

The Importance of Islam and Christianity in Fighting Corruption in Nigeria with the “Change Begins With Me” Campaign

Dr. Musa Yusuf Owoyemi,*Dr. Makueta Hayiwaesorhoh* & Ahmeed Adedeji Onikosi**

**Visiting Senior Lecturer, Department of Civilization and Philosophy, School of Languages, Civilization and Philosophy, College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia*
***HOD, Islamic Law Department, College of Law, Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Nigeria*

Abstract: Corruption is a worldwide menace which hinders the development and progress of nations everywhere it is allowed to fester. In Nigeria, corruption has become endemic and it has been allowed to fester for so long that it has affected all the fabrics of the nation. However, with the advent of the new government, there is a renewed effort to bring it under control if not wipe it out totally. The current government has launched a campaign called “Change Begins with Me” which is meant to herald a national rebirth for the society and its people, especially in the civil services, economic, political and social spheres. Much as this effort is commendable, this paper argues that for the campaign to succeed there is need to first tackle corruption in religion as well as involve the two major religions in the nation, Islam and Christianity, in the campaign since about ninety-eight percent (98%) of the people are adherents of these religions and tend to be influenced by them. Thus, using the analytical and critical methods, this paper explores the reason(s) why there is a need for the involvement of Islam and Christianity in the “Change Begins with Me” campaign.

Keywords: Nigeria, Religion, Islam, Christianity, Corruption, Change, Religious leaders, Campaign.

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I. INTRODUCTION

That there are countless books, articles and even magazines on the issue of corruption in the library is an understatement. Since corruption has come to be identified as one of the banes of development, especially human development, (Theobald, 1990; Williams, 2000; Williams & Doig, 2000) in the society, many scholars and writers have taken the pain to assess the causes, effects and solutions to the problem of corruption in the human society (Alatas, 1991; Alatas, 1968). Even recently, in the international arena, the United Nations has championed the cause of fighting corruption and even encouraged nations to put in place mechanism for curbing, discouraging and disciplining those who engage in corrupt practices especially in politics and public service. This explains why many who stole and corruptly enriched themselves, especially in the developing nations, are now facing prosecution whichever country they may run to for protection.

However, much as the above is commendable, a curious look at the issue of corruption as it is being fought today will reveal that this fight has been reduced to the political, economic and civil service spheres (see DeLeon, 1993; Levi, 1996; Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Girling, 1997; Jones, 1993) and the issue is not being raised in other spheres of life, especially in the religious sphere which is one of the important phenomena in the social sphere of human life. Although there are books which talk about corruption in religion, but, these books are mainly concerned with corruption in the holy texts of the religions and not about the corrupt use of religion. A look at the books on the issue of corruption will reveal this statement as an incontestable fact (see, for example, Ehrman, 1993 and Pegg, 2001). What most of the books on corruption in religions deal with is how men have interpolated, twisted and misinterpreted the words and teachings of religions, and not how religion is being used by some con men in the garb of piety to perpetrate corruption.

Likewise, one hardly comes across articles that discuss this very important aspect of religious corruption. However, one that seems to try to expose this issue and bring it to the public consciousness is that of Frank A. Jones titled, “When Religious Corruption is Allowed to Stand”. In this article, Jones questioned the covering up of and shielding of the Catholic Priests who abused their priestly positions by exploiting their followers sexually and in other ways. He holds that this issue is a moral one and the failure of the Catholic Church to act against and cover up these priests is unbecoming of what religion is all about and opens the gateway to the institutionalization of corruption in the religious sphere. He also points out the exploitation of the people that are going on in the new generation churches citing the example of a Reverend Ike who

collected money and other properties from his church members and exploits the female members sexually. He strongly argues for the need for action to be taken against people like this in the religious sphere so as to stem the new attitude of using religion as a tool of corruption by people of ill intents.ⁱ

