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CHRISTIANITY, A PRACTICAL OR THEORETICAL RELIGION: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION.

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Abstract

Religion generally is likened to the act of devotion to a given phenomenon and doctrine which require a certain level of ritual and rites. Overtime, religion has proven to be people's way of life; this is because it has a way of impacting the life of the follower. The argument is that the morality and conscience of a person are built and determined to a considerable extent by the person's religion and religious dispositions. It follows that religion has a way of affecting one's behaviour, lifestyles and approach to issues in the society. One of the obvious observations is that religion creates a bond of brotherhood, especially amongst persons who are rooted in the same religion or religious belief. Christianity is a perfect example of religion in the order that we have laid it bare so far. Christianity is the largest religion in the world, with more than two (2) million followers. Christianity is also reckoned as the religion with the highest number of denominations or religious sects in it, who all claim to be Christians. The result of these multi sects in Christianity is that it creates a sort of diversity in the doctrines and overall beliefs of the followers; who, although claiming to be all Christians but having differences to what they believe. Despite denomination or sects that a fellow falls under in the Christian religion; there are specific and common factors. These specific factors are apparent confirmation of one's Christian living. It is in line with the above that this paper researches on the concept of Christianity as a practical or theoretical religion by making a critical investigation of relative concepts.

Keywords: **Christianity, Christians, Critical investigation, Religion, Sects.**

Introduction

A Christian ought to be a person who is seen and deemed as being responsible. Christianity purports to make any follower live a certain form of lifestyle which is distinct and distinguished when compared to the life of others in the society. It follows that there is no point believing that one is a Christian if his conducts do not exhibit a model of Christian living. There are various studies which have certified that undoubtedly, there should be a difference between the Christian and the non-Christian just like the biblical analogy of a difference between the heaven and earth. The expectation is that one who is a Christian ought not to be a mere hearer of the word but also a doer of the Word, one who can take extra strides to show others the goodness in him as a Christian.

The Holy Bible used by Christians implores the followers to live a form of life that is worth emulating. Take for instance the verses that say "if one slaps you on one cheek, you should turn the other cheek", and another verse where Christians are enjoined to forgive someone in a single day for a record time of "seventy times seven". These two verses explain intensely

how practical Christianity is. It is not a mere intrinsic ideology; it also has to be extrinsically seen (*Internet).*

There have been arguments whether Christians are justified by faith alone, or they are justified by works alone. The researcher agrees wholesomely with the position of some scholars who made a thesis, antithesis and synthesis of the entire concepts. These thesis, antithesis and synthesis processes involve the belief that the Christians are not saved by works alone, they are saved by faith, but not by faith that is alone but by faith which is exhibited in the works. To them, faith without works is in vain and works without faith is futile. It is in this regard that the Holy Bible stated: "By their fruits, you shall know them". This is because one does not plant a Mango tree and then expect the mango to bring forth a pineapple. Just like a confused person would easily detect by seeing mango fruit on a tree that the tree is a mango tree actually; non-Christians should be able to do same with the Christians (Doetzel, 2001).

Talking about Christianity being practical or theoretical, is a fundamental query owing to the antecedents and precedents of events, especially in this our current generation. Christians are deemed to be followers of Christ or one who is like Christ. It follows that the life of Christ should be replicated in the lifestyle of such a person who put out himself as a Christian or follower of Christ. A story is told of a man whom some Christian preachers were telling testimonies of Jesus Christ and his acts and good works. The man to whom these preachers were giving the message has not heard of Jesus Christ all through his life. He was trained and brought up as a moralist. On that day, after the message to him about Jesus Christ, he ended up saying that he already knew the man Jesus Christ, that he had seen him before a couple of times in the neighbourhood *(Internet).*

That came as a shocker to the preachers as they were amazed. It was not as if the preachers shared any physical compositions of Jesus Christ, which could have made the man be convinced that another whom he had seen around looked exactly like the Jesus Christ being described. After a time; it was learnt that the man was referring to a man who live in the neighbourhood, who is at peace with everyone, who helps the needy, who consoles those in sorrow and rejoices with the happy ones, who shares what he has with others, who are always ready to go the extra mile to create the right impression in the people. It follows that this man here was able to match the qualities exhibited by Jesus Christ while on earth to the characters being exhibited by another man. This short story is precisely how others should identify Christians. It should not be by mere profess of the faith as a Christian (Internet).

