



POST-CIVIL WAR SPIRITUALITY IN NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY AN ASSESSMENT OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA (1970-2025)

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Abstract

Over the years, one economic, social, religious, or political issue or the other has influenced Christianity in Nigeria. The Nigerian civil war of 1967 had driven the nation, especially the Eastern part of the country, into a state of economic, social, and religious uncertainty. As uncertainties rent the atmosphere, those who survived the war were left with little or no hope of survival. Churches had become ghost-lands; market places and schools were almost no more. This situation led to spiritual paucity, poverty, and hunger in the land. It was in this situation that Prayer and Spiritual Houses sprang up. Prophets and seers became the last resort for the people, who never questioned the genuineness and source of their power. These prophets kept promising spiritual solutions to the already bad socio-economic situation, and the more these promises, the more they were patronized. This paper identifies similar trends in Nigerian Christianity today. In the midst of unimproved socio-economic conditions in the country, new churches keep springing up with promises of prosperity, health, and wealth. Large crowds of people devoid of class and status patronize these centres. The multidimensional approach is adopted in this work, drawing insights from both historical and phenomenological methods. This research finds that people, over time, have always resorted to spiritual solutions to the fundamental questions of human existence. The paper concludes with the recommendation that while people will always seek spiritual solutions to problems, the State should make socio-economic amenities affordable and available to the people.

Keywords: Aburi, Post-Civil War, Spirituality, Christianity, Prophets, Prosperity, Health and Wealth

Introduction

Nigeria's three-year civil war ended in January 1970 with the declaration of "No Victor, No Vanquished." The war, fought between the federal government and the secessionist Republic of Biafra, left an estimated 1-3 million dead and displaced millions more, particularly in the Southeast (Achebe, 2012). Beyond the physical and economic devastation, the war had deep

spiritual consequences. For many Nigerians, especially in the former Biafra, the war raised questions about God's presence, divine justice, and the meaning of suffering.

In the decades that followed, Nigerian Christianity underwent a spiritual transformation. The colonial missionary churches—Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian—remained present but were gradually eclipsed in visibility and influence by indigenous Pentecostal and charismatic movements (Ukah, 2008). By 2025, Nigeria is estimated to have over 80 million Christians, making it one of the largest Christian populations in the world (Pew Research Center, 2022). This growth is not primarily attributable to traditional denominations but to new Pentecostal churches, mega churches, and independent ministries.

This article provides an assessment of Christian spirituality in contemporary Nigeria from 1970 to 2025. It examines the historical context of the post-war period, identifies the major theological and spiritual trends, and evaluates their implications for Nigerian society. The analysis is structured around five thematic developments that have shaped post-civil war spirituality: the rise of Pentecostalism, the emergence of prosperity theology, the centrality of healing and deliverance, increased political engagement, and the ongoing process of inculturation.

Christianity in Nigeria has been severely impacted by various socio-political and economic issues to such an extent that the very essence of its existence and teachings could no longer be found to be as stable as expected. Christian living and teachings are no longer exclusively biblical and apostolic, as the early Christian communities presented and handed down through the ages. The Nigerian civil war of 1967 which swept through the Igbo heartland as a counter to an earlier Biafran secession (Bolton, 1992) gave rise to a very serious religious uncertainty in the land. The dying children were crying to God for help; widows were mourning the demise of their husbands; the surviving old and young people were gasping for survival as a result of hunger and homelessness. Hopes were gone. Homes and sources of livelihood no longer accessible, bombs and bullets were endlessly penetrating lives, homes, worship centres and market places. Under this atmosphere, Christian missionaries that survived were evacuated from their duty posts. Christian spiritual guidance had become scarce and the days of miracles were gone and being expected.