Another short article, "The Role of Religious Leaders in the Face of Corruption" by Chanshi Chanda, chronicles the types of corruption that are ongoing in the church and questions the issue of the role of church leaders in curbing corruption in the public sphere when they too are immersed in the same corruption issue in their sphere. The author queries a situation where churches engage in fundraising purposely for the church only for such monies to go to the church leaders pockets. She cites the example of an ordained minister who stole money meant for relief operation and those church leaders who bought their way to the top echelon of the church. Finally, she says, for church leaders to be taken seriously in curbing corruption in the public sphere, they must, as a matter of practicability eradicate corruption in their sphere first and make the religious sphere a sparkling example of a corruption-free institution.ⁱⁱ

But articles such as "The Corruption of our Churches" by Clayton R. Douglas, only look at how the government, in collaboration with religious leaders, uses religion as a tool of enslaving the people shortly after the world war 1 and how the Christian religious leaders meet in the U. S. to endorse the political and economic plan of the government in enslaving the people of the world without blinking an eyelid.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the same vein as above, the article, "Government's Corruption of Religion" argues against the government encroaching on and getting involve in the affairs of religion as past experiences show that once there is a combination of government and religion, the later becomes a tool of corruption in the hands of the former, and this does not always augur well for religion and the people.^{iv}

As in Christianity, there are few articles on the issue of corruption in Islam and most of the available ones are concern purely with explaining what corruption is and not how it is being used as a tool of corruption and affecting specific society/societies. For example, writing in the article titled "Definition of Bribery according to Islam" Syed Othman Alhabshi explains the ways in which corruption starts in the society especially among those in the position of authority. He also highlights the meaning of corruption by citing the event of the collector of zakat reported in the hadith of the Prophet who, having being appointed by the Prophet to collect zakat, returned later to give account of his collections to the Prophet and, while setting aside some of the things he was given, told the Prophet that they are gifts from those he collected zakat from. The Prophet reprimanded him as he viewed this act of the zakat collector as a corrupt act because in the words of the Prophet "What right have you to put aside something that does not belong to you. If you were to remain in your father's house, would you get what you are taking?"^v The Holy Prophet reportedly continued by saying "If you get from the people because of your position [that] is bribery. Would you get it if you are not holding that position, or if you stay in your father's house?"^{vi} Thus, Syed Othman Alhabshi concludes that using one's position to get material favour for oneself amounts to corruption.

Another work on corruption from the Islamic perspective is that of Mevliyar Er entitled "Corruption from the Islamic Perspective: Some Recommendation for the MENA Region". In this article, Mevliyar Er focuses on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. His attention is mostly on the economy of this region and how corruption is contributing to the mismanagement of resources. According to him, several factors contribute to corruption in the region with a consequence of savings being squandered away and funds withheld from productive investments. Contrasting these Muslim societies with the West, he "argues that Muslim countries have a competitive advantage over the industrialized world in that the Islamic faith is important to the populace, which the West lacks and is trying to replace it with substitutes like for instance moral education in schools."^{vii} He concluded that moral "renovation in Muslim societies appears to be easier to realize than in Western societies once its underlying cause – notably, poverty - is tackled. Self-restraint is an absolute prerequisite for a successful fight against corruption. Organizational instruments against corruption can only succeed to eliminate corruption only through political leaders committed to weeding out corruption."^{viii}

The answer provided by Marie Chene in a short article for Transparency International on the question of corruption from an Islamic perspective is worthy of mention here.^{ix} First, she explains the idea of corruption from the Islamic perspective and highlights the important fact that since Islam does not entertain the idea of secularism, whatever may be said about corruption in Islam must necessarily derive from the Islamic heritage and the Shariah law. She then went on to quote hadith and Quran on the idea of corruption especially as it concerns human interaction in the areas of business and the economy. She also explains the different legal approaches of Muslim nations in the MENA region and how they used this in tackling the issue of corruption.