This is to say that when people see Christ-likeness in the followers of Christianity as a religion, these people will be more attracted towards the religion, where the people could not see nor find any form of Christ-likeness in the purported Christians, it causes a sort of repel; because, it is in the performance of one's duty to others that the ethics will come to be exhibited and seen by other people. This is why it is written that your light should so shine before men that they may see your good works and praise your Father in heaven. Christianity may be likened to electricity. Just like electricity cannot be seen or noticed except through an output shown via mediums of light, heat, and power, Christianity cannot be seen or noticed except through some outputs shown via the mediums of lifestyles. If one is in a dark room and nothing is seen, and vision is limited and impaired, activities may be affected, electricity lightens the

room and saves the person therein from the disadvantaged position he was in before then. Christianity, in a like mind, does the same in society (Gordon and Wilkinson, 2008).

There are about two million Christians with thousands of denominations (churches). All claims to be under Christianity (Smidt, 2003). This paper attempts to make a critical investigation into the world of Christianity to ascertain if Christianity since its inception, and especially in its current forms of practice and dispositions, is a practical or theoretical religion. The paper will proceed to give a brief highlight as to the origin of Christianity as a religion and will further from there to illustrate critically if Christianity is practical or theoretical

Origin of Christianity

The origin of Christianity could be traced to the Judaism movement in the first century of Christ's existence on earth (C.E.). During this time, Jesus of Nazareth, who was deemed as a Jewish rabbi by the Jews handled teaching where he taught the people about the soon coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus, in order to facilitate his teaching processes and other related issues like the welfare of the listeners and venue and other things recruited and choose a caucus of twelve men who are known as the twelve disciples. In no distant time, the number of followers of his teachings grew numerically. It is recorded that his teachings spread imminently within the present-day Israel and Palestine during his 33 years sojourn on earth. He was later arrested and crucified, and from whence, he died (McGrath, 2001).

The followers and disciples of Jesus assert that their master rose from death and ascended into heaven to prepare a place for them and all others who may be willing to accept the teachings and faith. The followers of Jesus on the premise that their master died and resurrected and ascended into heaven, upon claims by the disciples of witnessing so many signs and wonders suggesting him as a supernatural being, they came to believe that he was the Son of God and that his death and resurrection saved them from their sins (Gonzalez, and Zaida, 2002).

The faith of the disciples and the followers grew, likewise their convictions in their belief. They reformed the name of Jesus and added Christ to it, which symbolizes the anointed one or the Messiah. Following the death of Jesus, his followers were seen by all others as a sect in Judaism. Based on prophecies, the Jews believed that a messiah is to come and save them from the earthly scourge and bondage of being enslaved by the Romans and formal establishment of the Jewish kingdom as a sovereign and majestic kingdom here on earth (Gonzalez, and Zaida; 2002). Though the Jews had long anticipated the birth and coming of their prophetic Messiah, when Jesus sprung up, they held unto him as that Messiah who was foretold in their prophetic scrolls. However, as events unfold, most Jews lost interest in Jesus and did not acknowledge his Messiah-ship; this and other factors contributed to the differences in the belief of the followers of Christ and the other Jews. It follows that overtime, the practices of the followers of Christ became so distinct and distinguished that they could no longer be categorized as a sect in Judaism and were instead considered as a separate religious sect distinct from Judaism (McGrath, 2001).

