

**PROGNOSTIC ANALYSIS
ON
THEOLOGY EDUCATION
ETHICS AND DEVELOPMENT
(TEED)**

**FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF
REV. MSGR. PROF. DR. OBIORA IKE**

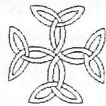
Edited by
JOHNPAUL CHUDI OKOLO

Msgr. Prof. Dr. Obiora Ike is a leading voice and public speaker across Africa and Europe, he is Professor and Chair for Ethics and Intercultural Studies at the Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu. Previously he was visiting Professor at the Frankfurt Goethe University Germany and the Theologische Faculteit, Tilburg, The Netherlands.

A member of the European Academy of Science and Arts, The New York Academy of Science and Arts and the Africa Studies Association, Ike is engaged in many social, pastoral and scholarship activities and is founder and director of over 17 Civil Society Organisations (NGO,s) in Nigeria and abroad.

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JUSTICE FOR THE POOR AND NEEDY: A WEIGHTY MATTER IN RELIGION

Marysylvia Nwachukwu

I. Introduction

An age-long defect in the practice of religion, which endures into our time, is a narrow-mindedness that pays primary attention to externals, to the neglect of matters at the heart of the relationship between God and his people. From biblical times till the present, authentic prophetic voices continue to critique the mistake in considering external religious practices as the core of religion. This mistake gave rise to certain maxims like, "the habit does not make the monk", or "obedience is better than sacrifice" (cf. 1 Sam 15:22).

Our society has much regard for Church goers, those who strictly adhere to religious practices, those who contribute their tithes, those who spend quality time in adoration grounds, and even those who work miracles. We hold these 'religious people' in great esteem because of their diligence and adherence to prescribed practices that make for true worship. Africans have been recognized and acclaimed as a very religious people. In fact, the vitality of the Church is felt more in Africa than in other parts of the globe. As many people fill our Churches and commit themselves to austere practices and to things of the spirit, the truth remains that there is much more to piety than meets the eye. Jesus makes this evident when he says "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matt 7:21).

Where do we find this expression of the will of God, which qualifies one for heaven? What does God require from his worshippers? The prophet Micah responds, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:8). Amos says something similar in his critique of a community of God's people who are insensitive to the plight of the poor, "Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:23-24). The criteria for final judgment in Matt 25 highlights that positive actions for the poor and needy are important benchmarks for admission into the heart of God (cf. vv31-40).

Judging from the meaning of these expressions of God's will, our piety as a religious community is in question, if the poor continue to multiply, uncared for, in our surroundings, and if the outcry of the oppressed is heard in our midst. The outcry of the poor and oppressed in a nation populated more densely by those who claim to worship God occasioned some of the strongest prophetic critiques that we find in the Bible. For instance, Jeremiah reproached the people who trusted that the presence of God in the Temple and the many sacrifices that were taking place, there gave strong guarantee for peace and wellbeing. He said:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly; one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever (Jer 7:3-7).

One might ask: what actually and truly makes the presence of God effective? One of the goals which religion aims to achieve is to provide means of making God effectively present, since God's presence in the midst of his people is the only guarantee for peace and wellbeing. For this reason, Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, was called Emmanuel, which means, God is with us (Matt 1:23). All religious practices are mediations of that divine presence, but there are some which are more effective than others, and which God has revealed as short cuts to having close union with him. One of such means of gaining easy access to God is the topic of the reflection that this essay presents.

This essay is a study of what the Bible says about justice for the poor and needy. The study is undertaken here in honor of the Founder of CIDJAP, a man of God who has borne outstanding witness to the heart of the Christian message through his commitment to justice among peoples. I also use this medium to congratulate him on his new appointment as the Executive Director of Global Ethics. His life and ministry inspired this study.

As we, Nigerians and many Africans experience the flourishing of Christianity on the African soil, there are some among us whose lives bear witness to our common responsibility towards the love command (John 13:34-35). Justice for the poor is one of the most effective expressions of the love command. The aim of the essay is both epistemic and pastoral. While it gives an understanding of the essential part justice plays in the definition of the Christian religion, it reverberates the biblical exhortation to pay primary attention to the heart of religion without neglecting the externals.

The essay begins with an explanation of the terminology of justice and continues to expose the sacramental nature of justice, as well as the mission it imposes on all who serve God in spirit and in truth. The essay concludes by underscoring again that justice is a weighty matter in religion.

2. The Terminology of Justice

One of the beautiful features of biblical literature is its characteristic pragmatism. In defining concepts, the Bible does not give ungrounded and complicated definitions; rather, it defines concepts by showing how they are practised and expressed in real life. The definition of the word 'justice' which is given in this essay is derived from the meanings it inspires from the different context in which the word occurs in the Bible.

