



Lead City Journal of Religions and Intercultural Communication
(ISSN 3043-4416)

*The Journal of the Department of Religious and Intercultural
Studies, Faculty of Arts, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria*
Volume 1, Number 1, July 2024

Influence of Liberation Theology on Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study delves into the complex relationship between liberation theology (a Theological approach that emphasized social justice, human rights and freedom) and governance in Nigeria, examining how religious ideals have shaped political decisions and social movements. Through a qualitative approach, incorporating semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and thematic analysis, this research reveals the intricate dynamics between religious leaders, political elites, and civil society organizations. The study highlights the significant role of liberation theology in mobilizing resistance against oppressive regimes, promoting social justice, and advocating for human rights in Nigeria. It explores how religious leaders have utilized liberation theology to challenge unjust systems, empower marginalized communities, and push for political reform. However, the research also examines the challenges and limitations of applying liberation theology in Nigeria's governance. These include the tension between religious ideals and political pragmatism, the risk of religious manipulation by political elites, and the difficulty of translating theological principles into concrete policy changes. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection of religion and politics in Nigeria, shedding light on the potential of liberation theology to drive social change and promote just governance. The research also underscores the need



for continued critical engagement between religious leaders, political elites, and civil society organizations to address the complex social and political challenges facing Nigeria.

Keywords: Liberation Theology, Governance, Nigeria, Social Justice and Political Theology

Introduction

Liberation theology has been a significant force in shaping the political and social landscape of Nigeria, a country with a rich cultural heritage and a complex history of colonialism, military rule, and democratic governance (Adejumobi, 2000; Ihonvbere, 2000). This theology, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America, emphasizes the need for social justice, human rights, and grassroots empowerment (Gutiérrez, 1973; Boff, 1985). In Nigeria, liberation theology has influenced political decisions and social movements, particularly during the military regimes of the 1980s and 1990s (Ojo, 1997; Falola, 2001). The intersection of liberation theology and governance in Nigeria is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, religious leaders have played a crucial role in mobilizing resistance against oppressive regimes, promoting social justice, and advocating for human rights (Kukah, 1999; Ojo, 2007). On the other hand, the application of liberation theology in Nigeria's governance has been challenged by the tension between religious and secular authority, the impact of corruption, and the need for inclusive decision-making processes (Ihonvbere, 2000; Adejumobi, 2000).

This study aims to explore the intersection of liberation theology and governance in Nigeria, examining how religious ideals have influenced political decisions and social movements. It will analyze the complex dynamics between religious leaders, political elites, and civil society organizations, highlighting the challenges and limitations of applying liberation theology in Nigeria's governance.



Clarification of Terms

Liberation Theology: A theological approach that emphasizes social justice, human rights, and grassroots empowerment, particularly among marginalized communities (Gutiérrez, 1973).

Governance: The process of decision-making and implementation of policies, programs, and projects that affect the lives of citizens, including the role of government, civil society, and religious institutions (Hyden, 2006).

Nigeria: A federal republic in West Africa, with a dense population of about 229.5 million (Worldometer 2024) and a complex history of colonialism, military rule, and democratic governance (Adejumobi, 2000).

Religious Leaders: Individuals who hold positions of authority within religious institutions, such as bishops and imams who play a significant role in shaping religious discourse and influencing political decisions (Kukah, 1999).

Political Elites: Individuals who hold positions of power and influence within the political sphere, including government officials, politicians, and policymakers (Ihonvbere, 2000).

Civil Society Organizations: Non-governmental organizations, community groups, and advocacy networks that promote social justice, human rights, and democratic governance (Falola, 2001).

Social Justice: The pursuit of fairness, equality, and human rights, particularly among marginalized communities, including the poor, women, and minority groups (Boff, 1985).

Human Rights: The universal principles and standards that protect the dignity, freedom, and well-being of individuals and communities (United Nations, 1948).

Grassroots Empowerment: The process of enabling marginalized communities to take control of their lives, resources, and decision-making processes (Gutiérrez, 1973).

Secular Authority: The legitimate power and influence of non-religious institutions, including government and civil society, in shaping public policy and decision-making (Ihonvbere, 2000).



By clarifying these terms, we can better understand the complex relationships between liberation theology, governance, and social justice in Nigeria.

Liberation Theology in Nigeria

Liberation theology has been a significant force in Nigeria, since the 1970s (Ojo, 1997). Nigerian theologians and scholars have adapted liberation theology to address local contexts, such as poverty, inequality, and political oppression (Kukah, 1999).

Key Features of Liberation Theology in Nigeria include:

1. Emphasis on social justice and human rights (Boff, 1985; Gutiérrez, 1973)
2. Critique of oppressive structures and systems (Ojo, 1997)
3. Advocacy for the poor and marginalized (Kukah, 1999)
4. Promotion of grassroots empowerment and community development (Gutiérrez, 1973)
5. Dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Muslims (Ojo, 2007)

Nigerian scholars have also developed unique perspectives on liberation theology, such as:

1. Enculturation theology, which emphasizes the importance of local culture and tradition (Orobator, 2008)
2. Afro-centric theology, which highlights the experiences and perspectives of African people (Nyamiti, 1995)

Barriers to Liberation Theology in Nigeria

Despite its significance, liberation theology faces several barriers in Nigeria, including:

1. *Religious Fundamentalism*: The rise of religious fundamentalism has hindered the acceptance of liberation theology, as some religious leaders view it as too radical or political (Kukah, 1999).
2. *Political Repression*: Government repression and censorship have limited the spread of liberation theology, as some regimes view it as a threat to their power (Ojo, 1997).