The followers of Christ were not known and referred to as Christians until an event that occurred in Antioch, where the people of Antioch who had foreknowledge of the teaching of Jesus Christ, upon seeing the attributes of Jesus Christ in the followers, said unto themselves that the followers behave like Christ. It is on that assumption that the followers behave like

Christ that the name Christians and Christianity was later adopted for the followers in the teaching and faith of Jesus Christ. The early Christians who happened to have a certain level of knowledge about the life of Jesus Christ while he was on earth put together their scratched form of the memories of the activities and teachings of Jesus Christ into a written document (Gonzalez,1999).

These followers, as well as other distinguished followers that joined the movement later, wrote in accordance to what they have learned, and they were all compiled and collectively used today by Christians as their Holy Scripture or Bible. The means of communication then also affected the volume of the scripture and most letters written either to specific individuals, or any collective congregation were all encumbered into the scriptures as part of the teachings to be upheld by any follower (Gonzalez, 1999). It is observed that the Christian scripture as it is today has undergone series of debates and symposium as to what and what should be contained therein and what should be discarded or accepted as a universal belief of Christians. The result of the debates were the selections of certain books which were deemed favourable to the teachings of their master from the voluminous Jewish scroll, which they termed old testament and selections of some claimed life accounts of the disciples regarding life and death of their master, Jesus and other related letters written amongst the followers were adopted and divided into 27 books, known today as the new testament (Noll, 2000).

Historically, the Roman empire was in charge of ruler-ship of that part of the world then; in order not to displeased the traditional socio-religious settings of the colony amongst the Jews; the Roman empire was alert to combat the followers of the Christian religion as they outlawed Christianity and persecuted anyone who is found guilty of professing his faith as Christian. These practices of Christian martyr continued throughout the region until the year 313 AD, when the Emperor of the Roman empire and government was converted to the movement as a Christian (Noll, 2000). This emperor by name Constantine as a true sign of his conversion legalized the religion, which broughtan end to a very great extent the extermination of Christians via persecution and martyrdom. At this point, all the disciples and the followers who are contemporaries to the disciples were long dead (Gonzalez, 1999).

At this stage of Christianity, there was a discrepancy in the teachings. Concerns were about which Jewish belief and doctrines to drop and the ones that needed not to be dropped, there were differing points where the Christians disagreed with one another. All these were causing a commotion, unrest and internal confusion amongst the Christians. When Constantine noticed the issues, he was of the view that if those were left unattended, it would lead to conflicts amongst the Christians; he issued an order inviting all the known and profound Christian leaders to a forum for meeting on the different issues. The meeting of the Christian leaders (bishops) across the empire which was later known as Christian Leaders' Council has held at Nicaea in the 325 C.E. It was this first major council of the Christian churches that some issues regarding the divinity of Jesus, Trinity, days of worship and holidays, were communalized. The agreements made by the council are known today as the Nicene Creed (Noll, 2000).

The council held at Nicaea did not put to an end the debates and arguments amongst Christians on certain issues. It continued till the fourth century during the political reign of Emperor Theodosius, and under the theological leadership of Bishop Augustine of Hippo,

another council was held. From this council, Christianity was officially announced and adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire. This order implied that so many more converts were gotten across the empire, some who converted to gain favour from the government and others who converted out of fear of being extinguished by the Roman authorities. From then on, Christianity spread rapidly into other regions (Lynch, 1995).

Practical or Theoretical

When it comes to Christianity, everyone has a view of what is expected of a Christian in our world today; the major concern and issue is whether the expectations are met or not. Sometimes we may in daily endeavours run across someone who professes to be a Christian, but the lifestyle of the person could make us pause and ponder over the profession and claim of being a Christian made by the person *(Internet).* The undiluted fact is that aside Christians, people of other religion know that there are expected characteristics exhibitions which are expected to be seen and observed overtime in the behaviour and attitude of any Christian (Doetzel; 2001).In a situation where the expected qualities are lacking and are not inculcated in the life of an acclaimed Christian; it raises actual doubt on the person's claim and profession. It is at this point that one would hear (*Emphases are mine):*

1. "Is this one a Christian too?"
2. "What sort of Christian is this one?"
3. "If this is what Christianity is all about, count me out".