The English word 'justice' is one the words that translates the Hebrew word *mišpāt*, which derives from the verb *šāpat*, meaning 'to judge', 'to rule', 'to govern', 'to decide', 'to pass a verdict', 'to arbitrate', 'to command' or 'to vindicate'.¹⁰ As a ma-noun, *mišpāt* refers to a wide range of activities that derive from the action which the verb *šāpat* signifies. It can refer to the place where the activity of the judge or the king takes place, the result of the action, or the means by which the action is performed.¹¹ This is why it has multifarious meanings, such as, law (*mišpāṭīm*), commandment, lawsuit, legal case, justice, verdict,

¹⁰ Cf. Temba L. J. Mafico, "Just, Justice" in D. N. Freedman et. al. (eds.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, Doubleday: New York, 1992, p1127.

¹¹ B. Johnson, "*mišpāṭ*" in G. J. Botterweck et. al. (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. IX, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, p87.

decision, judgment, punishment or deliverance, legal right of a person, rights proper to a king.¹²

The present essay studies some contexts where *mišpāt* describes actions taken on behalf of, or against a category of people - the 'poor, resident alien, orphans and widows - and where it is generally translated as 'justice'.¹³ Widows and orphans are a class of vulnerable people in the society. In ancient times, the death of the widow's husband severed her relationship with her husband's family as she is left without any claim to inheritance. Like the orphans, widows were in need of special care and compassion on the part of their relatives. When this care is denied, she and her young children could fall into a precarious state of destitution and slavery. A similar fate awaited the homeless stranger or resident alien, who supplied a cheap source of labor for wealthy people with large holdings.¹⁴ The law forbade Israelites to exploit or oppress this class of people, drawing the motivation for this from Israel's memory of its past experience of homelessness and oppression in Egypt: "...for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exod 23:9).

The use of *mišpāt* in relation to the poor is found in different parts of the Bible. Every part of the Bible gives special concern to the poor, and this speaks volumes of its importance in Jewish religion. Although it is required of all believers in God to be committed to justice, the burden of this requirement lies in the hands of leaders whose reign are assessed according to this essential criterion. There are five references in the Historical Books¹⁵ where the word *mišpāt* describes the character of the rulership of three Israelite leaders - Samuel, David and Solomon - as the model to follow. "So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity to all his people" (2 Sam 8:15). A similar appraisal is given to Samuel and Solomon. Solomon's court is called "the Hall of Justice" (*'ulām hammišpāt*).¹⁶ These leaders are contrasted to Samuel's sons, for instance, who perverted justice and took bribes.¹⁷

The burden of leadership lies especially in the ability of the leader to ensure and execute justice in the land. Ps 72 is a prayer that God should give his *mišpāt* to the king to enable him execute justice by defending the cause of the poor and

¹² Johnson, "*mišpāt*", pp88-96.

¹³ In this essay, these people are identified as 'the poor'.

¹⁴ Cf. Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986, pp46-47.

¹⁵ Cf. 1 Sam 7:17; 2 Sam 8:15 // 1 Chron 18:14; 1 Kings 3:28; 7:7

¹⁶ 1 Kings 7:7.

¹⁷ Cf. 1 Sam 8:3.

rescuing them from their oppressors (vv1-2). Significantly also, the references found in the prophets are mainly critique of the perversion of justice by leaders,¹⁸ and admonition not to use religious practices as cover for neglecting the weightier matter of the Law, which is the establishing of justice or the administering of right judgment in favor of the poor and the needy.¹⁹

Positive and negative verbs are used to describe the actions denoted by *mišpāt*: to execute, to pursue, to distort, to pervert and to deprive. These verbs show that the major context for obtaining or being denied of justice is forensic. The law forbids the following actions which lead to the perversion of justice: calumny, being partial in judgment and the taking of bribes.

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit. ... You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in their lawsuits. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty. You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt (Exod 23:1-9).

The abuse of the law, the perverting of justice and the looting of common or national treasury by individuals in power are considered by all as detrimental to the progress of any institution or nation, the worst being the abuse or denial of the legal rights of individuals. In the African context, these evil practices take place in different institutions, as it has become increasingly a basic way of being in power. The natural outcome of the accrual of fund in the hands of a few is a huge gap between the few wealthy people and the majority poor, with all the injustices attending social stratification. The level of injustice which we experience today in our country and in our different institutions is comparable to the experience of Israelites from the 8th century B.C. when the egalitarian - agrarian system of the pre-monarchical period, which protected the rights of individuals before the law, gave way to a different socio-political system which allowed some individuals to impose financial weight on other citizens. Our times could lack prophets in the likes of Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, who condemned the greed and exploitation of the wealthy powerful and spoke in favor of the oppressed poor and afflicted. Yet,

¹⁸ Cf. Is 29:21; 53:8; 59:8,11,15; Jer 5:28; 21:12; Amos 5:7; 6:12; Mic 3:8,9; 7:3; Hab 1:4,7.

