



Title:
Impact of materialism on the
contemporary Nigerian church

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ABSTRACT

Materialism has significantly impacted the Church in recent times, leading to a shift in focus from spiritual growth to material wealth. This study aims to evaluate the causes and effects of materialism in today's ecclesiology. It also focuses on Christian teaching on materialism. The research methodology adopted in this study includes descriptive and phenomenological methods. It is observed that materialism is characterized by an excessive desire for wealth, possessions and worldly comforts, which contradicts biblical teachings on contentment and worship. Materialistic attitudes can distort Christian values, leading to a focus on prosperity and success as the yardstick for measuring the goodness of God, rather than spiritual growth and humanitarian service. It is discovered that the contemporary Church through her ordained leaders place emphasis on materialism. The negative impact of materialism in today's Church has brought about a slight division between the poor and the rich. The penetration and exaltation of wealth in Church, the poor are neglected and exploited while the rich are honoured and pampered. This attitude had deteriorated the core mission of the Church from its nascence. In order to salvage the Church in particular, and the society at large, the Church through ordained and lay leaders are expected to prioritize spiritual growth and development, develop a sense of contentment, recognising that true fulfilment comes from God, not material possessions.

Keywords: Impact, Materialism, Contemporary Church, Nigeria

A. INTRODUCTION

The historical mission of the church has been to foster spiritual growth, community unity, and service to humanity. However, the increasing entanglement of the church in Nigeria with materialistic ideologies has raised concerns about its focus and integrity. In many instances, the prioritization of wealth accumulation and prosperity theology has overshadowed core biblical teachings, leading to shifts in the perception of the church's role in society. This phenomenon has prompted debates on whether the church is succumbing to secular influences or adapting to contemporary realities (Eze, 2022).

Materialism's infiltration into ecclesiology, the theological study of the nature and structure of the church has led to significant changes in leadership dynamics, worship practices, and community relations. Leaders are often evaluated based on their material success, while congregations may measure their spiritual progress by their financial prosperity. These developments threaten to distort the gospel message, prioritizing material wealth over spiritual richness and fostering a culture of competition and individualism. The study of materialism's effect on contemporary Church is crucial for understanding the challenges and opportunities facing the modern church. It seeks to explore the implications of this trend for church theology, leadership, and mission, providing a framework for reclaiming the spiritual essence of ecclesiastical life in a materialistic age (Adenrian, 2020).

The contemporary church stands at a critical juncture, where the pervasive influence of materialism challenges its foundational principles and mission. Materialism, characterized by the excessive value placed on material possessions and wealth, has infiltrated not only the personal lives of believers but also the theological, structural, and operational dimensions of the church. This development raises critical questions about the church's role as a spiritual institution and its capacity to resist secular influences while maintaining its focus on the Kingdom of God.

One of the critical issues arising from this materialistic influence is the alteration of ecclesiastical priorities. Church leaders and congregations often find themselves focusing on financial growth, the acquisition of properties, and the enhancement of physical infrastructures at the expense of spiritual development and community service. This shift has led to the commercialization of worship, where success is measured by the size of the congregation, the opulence of church buildings, and the wealth of its leaders rather than the depth of spiritual growth and human development among its members.

Another significant concern is the impact of materialism on the ethical and moral integrity of the church. The pursuit of wealth has, in some cases, led to corruption, exploitation, and a loss of accountability within ecclesiastical structures. Instances of financial scandals, misuse of church funds, and unethical fundraising practices have not only

The problem is further compounded by the influence of modern consumer culture, which promotes the idea that personal identity and worth are tied to material possessions. This cultural shift has led many believers to prioritize personal wealth over spiritual growth, reducing the church to a platform for individualistic pursuits rather than a collective body dedicated to God's mission on earth (Olajide, 2019).

The study will also explore strategies for reclaiming the spiritual essence of the church in a materialistic age, providing insights for church leaders, theologians, and believers on how to navigate this pressing issue.

Phenomenological method is the research method used in this study. It is a research method that seeks to understand the meaning and structure of conscious experience or perception (Hussel, 1913). Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that was developed by Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher, in the early 20th century (Van Manen, 2014).

Data were collected through secondary sources and were analysed qualitatively. The methodology is apt for this study because the issue of exemplary leadership is one of the experiences of the contemporary Church. The goal is to uncover the essence or core meaning of a phenomenon as experienced by participants, free from external assumptions or interpretations.

B. CONCEPT OF MATERIALISM

Materialism is a philosophical viewpoint asserting that the physical world is the fundamental reality and that all phenomena, including consciousness, thoughts, and emotions, are the result of material interactions. According to materialism, the mind, ideas, and other abstract entities are not independent from the physical world but are reducible to physical processes.

Materialism stands in contrast to idealism, which emphasizes the primacy of the mind or consciousness over the material world. Materialism has been a central theme in various intellectual traditions, from classical philosophy to modern science. In this context, materialism can be divided into several forms, each of which contributes to our understanding of the relationship between mind and

matter. These forms include metaphysical materialism, dialectical materialism, and scientific materialism (Marx, 1844).