This paper does not have its focus on the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, but it is an evaluation of the spirituality that pervaded the Christian church after the war. It, at the same time equates it with the contemporary Nigerian ecclesiastic situation in which diverse pneumatic expressions and manifestations strive. As it was in the midst of the socio-economic crisis after the civil war, when various spiritual groups emerged and promised solution and bliss so also it is today. As noted by (Maxey and Azodo:2017), people are no longer swayed by the promise of blessings to come in the hereafter as the principal rational for Christian living and character. To them the soon return of the Christ seems to have been over anticipated. The new message is that inherent in salvation is the victory expected to be experienced here and now over poverty, disease and hunger. With emphasis on the fact that man is saved principally to enjoy goodness and blessings of God here and now while awaiting the blessings of the remote hereafter. This drift is a total carry-over of the message of the 1970s, deemphasizing the Christian's focus on good living towards heaven which was the major motivation for calling people to in favour of material benefits to be gained here and now in this present life.

Historical Context: The Civil War and Its Spiritual Aftermath

The Nigerian Civil War was not framed explicitly as a religious conflict, but religion played a significant role in its dynamics and aftermath. The predominantly Christian Igbo population of the Southeast experienced the war as both a political and spiritual crisis. The massacres of Igbo civilians in the North in 1966 were interpreted by many as persecution, reinforcing a sense of Christian identity and solidarity (Obi, 2001).

Chinua Achebe opined that an emergency meeting was convened on the twenty sixth may 1967 by Ojukwu of his special advisory committee in Enugu. Accordingly, by the next day, twenty seventh May, Ojukwu was mandated to declare Eastern Nigeria an independent state from Nigeria with the name 'Republic of Biafra'. This action was a reaction to various happenings and observations targeted towards the easterners which were no longer going down well with the people, especially the perceived non implementation of the resolution of the Aburi meeting. Therefore, on May, 30, 1967, Ojukwu, citing a variety of malevolent acts purportedly directed towards the Igbos, proclaimed the independence of the Republic of Biafra from Nigeria, with the full backing of the Eastern House of Constituent Assembly. An action which threw Nigeria into a full-blown war that claimed millions of lives. (Achebe, 2012)

As the war raged on, life became a nightmare for survivors while the conflict created a humanitarian emergency of epic proportion. Millions of civilians flooded the main ways between towns and villages looking for safe havens and possible ways of escape from the chaos and conflict not minding the distance they were trekking from, sometimes to unknown destinations without the guarantee of food and water. In the words of Aniekop, there was food crisis, a scourge of hunger, starvation and malnutrition particularly for children, nursing mothers and the aged. Kwasiokor epidemic arose as a result of acute protein deficiency. About two million biafrans were estimated to have died of hunger including those who were killed by arms in battle. (Aniekpo, 2001)

In all these situations, where was the church, what message, encouragement or hope did people receive and how were they responding to those messages; the spirituality of the environment would definitely not be the same as it was before the war. The church was in exactly the same state as the nation as Bolton observed.

Post Civil War Spirituality

The war's end in 1970 created a spiritual vacuum. Traditional missionary churches, which had been weakened by the conflict and associated with colonialism, struggled to address the existential questions raised by the war. At the same time, the federal government's policy of reconciliation opened space for religious expression and association. This environment facilitated the emergence of indigenous spiritual movements that spoke directly to the experiences and needs of Nigerians.

Two immediate post-war developments were significant. First, there was a surge in evangelical revivalism, particularly through campus fellowships at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, University of Lagos, and University of Ibadan. The Scripture Union and Christian Union movements became breeding grounds for a new generation of Christian leaders who would later found major Pentecostal churches (Kalu, 2008). Second, there was a growing disillusionment with Western missionary theology, which was perceived as detached from African realities of poverty, sickness, and spiritual warfare. This disillusionment laid the groundwork for African-led spiritual movements.

The Nigeria-Biafra war did not only affect the peace, unity and economy of the nation it dealt a blow on Christianity. It ushered in something alien to the Christianity that was received from the European missionaries. It introduced deception into Christianity and gave room for syncretism. In a situation of helplessness, “Spiritual paucity and poverty, prayer houses began” (Bolton, 1997). The Holy Spirit was wrongly invoked and people made to believe the deception carried out in the name of God. The prophets in these prayer houses prayed for healing people were healed “but they healed their bodies, not their souls and of course they did not tell people that Jesus saves because they did not know this themselves. They surrounded themselves with ‘godly’ paraphernalia: crosses, holy-looking altars, religious emblems and Bibles, and they loved the use of candles in worship”.

