young members, see the Bible as just another human opinion rather than divine revelation. This skepticism leads to arrogance, disobedience, and disrespect toward spiritual leadership. Postmodernism dismantles traditional standards by promoting relativity, meaning values shift depending on time, place, or personal preference. As a result, the Church struggles to maintain discipline and unity, since its foundational truths are no longer accepted as absolute.

Another implication of postmodernism is the effect of spiritual guidance. Since truth is considered subjective, people believe they can determine what is right for themselves without needing pastors or ministers. This mindset undermines the role of spiritual leaders, who historically provided direction, correction, and encouragement.⁵⁹ In a postmodern context, everyone becomes their own authority, which weakens the collective identity of the Church. Without pastoral guidance, believers risk drifting into confusion, following personal desires rather than biblical truth. This attrition of leadership authority not only diminishes the Church's influence but also leaves individuals vulnerable to false teachings and shallow spirituality.

Postmodernism also erodes moral absolutes, replacing truth with falsehood and relativism. In this environment, immorality is not only tolerated but often celebrated. Practices such as sexual sin have infiltrated both congregations and society, with some ministers engaging in immorality without remorse. When society disregards God as the source of ethics, morality becomes subjective, and people simply do what feels right in their own eyes.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 20-33.

This collapse of moral standards leads to broken families, damaged communities, and weakened churches. The Church's silence on these issues further worsens the problem.

Christian fellowship thrives on shared values, biblical principles, and truth. Postmodernism, however, undermines these foundations by emphasising relativism.⁶⁰ When truth is seen as flexible and subjective, gatherings lose their meaning because there is no common standard to unite believers. This weakens the bonds of fellowship and makes worship feel empty or irrelevant. The Church, meant to be a place of unity and encouragement, risks fragmentation as individuals pursue personal interpretations of truth. Without a firm commitment to biblical principles, fellowship becomes shallow, and the Church loses its ability to function as a strong, unified community.

Postmodernism also encourages materialism, in which the pursuit of wealth overshadows that of truth. People prioritize material gain over spiritual growth, often engaging in unethical practices to achieve abundance. Conscience becomes emotionless, and actions are judged as good only if they solve immediate problems or bring profit.⁶¹ This mindset fractures families, fuels violence, and spreads chaos in society. Instead of offering solutions, postmodernism often creates confusion and instability. The Church, therefore, faces the challenge of addressing materialism while reminding believers that true fulfilment comes from serving Christ. Without this correction,

⁶⁰ Ajedokun,

⁶¹ Onyeije, 20-33.

materialism continues to erode spiritual values and weaken communities.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that ecclesiology in flux highlights the tension between preserving biblical truth and responding to postmodern cultural realities. While relativism, moral loss, and individualism threaten the unity and authority of the Church, these challenges also invite renewal. By emphasising Christ-centred mission, authentic fellowship, and moral clarity, the Church can resist world pressures while embracing opportunities to serve diverse communities. Ultimately, the Church's identity must remain dynamic yet faithful, balancing tradition with adaptability. In doing so, it can provide stability, meaning, and hope in a fragmented age, becoming a living testimony of God's truth and love in the postmodern world.

Recommendations

1. For the Church: The Church must remain Christ-centered, affirming absolute truth while engaging postmodern culture with humility. It should foster authentic fellowship, unity in diversity, and a holistic mission. They should also exemplify justice, reconciliation, and peace, which will make the Church become a living testimony of God's truth and resist relativism and materialism while offering stability and hope in a fragmented world.

2. For Believers: Believers should anchor their faith in Scripture and counterattack cultural relativism and moral confusion. They are called to live out holiness, compassion, and accountability and ensure their witness

reflects Christ's truth. believers can resist individualism and materialism, value community and discipleship, and embody resilient hope and authentic relationships that strengthen the Church's mission in postmodern society.

3. For Theological Educators: Theological educators must equip students to critically engage postmodern thought while remaining faithful to biblical truth. They should emphasize contextual theology that respects cultural diversity yet affirms Christ's authority. By integrating apologetics, ethics, and mission, educators prepare leaders to defend the gospel, nurture communities, and respond creatively to challenges posed by relativism and pluralism.

4. For Spiritual Leaders: Spiritual leaders should model servant leadership, exercising authority through humility, transparency, and accountability. They must rebuild trust by reflecting Christ's example and guide believers with integrity and compassion. Leaders can help communities interpret culture through Scripture, balance experience with revelation, and ensure that faith remains rooted in God's truth while addressing fears, confusion, and moral challenges.

5. For Pastors: Pastors must provide clear moral guidance, teaching God's universal standards as binding and good. They should disciple believers to resist cultural pressures and emphasize holiness and accountability. Pastors also need to engage culture through apologetics and mission, and to use creativity and authentic relationships to communicate the gospel. Their role is vital in sustaining unity, truth, and resilience.

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