The popular belief is that when a person is or becomes a Christian, there will be positive changes in the life of that person. It does not merely suggest that Christians must be faultless and spotless or that they are above making mistakes and letting their human nature overshadow their divine nature of spirituality. What matters is how the Christian was able to handle the situation and emerge victoriously. One of the early followers of the Christian faith, named apostle Paul described in one of his writings that things he did not want to do, he saw himself doing them and things he wanted to do, he saw himself not doing them. He emphasized his assertion by stating that the flesh is weak, but the spirit is willing (Lewis, 2001).

In order to further comprehend our discourse; when it is insinuated that something is theoretical, it implies a bunch of theories which cannot put into practice or be exhibited in real-life events. It follows that anything is mainly based on provisions of theories and cannot experience or live out may be termed as being theoretical. On the other, something is practical if and when it can be exhibited in real-life events or be put into practice. From this paragraph, let it jingle in our memory lane, is Christianity practical or theoretical?

One of the significant theoretical beliefs of the Christians is that Jesus asked them to love God with all their hearts and souls and also to love their neighbour as they love themselves. On how to love God with all their hearts, the Bible explained that a Christian should keep the commandments of God if they love him (Lim & Putnam, 2010). The commandment of God as contained in the Bible is something most acclaimed Christians can recite offhand, but they find it too hard to obey and follow them. Out of the numbers of crimes committed in the USA, more than 50% of them are committed by persons who professed to be Christians (Gordon, and Wilkinson, 2008), in Africa, the horrendous crimes of apartheid meted against the blacks were done by Christians; bringing it home to Nigeria, the killings and other related crimes

which are apparent contravention of the commandments of God are perpetrated amongst others by persons who claims to be Christians. It follows that the practical side of Christian theory of keeping Gods commandment has not been kept up with accordingly *(Internet).*

The other parts of the Christian teaching and theory which say love your neighbour as you love yourself is now too much a mountain to climb. Christian finds it easier to say love one another but in exhibiting conducts to show that they love one another is a herculean task. Jesus Christ, in explaining what it means to love your neighbour as you love yourself told the rich man who inquired to know that he should sell off his properties, use the proceeds and help the needy. When asked who one's neighbour is, Jesus used the story of the good Samaritan to illustrate that. What Jesus depicted in the story of the good Samaritan is still invoke today. Professed Christians would rush to church to get the front seat and partake holy communions, but they are devils to their tenants, landlords, relatives, among others. The Christians find it to let go in helping the needy, especially the ones that could not fetch him the recognizance he ascribes. It means that most Christians who involve in helping others are doing it for publicity sake that is a show of sycophancy *(Internet).*

The theoretical teaching of the Christians that one should not have any other god aside their God in heaven nor bow to any graven image is a mockery of itself. You see Christians publicly showcasing that they have other sources of power and protection aside their Christian God. The Igbo call it *"Ike nkwucha"* which implies being readily prepared. In extended family settings, there is a member of the family who is so dreaded for his diabolic activities. These persons involved in the diabolic acts would still be holding predominant positions in the Christian churches (Awoniyi, 2016).

Based on the teachings and faith of Christianity, the religion theoretically shuns all forms of bribery, cheating and corrupt practices. But it is not unusual to hear Christians using slangs like:

1. "Conditions make crayfish bend" or
2. "If you get to Rome, you behave like Romans."