The roots of materialism can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy. Pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Thales and Heraclitus, proposed that the fundamental substance of reality is material. Thales, for instance, posited that water was the essential substance from which everything else derived (Russell, 1945).

Heraclitus, on the other hand, believed that change and the flow of material elements underlie all of existence. The more developed philosophical system of materialism emerged in the works of philosophers such as Democritus and Epicurus. Democritus is best known for his theory of atomism, which proposed that all matter is composed of indivisible particles called atoms (Graham, 2008). Epicurus further developed this idea, positing that the soul itself is made of atoms, which challenges the idea of a separate, immaterial realm.

C. CAUSES OF MATERIALISM

Materialism, a philosophical belief that physical matter is the fundamental substance of reality, is also commonly associated with a focus on material possessions and wealth as the primary indicators of success and happiness. This tendency can be observed across various societies, driven by multiple factors ranging from cultural and societal pressures to psychological needs and economic systems.

Below, we examine the primary causes of materialism, with a focus on psychological, societal, economic, and media influences.

Psychologically, materialism often emerges as a coping mechanism to fulfil unmet emotional or psychological needs. Research suggests that individuals who experience lower self-esteem or a lack of personal fulfilment may resort to acquiring material possessions in an attempt to enhance their self-worth or status.

A study by Kasser and Ryan (1993) found that people who prioritize materialistic goals, such as wealth or status, tend to experience lower levels of happiness and higher levels of anxiety, suggesting that materialism is often driven by deeper emotional deficiencies.

Economic systems, particularly capitalism, further embed materialism into the fabric of everyday life, promoting the accumulation of wealth as a primary goal. Finally, the media—especially social media—intensifies these pressures by constantly showcasing idealized, materialistic lifestyles.

Understanding these causes is crucial in addressing the negative effects of materialism, such as decreased well-being and environmental harm (Richins, 2013).

D. CHRISTIAN TEACHING ON MATERIALISM

The Bible provides numerous passages that warn against materialism and encourage believers to focus on spiritual treasures. In Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus instructs:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (NIV)

This passage underscores the transient nature of earthly possessions and urges Christians to invest in heavenly, imperishable rewards. It reflects the central Christian principle that devotion to God and His kingdom should take precedence over the accumulation of material wealth.

Similarly, 1 Timothy 6:10 warns of the dangers of greed: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.” (NIV). Here, the Apostle Paul highlights how an unhealthy attachment to money can lead to moral corruption and spiritual downfall. It is not wealth itself that is condemned but the love of wealth that displaces God from the centre of one’s life.

E. THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS

Jesus’ ministry often addressed the tension between spiritual and material concerns. In the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21), a wealthy man hoards his goods, only to die suddenly without enjoying or using his wealth for meaningful purposes. Jesus concludes the parable by saying: “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” (NIV)

This teaching illustrates the futility of materialism when it is detached from a relationship with God and a commitment to serving others. Christians are called to use their resources for the benefit of others and the glory of God, rather than selfishly hoarding them.

In practical terms, Christian teachings advocate for a life of contentment, generosity, and stewardship. Hebrews 13:5 advises: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’” (NIV) This verse encourages believers to trust in God’s provision rather than striving endlessly for material gain. Contentment, coupled with gratitude, fosters a sense of peace and reliance on God.

Generosity is another hallmark of Christian teaching. In 2 Corinthians 9:7, Paul writes: “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

F. MANIFESTATIONS OF MATERIALISM IN THE CHURCH

Materialism in the Church is evident in several ways. Firstly, the pursuit of opulent church buildings and facilities has become a hallmark of many Christian denominations. While maintaining a conducive environment for worship is essential, the emphasis on extravagant designs often reflects societal values rather than spiritual priorities (Foster, 2020).

This trend raises questions about the allocation of resources that could otherwise address pressing social and humanitarian needs. Secondly, the “prosperity gospel” movement exemplifies materialism within contemporary ecclesiology. This theology equates faithfulness with material wealth, teaching that financial prosperity is a sign of divine favor (Bowler, 2013). Such teachings shift the focus from spiritual virtues like humility and service to individualistic pursuits of wealth, fostering consumerist attitudes among believers.

G. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH’S MISSION

The infiltration of materialism undermines the Church’s mission to prioritize spiritual transformation and social justice. For instance, excessive focus on material wealth can alienate marginalized groups who cannot meet the implicit standards of affluence promoted in certain church contexts (Volf, 2011).

Furthermore, materialistic tendencies can distort the Church’s witness, as society increasingly perceives religious institutions as commercial entities rather than spiritual havens. Theologically,

materialism challenges core Christian teachings on stewardship and the sacrificial nature of Christ's ministry.

The Gospel repeatedly emphasizes contentment, generosity, and the dangers of excessive attachment to wealth (Matthew 6:19-21; 1 Timothy 6:10). A materialistic ecclesiology risks contradicting these principles, leading to a dissonance between doctrine and practice.

