

The Concept of Religion in James 1:26-27 and Its Implication for the Nigerian Christian

John Arierhi Ottuh¹

Abstract

The concept of pure and true religion according to James encompasses humanitarian work in the church community and beyond. This concept poses some ethical, economical and social-religious challenges to the Nigerian Christian. Using the historico-evaluative model as a method of interpretation, the paper examined James' concept of true and pure religion as recorded in James 1:26-27 and applied the lesson to the Nigerian Christian. The paper showed that James' understanding of true and pure religious practice is on one's ability to care for the orphans and widows in the community. It also showed that true righteousness and holiness are characterized by benevolence to the indigent people in the community. The work was concluded on the premise that Christianity in Nigeria will be Christianity indeed if the Christian religion is practiced within James' model of pure and true religion. The paper recommended that the church in Nigeria should be proactive in the area of poverty alleviation for the poor orphans and widows in the society by organizing empowerment scheme for them.

Key Words: Concept, Religion, Nigeria, Christian.

1. Introduction

The universal concept of religion has been that of belief and worship of a deity. In James' concept of religion, he relates it with humanitarian services. The term *threskos* as used by James is a situation of true worship that encompasses simultaneously worshiping of God and caring for the needy in the society. This dimension of James' religious concept is lacking in Nigeria today in the sense that many church denominations in Nigeria seemed not to see the need to be fully involved in humanitarian services. Although, some few church denominations in Nigeria are involved in humanitarian services, they are yet to do it in full scale as recommended by James.

The methodology that shall be explored here is the historical and evaluative paradigms and as such, the aim of the study is to historically evaluate James concept of Religion against the backdrop of its practice in contemporary Nigeria. The religion so emphasized by James suggests the care for orphans and widows. This is a recipe for the contemporary church in Nigeria.

2. Definition of Operational Terms

Concept

The Encarta Dictionary (2008) gives several meanings of the word concept. First, it means something that somebody has thought up, or that somebody might be able to imagine; second, a broad abstract idea or a guiding general principle; third, basic understanding of something; and fourth, a way or methods of doing things. West and Endicott (1976, p.69) also defined concept as a conceived idea. A concept can also mean a world view of a people or person about something or an issue. As it is used here, concept means an understanding of something as it relates to Paul's understanding of resurrection in the New Testament.

¹Vicar: Winners Baptist Church, P. O. Box 1214, Effurun, Delta State, Nigeria.

Religion

The word religion has many definitions depending on the perspective one is looking at it. According to Bouquet (1970, p.16), religion is man's attempt to achieve the highest possible good by adjusting his life to the strongest and best power in the universe and this power is usually called God. In the opinion of Hick (1994, p.2), religion is human recognition of super human controlling power and especially of a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship. Also, religion according to Bouquet (p.16) is a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply God. All these definitions point to the issue of beliefs (Smith, 1970, p.207). Religion, in the context of this paper refers to Christianity as practiced in James church communicate. James defined this religion as the type that cares for the needy in the society.

James 1:26-27: Contemporary Context of Interpretation

The contemporary context of the interpretation of James 1:26-27 is the situation of the neglect of the orphans and widows by the church in Nigeria. It is common to see orphans and widows roaming the street of Nigeria. The church neglect them because she feels that such people come from a family. It is true that they are from a family but the ordeal they go through in the hands of some kinsmen are very worrisome.

In some cases, some of these orphans and widows are being maltreated by their kinsmen who supposed to assume the responsibility of care and nature have turned to become an agent of cruelty and torture. Such orphans and widows have to go through true economic and psychological torture on a daily basis. Some of them whose late parents or husbands left properties behind, the tyrant kinsmen deny them of their inheritance and as such, they are left to suffer.

Some of the orphans drop out of school due to lack of funds. Also some of the widows have also resorted to begging in the street or at least take up some odd jobs to survive. Some of them hawk commodities along the high ways. They are a particular type of cloths for years. Some have no shelter to stay in hence they squat in uncompleted buildings in town.

Lack has led some of them to engage in social vices like stealing, prostitution, etc. Feeding is a problem. They hardly have a square meal a day. They have become used to hunger and harsh weather. Being that they are poor, they cannot save any money for any eventuality like sickness. They cannot afford hospital bills and such many of them have lost their lives through protracted sicknesses.