The war watered down the faith of the people as many Igbo Christians ended up with syncretism. One of the places, apart from belonging to occultic groups, where people went in search of spiritual reality was the prayer houses. Even pastors of churches went to these places in search of the ‘deeper things of God’.

One tool of deception used against the unity of the church “is the Christian who refuses to work with other people”, whereas, love is the weapon against disunity (cf John 13:35). The author advises the church to guard against “spiritual apartheid” – practice of segregation on the ground of age, spirituality, race etc. though there could be justified grounds for this spiritual apartheid, love should be the midcourse for Christ himself called us to let the wheat and the weed grow together for if we try to uproot the weed, we may end up uprooting the wheat as well.

Christianity lost its beautiful place and fell below following the “search of something deeper and more meaningful”. In their helplessness, many consulted spiritualist, occultists or native doctors for solution to their problems. This atmosphere of spiritual paucity experienced in the established orthodox churches led to the springing up of prayer houses and a return to traditional worship in disguise.

The Pentecostalization of Nigerian Christianity (1970-1990)

The most significant feature of post-civil war spirituality has been the rapid expansion of Pentecostalism. While classical Pentecostalism had existed in Nigeria since the 1930s through churches such as the Assemblies of God and the Apostolic Church, the post-1970 period saw the rise of neo-Pentecostalism—-independent, dynamic, and media-savvy ministries. Pentecostalism was not a known phenomenon in the Nigerian religious landscape before 1970 when the mainline Churches held sway in the religious scene of the country. Diara (2005) traced the outburst of Pentecostalism to four sources, namely, through the students of Universities Ibadan and Ife who; through secondary school students who were influenced by the Scripture Union ministry during and immediately after the Nigerian Civil war that ended in the early 1970s and the ministry of Benson Idahosa. In the 1980s, the prosperity theology crept into the African church particularly in Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana. The Nigerian story is hinged on the ministry of Bishop Benson Idahosa who is believed to have been the first apostle of the prosperity gospel in Nigeria and the one who also transported it through his evangelistic crusades across the cities of Africa. These men, like their American mentors live very affluent lives characterized by flamboyant attire, expensive cars and big mansions. They want to live out the American dream in Africa. The philosophy of their gospel seems to be ‘seek ye first the things of this world and the kingdom of God shall be added unto you’. (Mpigi, 2018)

Key figures in this period include Pastor Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Bishop David Oyedepo of Living Faith Church Worldwide, Pastor William Kumuyi of Deeper Christian Life Ministry, and Pastor W.F. Kumuyi. These leaders established churches that emphasized personal conversion, baptism in the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and divine healing (Anderson, 2004).

Several factors account for this rise. Economically, the oil boom of the 1970s created new urban populations seeking meaning and community amid rapid modernization. Socially, Pentecostal churches provided networks of support, discipline, and moral order in a context of corruption and instability. Theologically, Pentecostalism offered a worldview that addressed African spiritual realities such as witchcraft, curses, and ancestral powers, which missionary churches often dismissed (Meyer, 1998).

By the 1990s, Pentecostalism had become the dominant expression of Nigerian Christianity. The “Pentecostalization” of mainline churches also occurred, as Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist congregations adopted charismatic worship styles, prayer meetings, and healing services (Ukah, 2005).

Prosperity Theology and Material Blessing (1990-2010)

From the 1990s onward, prosperity theology became a defining feature of Nigerian Pentecostal spirituality. Prosperity theology teaches that God desires material wealth, health, and success for believers, and that these blessings can be accessed through faith, positive confession, and sacrificial giving (Coleman, 2000).

The appeal of prosperity theology in Nigeria must be understood against the backdrop of economic decline. The Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the late 1980s led to inflation, unemployment, and poverty for millions. In this context, prosperity preaching offered both spiritual hope and practical motivation. Pastors such as Oyedepo, Chris Oyakhilome of Christ Embassy, and Matthew Ashimolowo of Kingsway International Christian Centre framed wealth as a sign of God’s favor and a tool for evangelism.

Prosperity theology reshaped spiritual practices. Seed sowing, first fruit offerings, and financial prophecies became central to church life. Testimonies of financial breakthrough replaced testimonies of salvation as the primary narrative in many churches (Gifford, 2004). The megachurch emerged as a model, with expansive campuses, business ventures, and media outreach.