¹⁹ Cf. Is 1:17; 10:2; 58:6; Hos 12:6; Amos 5:7,15.

biblical descriptions of justice for the poor show that it is not the exclusive responsibility of leaders. It is at the reach of all who have experienced God's grace and love. The justice due to the poor is described in the following ways:

- a) It is to bear true witness in lawsuit and to avoid calumny (Exod 23:1).
- b) It is to defend the legal rights of the poor and to rescue oppressed people from those who despoil them (Ps 82:3-4; Is 1:17; Jer 5:28).
- c) It is not to be partial in lawsuit and not to obstruct or deny justice to the innocent (Exod 23:3; Lev 19:15; Is 29:21).
- d) It is not to oppress the stranger, the poor, and not to shed innocent blood (Jer 22:3).
- e) It is not to give bribes which obstructs the course of truth when deciding between contending parties (Ezek 18:8; Amos 5:15).
- f) It is to feed the poor and the needy and to provide for their needs (Prov 22:8).
- g) It is to pay the wages of the worker (Deut 24:14-15; Jer 22:13).
- h) It is to give shelter and protection to the outcast and the fugitive (Is 16:3).
- i) It is to forgive and to have mercy (Luke 9-14).

Injustice, the opposite of justice, is what Isaiah describes in 10:1-2:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!

Most poor people are not made so from birth, but as Prov 13:23 says, "The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice". In the New Testament, the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is one of the most vivid examples of our duty towards the poor, which we owe before God. The Rich Man merited condemnation because he had no regard for and insensitive towards the poor man's need for nourishment and health care. No human court would condemn the rich man for his neglect, but before God, the poor is the responsibility of the society that produced them. The next paragraph presents reasons why justice for the poor is a weighty matter in religion, especially because it has a sacramental character.

3. Sacramental Nature of Justice

The essential importance for religion of justice for the poor is an inference drawn from the nature of the God who defines himself in relation to the poor and oppressed. He is the "Father of the fatherless and the protector of widows" (Ps 68:5). God is, moreover, the God who acts in favor of the poor and oppressed. "You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. ²³ If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry..." (Exod 22:22-23). And Isaiah 41:17

says of God, "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the LORD will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them".

Justice for the poor is a demand which God makes of his people on grounds of their primary experience of being liberated by God. The people of God, therefore, having been founded by the experience of unmerited divine grace at the exodus, must give God a response of faith that is patterned after God's holiness. The people are confident of God's presence only if their lives was a reflection of God's concern for the vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the oppressed and different categories of the poor.²⁰ Therefore, doing justice in the land is a very sensitive activity. It is a determinant for peace in the land, and lack of it, a cause for calamity. Prov 28:3 says, "A ruler who oppresses the poor is a beating rain that leaves no food." And Prov 29:4 says, "By justice a king gives stability to the land, but one who makes heavy exactions ruins it." The Prophet Isaiah considers that calamity could be forestalled through the restoration of justice in the land:

How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her-- but now murderers! ... Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them. Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, ... And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness (Is 1:21-26).

Justice is descriptive of the activity of God for his people. The Lord is a God of justice (Is 30:18); He loves righteousness and justice (Ps 33:5; Is 61:8); righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne (Ps 89:14; 97:2); all his works are truth and all his ways are justice... (Dan 4:37). Therefore, all of God's decisions for the wellbeing of creation is fruit of justice and faithfulness. Since ruling with justice is a quality in God, the texts show that if justice should be right, it must be a gift from God and it must correspond with the character of God's own justice. Therefore, God gives it as gift to the king.²¹ When God's *mišpāt* is with the king, it is a sign of God's presence and providence among his people. It is the guarantee for security in the land, victory, peace and wellbeing in

²⁰ Cf. Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called*, pp43-44.

²¹ Is 28:6; 42:1,3; Ps 72:1-2.

the land (Ps 72:1-9). In another case, 2 Chron 19 shows that part of the reform activity of King Jehoshaphat is the appointment of Judges in all the cities of Judah who administer justice on God's behalf. He admonished them in these words:

Consider what you are doing, for you judge not on behalf of human beings but on the LORD's behalf; he is with you in giving judgment. Now, let the fear of the LORD be upon you; take care what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the LORD our God, or partiality, or taking of bribes (2 Chron 19:6-7).