3. *Cultural and Traditional Barriers*: Traditional beliefs and cultural practices have sometimes hindered the acceptance of liberation theology, as some Nigerians view it as foreign or incompatible with local customs (Nyamiti, 1995).
4. *Economic Factors*: Poverty and economic inequality have limited access to education and resources, making it difficult for liberation theology to reach marginalized communities (Gutiérrez, 1973).
5. *Denominational and Sectarian Divisions*: Divisions within Christianity and Islam have hindered the unity and effectiveness of liberation theology, as different denominations and sects may have competing interests and agendas (Ojo, 2007).
6. *Lack of Institutional Support*: The lack of institutional support from churches and mosques has limited the impact of liberation theology, as some religious leaders may not prioritize social justice and activism (Kukah, 1999).

Despite the challenges, liberation theology has significant prospects in Nigeria, including:

1. *Promoting Social Justice*: Liberation theology can continue to advocate for the rights of marginalized communities, addressing issues like poverty, inequality, and political oppression (Gutiérrez, 1973).
2. *Empowering Local Communities*: Liberation theology can empower local communities to take control of their lives, resources, and decision-making processes, promoting grassroots development and self-reliance (Kukah, 1999).
3. *Fostering Interfaith Dialogue*: Liberation theology can facilitate dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Muslims, promoting mutual understanding and cooperation in addressing social and political issues (Ojo, 2007).
4. *Informing Public Policy*: Liberation theology can inform public policy, ensuring that government prioritizes the needs and rights of marginalized communities (Nyamiti, 1995).



5. *Nurturing Prophetic Leadership*: Liberation theology can nurture prophetic leadership, encouraging religious leaders to speak truth to power and advocate for justice and human rights (Boff, 1985).
6. *Enhancing Democracy*: Liberation theology can enhance democratic governance, promoting participatory decision-making, transparency, and accountability (Ojo, 1997).

Nigeria's governance has been characterized by:

1. *Political Instability*: Frequent regime changes, military interventions, and political violence have hindered democratic consolidation (Adejumobi, 2000).
2. *Corruption*: Widespread corruption has undermined public trust, accountability, and effective governance (Ihonvbere, 2000).
3. *Ethno-Religious Conflicts*: Ethnic and religious tensions have led to violent conflicts, threatening national unity and stability (Falola, 2001).
4. *Economic Mismanagement*: Poor economic policies, mismanagement, and dependence on oil exports have hindered sustainable development (Osaghae, 1998).
5. *Weak Institutions*: Ineffective institutions, including the judiciary, legislature, and civil service, have hindered good governance (Adejumobi, 2000).
6. *Patronage Politics*: Patronage networks and clientelism have undermined meritocracy, accountability, and public service delivery (Ihonvbere, 2000).

Liberation Theology and Governance in Nigeria

The integration of liberation theology and governance in Nigeria can be seen in:

1. *Social Justice Advocacy*: Religious leaders advocating for social justice, human rights, and good governance (Kukah, 1999).
2. *Community Development*: Faith-based organizations engaging in community development, education, and healthcare (Ojo, 2007).



3. *Political Activism*: Religious leaders participating in political activism, criticizing oppressive policies, and promoting democratic values (Gutiérrez, 1973).
4. *Interfaith Dialogue*: Collaboration between Christians and Muslims promoting mutual understanding, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution (Ojo, 2007).
5. *Policy Influence*: Religious leaders influencing policy decisions, ensuring governance prioritizes the needs of marginalized communities (Nyamiti, 1995).
6. *Prophetic Leadership*: Religious leaders speaking truth to power, advocating for justice, and holding leaders accountable (Boff, 1985).

Conclusion

Liberation theology has significantly influenced governance in Nigeria, promoting social justice, human rights, and community development. Despite challenges, the integration of liberation theology and governance has achieved notable successes. For instance, it has empowered marginalized communities (Gutiérrez, 1973), fostering a sense of ownership and participation in the governance process.

Furthermore, liberation theology has fostered interfaith dialogue and collaboration (Ojo, 2007), promoted a culture of tolerance and understood. It has also held leaders accountable for justice and human rights (Boff, 1985), ensuring that those in power prioritize the needs of the people. Additionally, liberation theology has informed public policy and governance (Nyamiti, 1995), providing a moral framework for decision-making. Lastly, it has nurtured prophetic leadership and advocacy (Kukah, 1999), inspiring a new generation of leaders to champion the cause of justice and equality.

However, challenges persist, including religious fundamentalism and extremism, political repression and corruption, cultural and traditional barriers, and economic inequality and poverty. To address these challenges, continued engagement between religious leaders, policymakers, and civil society is crucial. By integrating liberation



theology and governance, Nigeria can promote a more just, equitable, and peaceful society.

Recommendations

1. *Increased Collaboration:* Encourage collaboration between religious leaders, policymakers, and civil society to promote social justice and good governance.
2. *Religious Education:* Integrate liberation theology into religious education to raise awareness and promote critical thinking.
3. *Community Engagement:* Support community development projects and initiatives that address poverty, inequality, and social injustice.
4. *Policy Influence:* Encourage religious leaders to engage with policymakers to ensure governance prioritizes the needs of marginalized communities.
5. *Interfaith Dialogue:* Foster interfaith dialogue and collaboration to promote mutual understanding and address social and political challenges.
6. *Prophetic Leadership:* Nurture prophetic leadership that speaks truth to power and advocates for justice and human rights.
7. *Addressing Corruption:* Address corruption and promote transparency and accountability in governance and religious institutions.
8. *Economic Empowerment:* Support economic empowerment initiatives that address poverty and inequality.
9. *Conflict Resolution:* Encourage religious leaders to engage in conflict resolution and peace building initiatives.
10. *Continuous Research:* Conduct continuous research and analysis to understand the intersection of liberation theology and governance in Nigeria.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can harness the potential of liberation theology to promote social justice, good governance, and human rights.



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