The church in Nigeria has not identified with the plight of these groups of people in the society. It is against this background that the church is being challenged by James' concept of pure religion which cares for the orphans and widows in the society.

Literary Context of James 1:26-27

Constable (2014) presents two aspects of the literary context of James 1:26-27 which include special features and style of James. There are several unique features of this epistle. It contains no references to specific individuals who were the original recipients. There is no concluding benediction. There is a large number of imperatives in the letter, about one for every two verses. There are many figures of speech and analogies, probably more than in all of Paul's epistles (Blue, 1983, p. 816). James also alluded to over 20 Old Testament books. He referred to many Old Testament characters including Abraham, Rahab, Job, and Elijah as well as the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses. One commentator observed that this book "has a more Jewish cast than any other writing of the New Testament" (Mayor, 1894, pp. 229-233). There are many references to nature. This was characteristic of the Jewish rabbis' teaching in James' day and the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are also many allusions to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Porter Jr., 2005, pp. 344-360). Yet there are only two references to Jesus (1:1; 2:1), which led Martin Luther to question whether this book was worthy of being in the New Testament (Barclay, 2003, p.28). In his preface to the New Testament of 1522 James was stigmatized as 'an epistle of straw as observed by Luther who remarked that he would give his doctor's beret to anyone who could reconcile James and Paul (Bainton, 1951, pp. 863-866). The margin of the Nestle Greek Testament version of James identifies 38 references to statements in Matthew. Both books seem to have been written about the same time, namely, in the late 40s.

"Both writers (Matthew and James) seem to have to do with a similar type of community (Wim, 2008, pp.177-200; Kloppenborg, 2008, 2001, 201-232). Leading themes in James include perfection, wisdom, and the piety of the poor (Martin, 1988, pp. lxxix-lxxxvi). Within the structure of the epistle of James, there are traces of preaching and written skill (Motyer, 1985, p.11). The writing style of James has a semblance of Proverbs, stern denunciations of the prophets, the parables in the Gospels (Mayor, p. i.). The Epistle of James is without doubt the least theological of all New Testament books, with the exception of Philemon with three doctrines that come to the surface more often than any others and of these, the most prominent is the doctrine of God. In keeping with the ethical nature of the epistle, it is the repeated stress on the doctrine of sin and the third most prominent theological theme is eschatology (Burdick, 1982, pp.164-65). In nature and structure, the epistle of James is no more anti-Pauline than is the Sermon on the Mount (Stulac, 2010, p. 16).

James 1:26-27 lies within a pericope that spans between James 1:19-26. The preceding pericope spans between 1:1-18 and the pericope after is 2:1-13 (Burdick, 1995, p.1879). The pericopies around James 1:26-27 are structured and entitled as follows (ibid):

1:1 Greetings

1:2-18 Trial and Temptation

The Testing of Faith (1:2-12)

The Source of Temptation (1:13-18)

1:19-27 Listening and Doing

2: 1-13 Favouritism Forbidden

Socio-historical Context of James 1:26-27

James church community was situated in a Greco-Roman certain where polytheism was in vogue and Emperor worship enacted as part of state religion. Emperor worship was hostile to Christianity in the time of James. The persistence worship of Jesus Christ as against that of the emperor was seen as treason by the Roman government. This was part of what led to the persecution of the early church. Although nationalism in the sense we use the word did not exist in ancient times, most people's had a reverence for some deities which they connected with their own nation, and they also connected other nations around them with their own sets of deities. In the minds of Romans, those deities were connected with those peoples intimately, and were part of the overall workings of the world. Order was maintained when they worshipped their own body of Roman deities; the Greeks worshipped the Greek deities, Etruscans the Etruscan deities, and so on. While Romans expected other Romans to make offerings to Roman gods, therefore, they did not expect Greeks or Etruscans to do so. It was acceptable for each nation to worship its gods according to its own traditions (www.earlychristianhistory.net/grec-ro-rel.html).