"Shall one who hate justice govern?" The text of Job 34:17 forbids it because this would be a sign that God is not with the ruler. The government of such a leader would lead to disaster. Those who imitate God in showing justice to the poor are called blessed, and they will in turn enjoy divine protection "Happy are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble" (Ps 41:1). They are proclaimed blessed exactly because to do justice for the poor is fruit of righteousness.

4. Justice: The Fruit of Righteousness

The sacramental nature of justice is reason for another remarkable feature in the biblical presentation of the terminology of justice. This feature regards the often occurrence of the word 'justice' in connection with another word, righteousness, with which it forms an inseparable binomy. The two words occur inseparably 54 times in the Old Testament: found only 1x in the Pentateuch with reference to Abraham (Gen 18:19), 3x in Historical Books, 15x in the Psalms, 11x in Wisdom Literature, and 24x in Prophetic literature. A review of each of these associations would have been necessary, had it not been for the limited space allowed for the present essay.

Righteousness is a quality of life revealed in God. God's righteousness is shown in his steadfast love and faithfulness to the covenant.

As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children... (Ps 103:13-17)

Paul D. Hanson defines the righteousness of God as "a universal standard of justice that ordered life, defined the realm in which Yahweh's šālôm could be received, and gave rise to ordinances and institutions that formed a protective wall around the people that sheltered it from life-threatening dangers."²² Israel is called upon to understand the implication of worshipping a righteous God: "let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD" (Jer 9:24). The righteous are those who live in close imitation of the steadfast love and faithfulness revealed by God, by which they become agents of God's purpose in the world (cf. Rom 3:26). Job describes his righteous deeds in this manner:

I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made them drop their prey from their teeth (Job 29:14-17).

The linking of the two words, justice and righteousness, imply that although retaining their independent meanings and autonomy, each derives its complete meaning from being considered as an essential part of the other. In some cases, the two words are used interchangeable, where they are found in poetic texts in synonymous parallelism. For instance:

But the LORD of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness (Is 5:16).²³

In other words, what justice means is fully derived through association with righteousness. Amos 6:12 says that justice is the fruit of righteousness. In fact, the Greek adjective '*dikaion*' is translated either as 'just', 'what is right' or 'righteous'. This explains the nuance which *mišpāṭ* came to acquire in its being associated with righteousness. Obviously, the two words relate on the ground that both express the gracious character of God's action.

In the New Testament, the gracious character of justice is highly underscored in the parables of Jesus. The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matt 20, for instance, is one of the parables of the Kingdom of Heaven whose central referent is God. The deliberate use of the terminology of justice in this parable is striking: "...You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right" (Matt

²² Hanson, *The People Called*, p75.

²³ Cf. also, for instance, Is 1:27; 32:1; Amos 5:7,24.

20:4). The landowner and the first laborers agree to relate on the basis of an established just daily wage. This same arrangement was not required for all the other laborers who were hired later in the day. For them, 'what is right' depended on the discretion of the landowner. At the end of the day, the landowner paid all of them the same daily wage, and this seemed very unjust. So the first comers complained.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat' (Matt 20:8-12).

This story is told to show that God's actions for human beings are not determined by human action or exertion. God's will is the only criterion, as Matt 20: 15 shows, "Am I not free to do what I choose with what belongs to me?..." In executing justice for human beings, God goes beyond the medium of virtue in order to highlight the extraordinary generosity of his love. Jesus shows through this parable that God's love satisfied the other laborers' need for a full day wage, even though their supply was insufficient. The Apostle, Paul, sums up the entire history of salvation when he says that the righteousness of God is revealed definitively in the atoning death of Jesus for sinners (cf. Rom 3:21-26).

The parable of Matt 20 shows also that the gracious character of God's justice is not tolerable to human beings (cf. v11). Those who understand God in this regard, and who can imitate God's actions are those whom the Bible calls 'the righteous'. Some biblical texts make clear that the doing of justice is the activity of the righteous. The parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:2-8) seem to emphasize the importance of fear of God for the ability to give justice, even though the emphasis of the story is on the widow's persistent plea. According to Prov 28:5, "The evil do not understand justice, but those who seek the LORD understand it completely."²⁴ "The righteous know the rights of the poor; the wicked have no such understanding" (Prov 29:7). It is a virtue unknown to evil doers as they thread their evil paths (Is 59:8-15). Rather, justice is the possession of the righteous (Ps 94:15). In Gen 18:9, Abraham is enjoined by God to teach his descendants to walk in the ways of righteousness and justice.