H. EFFECTS OF MATERIALISM

One significant effect of materialism is its correlation with lower life satisfaction. Studies have consistently shown that individuals who prioritize material wealth tend to report lower levels of happiness and contentment.

For instance, Kasser (2016) highlights that materialistic values are associated with diminished well-being because they distract individuals from intrinsic goals such as personal growth, relationships, and community involvement. The relentless pursuit of possessions can lead to a cycle of dissatisfaction, as the initial joy of acquiring an item often fades quickly, leaving individuals yearning for more. Moreover, materialism can strain interpersonal relationships.

People with high materialistic tendencies may prioritize possessions over people, leading to shallow or strained social connections. Roberts et al. (2014) found that materialistic individuals often experience higher levels of conflict in their relationships, as their focus on possessions may foster feelings of envy, competition, or neglect among peers and loved ones. This diminished relational quality can further contribute to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Another critical effect of materialism is its impact on mental health. The pressure to acquire and maintain possessions can lead to stress, anxiety, and depression. A study by Dittmar et al. (2014) found that materialism is linked to increased psychological distress because it encourages individuals to base their self-worth on external factors.

When possessions fail to bring lasting happiness or status, individuals may experience feelings of inadequacy or failure. This reliance on material goods for validation can also perpetuate unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as compulsive shopping or excessive debt accumulation.

Materialism, the belief that material wealth and possessions are the highest values and the primary indicators of success, has profound effects on both the family unit and broader society.

While materialism may drive economic growth and technological advancement, its influence on human relationships, well-being, and social structures can be detrimental. This essay explores the effects of materialism on the family and society, drawing on relevant research and observations.

Effects on the Family. Materialism can have several negative impacts on the family dynamic, particularly in the areas of relationships, communication, and emotional well-being. One of the most significant consequences is the distortion of family values. When family members prioritize material wealth over emotional bonds and meaningful experiences, the fundamental purpose of family relationships: love, support, and connection, can be undermined.

The societal impact of materialism is equally concerning. One major consequence is the erosion of social cohesion and a decline in the sense of community. In a materialistic society, individuals are often judged by their economic status, leading to increased social stratification and inequality. This divide can breed resentment and conflict among different social classes.

According to Twenge and Kasser (2013), the rise in materialistic values over the past few decades has been accompanied by a decline in social trust and a weakening of social bonds. People become more focused on personal gain and less inclined to engage in collective efforts that benefit the community.

Materialism also contributes to environmental degradation, as the demand for material goods leads to overconsumption and unsustainable resource use. The global shift toward consumerism has put immense pressure on natural resources, contributing to issues such as climate change, deforestation, and pollution (Richins, 2013). In societies where materialism is prioritized, the long-term consequences for both the environment and future generations are often overlooked.

I. SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS OF MATERIALISM

One potential solution is to adopt a compatibilist approach, which seeks to reconcile materialism with the concept of free will. Compatibilism argues that free will is not about being exempt from causality but about being able to act according to one's desires and reasoning without external coercion.

Philosophers like Dennett (2003) argue that materialism does not necessarily eliminate free will, as human actions can still be considered free if they align with internal desires and intentions, even if those desires have physical origins. This approach maintains that humans can still be morally responsible for their actions, as long as they can reflect on and act upon their desires in a meaningful way.

Again is to adopt a naturalistic approach to meaning, which suggests that meaning can be derived from human experiences, relationships, and contributions to society, even within a materialist worldview. Philosophers like Dawkins (2006) have argued that, while the universe may not offer an inherent, preordained purpose, humans can create meaning through their actions and the pursuit of knowledge.

This is similar to existentialist perspectives, where individuals are responsible for creating their own meaning in a world that does not provide it inherently. Materialism, then, does not negate the possibility of meaning; rather, it challenges individuals to find purpose through engagement with the world around them.

J. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Church should use material possessions and wealth in ways that honour God and benefit others rather than prioritizing personal gain.
2. The church should reaffirm the Church's role as a sacramental and mystical body of Christ.
3. The leaders of the Church should provide insight into biblical teachings on material possessions.
4. Christians should endeavour to cultivate contentment with what they have and practice generosity.
5. Wealthy individuals especially Christians should view their resources as entrusted to them by God, hence use them responsibly.

K. CONCLUSION

The effect of materialism in ecclesiology is profound, often leading the Church to prioritize wealth and institutional power over its spiritual mission. This shift can undermine the Church's moral authority, diminishing its role as a voice for justice and compassion. Materialism can also foster inequality within the Church, concentrating resources and power among a few, while distancing it from the needs of the marginalized. While materialism can result in corruption and hypocrisy, it also serves as a call for the Church to return to its core spiritual values and social justice mission. Ultimately, the Church must navigate the tension between material needs and spiritual purpose, ensuring its focus remains on serving both God and humanity.

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