Critics argue that prosperity theology promotes materialism and exploits the poor (Adeniyi, 2014). Proponents contend that it empowers believers to escape poverty and contribute to national development. Regardless of theological evaluation, prosperity theology has undeniably shaped the aspirations and expectations of Nigerian Christians. The worry and concern about shallow spirituality is immense. The menace of wrong doctrine has remained a serious threat from within the Church, Para-Church institutions and Christian Cult Organization. A case in point is prosperity theology which blurs the boundary between the religious, economic and private institutional realm and is being championed by some “Pentecostal” denomination. It has threatened the peace and unity of the modern Church and the falsity of its central message that poverty is sin and that God wants all people to be rich has long become a powerful refrain, an entrenched culture which ironically, the juicier the claim and promise, the more the crowd and the more money accrues to the pastor. Pentecostal theology claims that poverty is not the plan of God for our lives as His



children... God's plan for us includes peace, joy, enough provision, sound health, abundant blessings, marital bliss and fulfilling jobs. The principles of covenanting prosperity is proposed by Awolola as including, dreaming big, believing, obedience to God's command, sowing seed sacrificially, partaking in miracle meals, positive confession, using anointing oil, claiming the power in the blood of Jesus. Hanegraaff (2002) remarked, "Tragically, these purveyors of error have become adept at misleading their followers with a message that sounds authentic but is in reality a counterfeit. They point to scripture, produce 'miracles,' and operate under the banner of 'Jesus is Lord'" (Mpigi, 2017)

Healing, Deliverance, and Spiritual Warfare (1995-2025)

Another central theme in contemporary Nigerian Christian spirituality is the emphasis on healing and deliverance from demonic oppression. Spiritual warfare has become a dominant framework for understanding personal and societal problems (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2005). In Nigerian cosmology, the spiritual and material worlds are closely interconnected. Sickness, unemployment, barrenness, and failure are often attributed to witchcraft, ancestral curses, or evil spirits. Pentecostal churches have responded by developing deliverance ministries that offer prayer, fasting, and exorcism as solutions (Ojo, 2006).

The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), founded by Dr. Daniel Olukoya in 1989, exemplifies this emphasis. MFM's prayer manuals and programs focus on "breaking yokes" and "binding the strongman." Similar practices are found in RCCG's Holy Ghost services and in numerous independent ministries.

This emphasis has had both positive and negative effects. On one hand, it provides pastoral care for people experiencing real psychological and spiritual distress. On the other hand, it can lead to stigmatization, particularly of women accused of witchcraft, and to a neglect of medical and social interventions (Marshall, 2009).

Political Engagement and Public Christianity (2000-2025)

The return to democratic rule in 1999 marked a new phase in Nigerian Christian spirituality: increased political engagement. Pentecostal leaders became visible in national discourse, often positioning themselves as moral watchdogs and nation-builders.

The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), established in 1976, has played a central role in articulating Christian interests in politics, particularly in response to the introduction of Sharia law in 12 northern states in 1999-2000 (Falola, 2001). Pentecostal pastors have also run for office or endorsed candidates, arguing that Christians must take responsibility for governance. This engagement reflects a shift from the "withdrawal" spirituality of earlier evangelical movements to a "transformation" theology that seeks to influence society (Ojo, 2014). The Redeemed Christian Church of God's "Christian Political Platform" and the emergence of Christian political parties illustrate this trend.

However, political engagement has also generated controversy. Critics accuse some pastors of partisanship and of compromising spiritual authority for political access. Others warn that the conflation of Christianity with a particular ethnic or regional agenda undermines national unity (Iyoboyi & Pedro, 2013).

Inculturation and Indigenous Expression (1970-2025)

Alongside Pentecostalization, there has been a parallel process of inculturation—the adaptation of Christian faith to African culture. This has been particularly evident in the Catholic Church through the work of theologians such as John Mbiti and Laurentino Magesa, and in indigenous churches like the Celestial Church of Christ and the Cherubim and Seraphim Church (Oduyoye, 2001).