In all the articles cited above, it is clear that the focus is on the economy, political and social and not so much on how Islam is being used by learned men as a tool of corruption in Muslim nations. However, that there are few of such research in Islam on this issue is not to say that Islam does not concern itself with this, rather, it is the case that Muslims have not focused their attention much on the issue, and, thus, the Quranic perspectives on the issue will be explained below for further clarity on the highlighted aim of this research work.

Religious Corruption, which could be literally translated in Arabic as فساد الدين (Fasad al-Din) can be basically classified into two from the Qur'an and these are (1) distorting the religious book, that is distorting the meaning of the text(s) of the scripture, حَرْفَ المعنى الكتاب (Harrafa al-ma'ana al-kitab) and (2) using the religion for worldly gains or to corruptly enrich oneself under the pretense of preaching the religion, اشترى بكتات الله ثمنا قليلا ('Ishtariybikitabi Allah thamanaqalilan). These two basic categories of corruption are referred to in the Qur'an as follow:

1. Concerning those who corrupt the religion by distorting the holy book thereby deforming what was originally preached by the Prophets sent by Allah, the Qur'En says:

"There is among them a section who distort the Book with their tongues; (as they read) you would think it is a part of the Book but it is no part of the Book; and they say "That is from Allah" but it is not from Allah: it is they who tell a lie against Allah and (well) they know it!" Q3:78 "But because of their breach of their Covenant We cursed them and made their hearts grow hard: they change the words from their (right) places and forget a good part of the Message that was sent them nor wilt thou cease to find them barring a few ever bent on (new) deceits: but forgive them and overlook (their misdeeds): for Allah loveth those who are kind." Q5: 13 "Those who pervert the Truth in Our Signs are not hidden from Us. Which is better? He that is cast into the Fire or he that comes safe through on the Day of Judgement? Do what ye will: Verily He seeth (clearly) all that ye do." Q41:40^x

2. Concerning those who use religion for worldly gains and to corruptly enrich themselves, the Qur'an says:

"Those who conceal Allah's revelations in the Book and purchase for them a miserable profit they swallow into themselves naught but fire; Allah will not address them on the Day of Resurrection nor purify them; grievous will be their penalty." Q2:174 "As for those who sell the faith they owe to Allah and their own plighted word for a small price they shall have no portion in the hereafter: nor will Allah (deign to) speak to them or look at them on the Day of Judgment nor will He cleanse them (of sin); they shall have a grievous penalty." Q3:77^{xi}

However, having explained the above in order to highlight the fact that the Qur'an itself is concerned with this issue, it needed to be said that it is the second kind of corruption mentioned in the Qur'an, that is the corrupt use of religion for worldly gains, that this research is concerned with. In this vein, it will be pertinent to also show what the Prophet of Islam said about it.

According to a hadith reported in Al-Bukhari and Muslim "The Prophet sallallaahu `alayhiwasallam employed a man from the tribe of Al-Azd named Ibn Al-Lutbiyyah to be a Zakaah [obligatory charity] collector. When he returned he said [to the Prophet sallallaahu `alayhiwasallam (may Allah exalt his mention)], "This is for you and this was presented to me as a gift." The Messenger of Allah sallallaahu `alayhiwasallam (may Allah exalt his mention) then rose to the pulpit and praised Allah The Almighty and extolled Him. Then he said: "I employ a man to do a job and he comes and says this is for you and this was presented to me as a gift? Why did he not remain in the house of his father, or the house of his mother, and see whether gifts would be given to him or not? By Allah, if anyone of you took anything unlawfully, he will come with it on the Day of Resurrection, carrying it on [his back]. I will not recognize any of you on the Day of Resurrection with a grunting camel, or a bellowing cow, or a bleating ewe." Then he raised his hands till he could see the whiteness of his armpits. Then he said twice, "O Allah! Have I conveyed [Your Commands]?" The Prophet (sallallahualeihiwasallam) said:

"Allah does not punish the individuals for the sins of the community until they see the evil spreading among themselves, and while they have the power to stop it, do not do so." (Ahmad)

Commenting on the above, Shaykhul-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah said:

"This is why those who are in authority are of two groups: the scholars and the rulers. If they are upright, the people will be upright; if they are corrupt, the people will be corrupt."