All these are forms of communication language which the Christians often use to justify their conducts which are out-rightly against the theories of the Christian religion and faith. You will see Christians swearing affidavits to reduce their ages to get a particular work or so as not to be retired in their present work. During exams, the volume of Christians who are caught involving in one form of examination malpractice or the other is at an alarming rate. The worst is that professed Christians who may teach against it are seen involved in the act. From the foregoing, it seems as if Christianity is all about following the teaching/theories and not the conducts and practices of the persons teaching *(Internet).*

In recent times, National Agency for Food and Drug Administration, a government agency in Nigeria which is in charge is approving drugs and food produced for human consumption carried out raid or examination in the Onitsha main market in Anambra state in South-Eastern Nigeria; more than 70 percent of the patent drug dealers were found to be intentionally dealing on fake drugs. These persons are from the East of the River Niger in Nigeria, which is an area predominantly occupied by Christians. One is left to ponder how their love for money

and success overshadow their Christian belief of not killing another person; when it is evident that the fake drugs they deal on may fasten the death of another person (Internet).

The Christian theory of not coveting their neighbours' property or wife or belongings is underrated by persons who professed to be Christians. You see men having extramarital affairs with other peoples' wife and women having affairs with other people's husband. There are more than 1,000 civil matters on land disputes across the courts in Nigeria, more than 50% of these cases have the claimants and defendants all professing to be Christians; who supposed, to be honest amongst themselves and allow the true owner of the land to maintain ownership and possession, but greediness would not let them be. Talking about fornication and adultery amongst the Christians is weighty talk. The world where Christians are where even members of the clergy are now being accused with overwhelming evidence of being involved in sexual immorality. The obvious defence is that "we are all humans before Christians if no man had ever sin, let him cast the first stone, for all have sinned and run short of the glory of God, if any man says he had no sin, he makes God a liar and the truth is not in him" (Leclaire, 2013).

Following the wave of Pentecostalism in the Christian religion, there became an influx and increase in the number Christian churches who are owned by individuals who based on overt observations are running the churches as a business entity with an eye on the commercial benefits and profits. In order to steady the flow of membership, and increase the commercial database of the churches concern; there became a sort of abridged Christian doctrines (Obiora, 2001). These Pentecostal churches preaches "God does not call the qualified, but he qualifies the called", they often relate to the story of God asking Hosea to marry a prostitute or God using a prostitute to save the Israelites who went to spy the land of Cannan, or the thief on the cross, or even Mary Magdalene who was a prostitute but later became a dear friend of Jesus. To this end, the center of their message is "come as you are". "It is not the work of men to change men but the work of the Holy Spirit". These lines of teachings have tremendously affected the lifestyles of many Christians in the world today. Christians are no longer modest in dressing, speech, character and overall lifestyles; all in the belief that their God understands (Farais, 2014).

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is candid about pointing out that Christians no longer live as they teach or believe. It seems the only theoretical aspects of Christianity being practised in the doctrines of baptism and communion as Christian churches and their members are seen carrying out the ceremonies of baptism and communions. However, those are not the only aspect of Christian theories which should be practised. It seems evident that Christians only have the theoretical belief that it ought to be so, but have no such practical expositions in real-life events. Could it be concluded that Christianity is a theoretical base religion or a practical religion? The researcher is clearly of the view that Christianity can be a theoretical religion or practical religion; it all depends on the people, the geographical area and time.

However, should we lean on the attributes of the people to reach our conclusion or should the Christian teachings be taken as a point of reference in making our conclusion? The researcher is of the view that using the attributes of persons who professed to be Christians to conclude that Christianity is theoretical only would be a wrong conclusion. This is because someone who is not following the principles as laid by the forerunners of a faith he or she professes to

be keeping cannot be said to be a follower of the religion. I agree wholly that Christianity ought to be practical for its apparent purpose to be appreciated. For it to be practical; it takes a good knowledge and experienced interpretation of the theoretical aspects for a follower to live it out in real-life events. Summarily, I conclude that it could be practical or theoretical, but it should be a combination of both the theoretical and practical.

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