Inculturation manifests in worship styles that incorporate African music, drumming, and dance; in theological reflection that uses African proverbs and concepts; and in pastoral care that addresses African spiritual concerns. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement, which began in Nigeria in the 1970s, represents a fusion of Catholic tradition and Pentecostal spirituality (Ukah, 2005).

Inculturation has also raised theological questions about syncretism and orthodoxy. Some argue that it preserves African identity within Christianity, while others contend that it compromises biblical teaching (Bediako, 1995).

Technology, Media, and Digital Spirituality (2010-2025)

The 21st century has seen the digitalization of Nigerian Christian spirituality. Pastors use television, radio, social media, and streaming platforms to reach millions. Prophet T.B. Joshua's Emmanuel TV, Pastor Chris's LoveWorld TV, and countless YouTube ministries have created a virtual religious space that transcends geography (Hackett, 2017).

Digital spirituality has democratized access to religious content but also raised concerns about misinformation, online scams, and the commercialization of faith. The COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022) accelerated this shift, as churches moved services online and developed digital giving platforms (Adogame, 2021).

Challenges and Criticisms of Contemporary Nigerian Christian Spirituality

Despite its growth and vibrancy, contemporary Nigerian Christian spirituality faces several challenges:

1. **Theological shallowness:** The emphasis on miracles and material blessings has led to accusations of superficial discipleship and biblical illiteracy (Adeniyi, 2014).
2. **Ethical concerns:** High-profile scandals involving financial misconduct and sexual abuse have damaged the credibility of some church leaders (Ukah, 2016).
3. **Social division:** The association of Christianity with particular ethnic groups or political parties can exacerbate religious and regional tensions.
4. **Health implications:** Overreliance on faith healing has sometimes led to neglect of medical care, with consequences for public health (Oyebode, 2018).

The Future of Nigerian Christian Spirituality

Looking toward 2025 and beyond, several trajectories are likely. First, the youth population will continue to shape spirituality through digital media and global influences. Second, there is a growing call for theological education and doctrinal soundness among Pentecostal leaders (Kalu, 2018). Third, interfaith relations, particularly with Islam, will remain a critical issue for national cohesion.



The challenge for Nigerian Christianity is to maintain its spiritual vitality while developing theological depth, ethical integrity, and social responsibility. As Ogbu Kalu (2008) argues, Nigerian Christianity must move from “survival spirituality” to “transformational spirituality” that addresses the structural problems of society.

Conclusion

Post-civil war Nigerian Christian spirituality from 1970 to 2025 is a story of remarkable growth, adaptation, and complexity. From the ashes of war emerged a vibrant, indigenous, and globally influential form of Christianity that has reshaped not only religious life but also social and political life in Nigeria.

The five themes identified—Pentecostalization, prosperity theology, healing and deliverance, political engagement, and inculturation—reflect both the strengths and tensions of this spirituality. It is a spirituality that is deeply African, intensely personal, and publicly engaged. It speaks to the hopes, fears, and aspirations of millions of Nigerians. The task ahead is to ensure that this spirituality remains rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ while being responsive to the realities of contemporary Nigeria.

True to this observation, a significant portion of Nigerian Christianity has bought into the message of prosperity wholesale, no matter the form in which it may appear; they are all “cons and cover-ups.” The begging question is who is not guilty of this ‘prosperity madness’? The Catholics are into it; if not, how do you explain the “tree or fruit of life” displayed in the church during harvest, Mothers’ and Fathers’ and Youth day services where members are called upon to either pick or harvest? What about the lucky dip or lottery tickets sold to members who are promised open doors; financial break through; and blessings of different sorts? The Evangelicals (Protestants) have imbibed it, rebranding it with different names.

Offering time in the church has been tagged “blessing time.” This has become a common slogan in church services today. Gospel crusades and revival programmes organized for conversion of people into the church are characterized with various forms of seed sowing or covenant offerings. When reading from posters, banners, envelopes even radio and television jingles used for publicity by any of the non-Pentecostal churches today, one finds it difficult if not impossible to separate the “sheep from the goat.” All in the name of winning people into the kingdom of God and making them prosper here on earth. The fact remains that if one looks through the liturgy and lectionaries of these churches you will not find what they preach and practice.

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