The above shows that in as much as the political leaders in society have the obligation of preventing corruption, the religious leaders have a greater responsibility of ensuring that corruption does not spread in the society too because they are more respected than political leaders and the people easily follow their advice and crave their guidance in all affairs of their lives. Thus, even if the political leaders transgress, it is the duty of the religious leaders to correct them and as long as the religious leaders remain corruption-free, it is likely to be contained and managed successfully in the society. But once corruption spread to the religious leaders, then the whole society is at risk and the people are most likely to become heedless and adopt it as a way of life – as is currently the case in Nigeria today.

The above explains why Islam and Christianity could serve a useful purpose in the fight against corruption especially in a religion opiate nation like Nigeria.

What is the “Change Begins with Me” Campaign?^{xii}

The “Change Begins with Me” campaign was launched by President Muhammad Buhari in Abuja the federal capital of Nigeria on the 8th of September 2016 in the presence of members of his cabinet with live telecast to the people of Nigeria. The fundamental idea of the change begins with me campaign according to President Buhari is to curb corruption both in public and private lives of the citizenry and to encourage a change of negative attitude which has affected all fabrics of the nation to a positive one which will, henceforth, change the fortune of everyone for a better nation and future. In the words of the President, for so long, the ethical way of life which espouses “honesty, hard work, Godliness have given way to all kinds of manifestations of lawlessness and degeneration in our national life” (Buhari, M.; 2016). As a result of this, “our value system has been badly eroded over the years. The long-cherished and time-honoured, time-tested virtues of honesty, integrity, hard work, punctuality, good neighbourliness, abhorrence of corruption and patriotism, have given way in the main to dishonesty, indolence, unbridled corruption and widespread impunity” (ibid.). There is, therefore, an urgent need for “attitudinal change, and the change of our mindset in private and public life”(ibid.). This change, according to the President must not be seen as merely economic change or social progress in the physical sense but must entail a total reorientation in terms of “our personal behaviour on how we conduct ourselves, engage our neighbours, friends and generally how we relate with the larger society in a positive and definitive way and manner that promotes our common good and common destiny, change at home, change in the workplace, change at traffic junction, change at traffic lights etc”(ibid.).

In other words, the proposed change is one that involves a paradigm shift which will impact the whole fabrics of our society and turn it around for good so that our time honoured and cherished values system such as hardwork and honesty which has been abandoned as a result of corruption will be gradually revived and once more revered in the nation.

“There is no doubt that our value system has been badly eroded over the years. The long-cherished and time honoured, time-tested virtues of honesty, integrity, hard work, punctuality, good neighbourliness, abhorrence of corruption and patriotism, have given way in the main to dishonesty, indolence, unbridled corruption and widespread impunity”(ibid.).

The problem of corruption which permeates the whole fabrics of our national life, in the words of the president, is the result of the choices that we made and which have eroded any sense of decency on how we live and relate with one another. These choices made corruption to be so endemic that the results are so glaring in the derailment of our value system which has affected the social, political and economic spheres of the nation. Thus, it is for this reason that “some youths will take to cultism and brigandage instead of studying hard or engaging in decent living; it is the reason that some elements will break pipelines and other oil facilities, thus robbing the nation of much-needed resources; it is the reason that money belonging to our commonwealth will be brazenly stolen by the same public officials to whom they were entrusted; it is the reason why motorists drive through red traffic lights, it is the reason that many will engage in thuggery and vote-stealing during elections; it is part of what has driven our economy into deep problem out of which we are now working hard to extricate ourselves. Every one of us must have a change from our old ways of doing things, we cannot fold our arms and allow things to continue the old way”(ibid.).