²⁴ Cf. Prov 29:4.

Obviously, it is a way of life that is characteristic of those who know God; those who understand God's ways and who make effort to thread similar paths.

5. **Conclusion: Justice, A Weighty Matter in Religion**

Why and how is justice a weighty matter in religion? The foregoing paragraphs have shown that justice for the poor touches the heart of religion. The exploitation of the poor contradicted the very notion of the community of the people of God that was born from the exodus event. God called Israel into being by delivering the people from the scourge of homelessness, exploitation and oppression. Therefore, the presence of oppressive practices that lead to homelessness, poverty and slavery in the land would not only be a reversal of Israel's founding experience, but also a mockery of God's grace and compassion.²⁵ Israelites are commanded to replicate in their relationship with one another the gracious and compassionate dealings that gave them existence. Only through this would God's justice continue to be a life-giving reality for every generation of Israel. This idea gave impetus to the exposition in Section Three of this essay of the sacramental character of justice. Therefore, piety that is devoid of this commitment to the poor is empty and fake.

The essay has shown that the entire Bible recognizes the essential importance of justice for authentic relationship with God. It is underscored in the description of the Abrahamic covenant, the Law, the Prophets, the Writings, and in the proclamation of Jesus. Justice for the poor is a weighty matter in the Law, as is shown in the Book of the Covenant (Exod 21-23),²⁶ Holiness Code²⁷ and the Deuteronomic Code, where it is also given as condition for staying in the land.²⁸ These laws show how Israel formulated its self concept and guidelines for cultic celebrations on the basis of the memory of God's grace. In the Abrahamic covenant, therefore, the binomy 'justice and righteousness' defines the way of life of the righteous, who include physical children of Abraham and all those who belong to the covenant (Gen 18:19). Dearth of justice in the land was considered as harbinger of calamity. The prophets minced no words in decrying the abuse of justice or its lack in Israel. The prophet Micah, for instance, reprimanded the people for paying primary attention to external matters of cult when he said:

With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of

²⁵ Cf. Hanson, *The People Called*, p48.

²⁶ See especially Exod 23:2,6

²⁷ Lev19:15.

²⁸ Deut 16:19-20; 24:17-18; 27:19.

rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? ... He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6:6-8).

In Is 58:4-9, the prophet says that they pray in vain those who seek favors from the Lord through a program of fasting that is lacking in works of charity: Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ... Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

Similarly, the Gospel of Luke (18:9-14) reports one of Jesus' parables which is told about some people who consider themselves righteous though they regarded others with contempt:

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The focus of this parable is the Pharisee, who has the merit of religious practices but who has no compassionate regard for others. This parable underscores once again that the measure of righteousness is God. In spite of his supposed piety, the Pharisee is considered unjust because he failed to treat sinners in the same merciful way that God treats them. On another occasion, Jesus addressed the question of true worship, where he accused the custodians of religion, the Scribes and Pharisees, of neglecting the weightier matters of the law:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others (Matt 23:23)

With this criticism, Jesus redefined the most essential matters of the law of God in terms of justice and mercy, both of which are fruits of a relationship of faith with God, that is, righteousness. Failure to recognize this heart of the law has led official religion to a distorted and narrow interpretation of God's law and of the expressions of worship in the cult.

THE STATE AND RELIGION IN NIGERIA: TOWARDS AN APPROPRIATE RELATIONSHIP IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Michael O. Osofisan

Introduction

Nigerians are a very religious people. Long before the coming of Islam and Christianity, African peoples, contrary to the cynicism of Paul L. Hays that "uneducated" Africans cannot conceive God, had their own concepts of the "Deity" or God. The recent scholar had argued that most of Africa's people do not know God or Deity because they lacked philosophical concepts. According to her, "How can an illiterate African conceive God? ... Deity is a philosophical concept which requires an incapacity of thinking" (p. 10). Smith (1971) is that the prototype of this notion, which was already discredited by other scholars, is that who were quoted to have observed that Africans are "invariably religious people" (Fernandez 1964:91; John A. Mbiti 1969:11) as African Orthodox has the saying:

Africans are intrinsically religious and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not only or possible always to ignore it.

African traditional religions have been variously described as animism, fetishism, polytheism, etc. Whatever the nature of these terms might mean, the fact is that Africans' religious beliefs are a way of worshiping or deifying who may be represented through their own traditional deities such as trees, animals, rocks, rivers, and streams. Traditionally, most Africans believe in the Supreme God as well as lesser gods and spirits.