In view of the above, therefore, the President admonished that “Rather than sit back and complain endlessly,” we must “act pragmatically” and since this is long overdue, the “campaign will not be a sprint but a marathon that will run the course of our tenure”(ibid.).

However, the President said he recognises the fact that it is not going to be an easy venture, but it is worth the try because the life of the nation itself depends on it “We are under no illusion that the changes we seek will happen overnight, but we have no doubt that the campaign will help restore our value system and rekindle our nationalistic fervour”(ibid.).

In conclusions, the President pleads to the people to wake up to this challenge as it is the only hope that we have in reviving our nation since recent history has taught us that very few benefit from the system of corruption while the majority suffer the consequences “Let us summon a new spirit of responsibility, spirit of service, of patriotism and sacrifice, Let us all resolve to pitch in and work hard and look after, not only ourselves but one another, What the current problem has taught us is that we cannot have a thriving army of rent seekers and vested interests, while the majority suffers”(ibid.).

The above sums up the idea of the “change begins with me” campaign of the current regime in Nigeria. The call is a call for national rebirth and a change of direction in the way the nation is governed and in the way people lives and interacts with one another. It is, therefore, a call which touches all the spheres of life including the religious sphere. As the President rightly points out, corruption is something that has affected both the public and private lives of the nation which shows that nothing in the nation has been spared of the menace called corruption.

However, as argued elsewhere in this paper, Africans, and particularly Nigerians, are religion opiates, and it is thus wise that this campaign should start from the religious sphere. The idea is that, once this idea

is championed through religion and religious institutions, the likelihood of it succeeding is greater since the issue of corruption in the Nigerian nation has taken a religious bent. The argument for the involvement of religion in this fight against corruption and for national rebirth will be further expatiated in the next section below.

The Importance of Islam and Christianity in Fighting Corruption with the “Change Begins with Me” Campaign

Since there is now a concerted effort to wipe out corruption in the society, the thrust of this paper is that for “the change begins with me” campaign to succeed in Nigeria as the government wishes, it should involve the two majority religions in the nation – that is Islam and Christianity. The reason is that there is this indisputable fact that many people, be it in the economic or political sphere, rely so much on the spiritual advice and guide of their religious leaders in doing most of what they do in their life endeavors. If therefore, the fight against corruption is to succeed, it must start from the religious institutions of both the Muslims and the Christians. Added to this is the fact that, although Nigeria operates a secular constitution, the adherents of both religions constitute about 98% of the population of the nation and if this 98 % of the population decides to be on the side of the government in fighting corruption, and they also eschew corruption in their lives, one can imagine how successful “the change begins with me” campaign of the government against vices will become. Moreover, the truth in the statements above becomes clearer when one considers the fact that virtually all the people that are currently being prosecuted, under investigation or convicted of corruption in Nigeria are either Christians or Muslims. All these people profess one of these faiths and are prominent members of their congregations. Thus, if the fight starts from their spiritual base and they are roundly admonished, criticized and when necessary ostracized by this base, it is likely going to yield the needed results because no human being is an island unto himself. Likewise, experience has shown that it is from this base that most people launch their career be it politics or other life endeavours.

In the same vein, as is always the situation in Nigeria, everyone – from the poorest person to the richest and from the non-influential person to the most influential person – has religious leaders as their spiritual guides, advisers and mentors. Therefore, beginning the campaign against corruption from the Mosque and the Church with the help of the leaders of these religions will have a multiplier effect as its impact will be felt on the other spheres of the society since most people tend to listen to their spiritual guides and follow their advice and mentoring.

Although, some may argue that these institutions themselves and the religious leaders need reformation before they can reform their members. This is not far from the truth because it is usually the case that part of the proceeds of corruption for which their members are being prosecuted, investigated or convicted had been shared and given to some of these religious leaders and they have actively encouraged them saying “it is the doing of the Lord” or “the mercy of Allah” on them. Nonetheless, it does not mean that there are no good and incorruptible ones among them. The good and incorruptible ones among them could be co-opted into the program and certain incentives given to them so as to encourage them – and, hopefully, with time, others will follow suit. The act of giving incentives to encourage them is because part of the problem is that these so-called men of God or religious leaders see Islam and Christianity as their “get rich quick” option just as the politicians see their political offices as their gateway to wealth. Thus, it will not be an easy endeavour to ask them to shun the corrupt but rich members of their Church or Mosque. Likewise, it is hoped that others will follow suit in this fight against corruption because nothing is impossible especially when there is financial independence! Moreover, while the politicians may be excused on the ground of ignorance and greed, those who hold spiritual offices have less ground to claim ignorance and greed because, by virtue of their office, that is what they are expected to treat in the society. They are the provider of the medicine to the evils in the human soul and as such ought to have healed themselves before seeking to heal others. If, therefore, the healer is sick, who will heal the dying?

Finally, Islam and Christianity are important and central to the anti-corruption campaign of the government because while the government may be busy preaching change and moral equity, the people may see this as a mere slogan since they do not really trust political leaders. But once this is coming from the pulpit of the Imam and/or Pastor, they will “believe” and listen since this is where their loyalty usually lies and this is where they look for direction in their lives and affairs. Therefore, in as much as there is a need to fight corruption in the religious sphere, there is also a need to understand that the anti-corruption war will do better with the help of religion based on the psyche of the Nigerian people as it concerns religion. Hence, here lies the importance of Islam and Christianity in the “change begins with me” campaign of the government and the reason why the government needs to co-opt the leaders of these two religions into the program.

II. CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the important role that Islam and Christianity can play in the fight against corruption in the Nigerian society especially with the launching of the “change begins with me” campaign by the current government. The reason for the need to incorporate these religions into the fight against corruption is based on the fact that most of those involved in corruption are people who profess one of these faiths and are therefore more likely to pay heed to the menace of corruption if the religious leaders urge them to eschew it. Nonetheless, the paper recognizes that before this could be achieved, there may be a need to clean the religious sphere itself of corruption as many of the so-called religious leaders of today are themselves corrupt and encourage corruption by not questioning the source of wealth of their followers and by encouraging them through advice and special prayers. But, the paper opines that for the change begins with me campaign to fully succeed, the government needstoidentify the incorruptible religious leaders in both religions and encourage them, through incentive if necessary, to take the message to their followers and congregation. This way, it is hoped, that the campaign will succeed, as most Nigerians tend to listen to the advice of their religious leaders and tend to implement them in their life.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ<http://www.gibbsmagazine.com/Religious%20corruption.htm> accessed on 28/05/08

ⁱⁱhttp://www.acton.org/commentary/commentary_249.php accessed on 28/05/08

ⁱⁱⁱSee http://www.theforbiddenknowledge.com/hardtruth/corruption_of_our_churches.htm accessed on 28/05/08

^{iv} See http://www.humanismbyjoe.com/government_corruption_of_religion.htm accessed on 29/05/08

^v See Syed Othman Alhabshi, Definition of bribery according to Islam, <http://corruptionmonitor.com/definitionofcorruption.html> accessed 25/09/16.

^{vi}Ibid.

^{vii}See Mevliyar Er, Corruption from the Islamic perspective: some recommendation for the MENA region, <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/full/10.1108/17538390810864241> accessed 25/09/16.

^{viii}Ibid.

^{ix}See Marie Chene, Islamic approaches to corruption, <http://www.u4.no/publications/islamic-approaches-to-corruption/> accessed 25/09/16.

^x See the footnotes in Yusuf Ali, English Translation of the Holy Qur’an, for more explanation of these verses of the Qur’an.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Everything in this section is taken from the speech of President Muhammad Buhari on the occasion of the launching of the Change begins with me campaign <http://allafrica.com/stories/201609090102.html>

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