Prior to Nero's accusation of arson and subsequent persecution of Christians in 64, all animosity was apparently limited to intramural Jewish hostility. In the New Testament (Acts 18:2-3), a Jew named Aquila is introduced who, with his wife Priscilla, had recently come from Italy because emperor Claudius "had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome". It is generally agreed that from Nero's reign until Decius's widespread measures in 250, the persecution of Christians by Romans was limited to isolated, local incidents (Croix, 1963, pp.105-152). Although it is often claimed that Christians were persecuted for their refusal to worship the emperor, general dislike for Christian likely arose from their refusal to worship the gods or take part in sacrifice, which was expected of those living in the Roman Empire (ibid). Although the Jews also refused to partake in these actions, it seems that they were tolerated because they followed their own Jewish ceremonial law, and their religion was legitimized by its ancestral nature (Frend, 1967, p.130). On the other hand, they believed Christians, who were believed to take part in strange rituals and nocturnal rites, cultivated a dangerous and superstitious sect (Croix).

During this period, persecution was accusatory and not inquisitive (Croix, p.125). Governors played a larger role in the persecution than did Emperors, but Christians were not sought out by governors, and instead accused and prosecuted through a process termed *cognitio extra ordinem*. No reliable, extant

description of a Christian trial exists, but evidence shows that trials and punishments varied greatly, and sentences ranged from acquittal to death (Barnes, 1985, p.145).

James church community was familiar with church leaders who were using religion especially Christianity to satisfy their selfish desire and neglecting the poor. This also was present in the Old Testament which prompted the prophet to speak against the neglect of the orphans and widows. It is against this backdrop that James concept of religion shall be read into the contemporary church situation in Nigeria, in relation to the needy in the church and outside the church.

3. Analysis of James 1:26-27

James 1:26-27 is structured within some themes. In the context of this paper, some themes shall be explored here.

i. Θρησκεία (*threskeia-v.27*): James gives examples of this life of active obedience. With these examples, he again poses two contrasting alternatives in two kinds of "religion." Both as an adjective *threskos* in 1:26 and as a noun *threskeia* in 1:27, the term especially refers to the outward observance of worship—for example, attending worship services, praying and fasting. James's initial proposition is that even among people who perform these outward observances, there are some who practice a deceptive and worthless religion and others who practice a pure and faultless religion (Osborne, 2013). The examples he gives are so practical that they may make these verses pointed and uncomfortable reading for us. He referred to religion that is unconcerned about humanitarian service as deceptive and worthless (*mataios*) religion (1:26). This term makes emphatic James's rejection of a disobedient faith as a false faith. Genuine, saving faith will produce actions in the believer's life which are obedient to the word of God. The first example James chooses is a negative one—failure to control one's tongue. This is not the first time he has brought it up (cf. 1:19). It is far from the last time. In 3:1-12 he also discussed the huge evil done by the tongue; in 4:1-12 he gave further examples of impure speech (e.g., quarreling and slander); in 5:9 and 5:12 he tells his readers not to grumble or swear. The repetition of the theme shows that it has great importance in the message of James's letter. Sinning in the way one speaks cannot be regarded as a minor matter (ibid). James uses the imagery of the tongue to give another clue as to why he sees one's speech as deserving such attention. The participle *chalinagogon* is properly translated keep a tight rein on, because it is indeed an equestrian term. James is the only New Testament writer to use the word, and he employs it again significantly in 3:2. He sees the control of one's tongue as decisive in the control of one's entire behavior, much like the decisive control of a horse's direction by means of the rein and bit (ibid).

ii. ὀρφανός (*orphanos*) and χήρα (*cheras*): Two sub-themes which were also addressed by James was include the *orphanos* and *cheras*. He referred to the religion that is pure (*aspilon*) as the religion that cares for the orphans and the widows. The Greek word *orphanous* as presented in James 1:27 means someone bereft of father or parents. Its Old Testament equivalent is *yathowm* and it also means a fatherless person or person bereft of parents. According to Church, the orphan in biblical modern translation and understanding, is a person without a male parent (Yeats, 2006, p.66). Orphans are often mentioned with widows (*chera*) as representatives of the most helpless members of society as presented in Exodus 22:22 ; Deuteronomy 10:18 ; Psalm 146:9 (Gideon, 1986, p.18). In societies where the basic social unit was the clan headed by a father (the eldest male relative, perhaps a grandfather or uncle), those without a father or husband were social misfits without one to provide for their material needs and represent their interests in the court as reflected in Job 31:21 (Thurston, 1989, p.106). In this same vein, Smith says that the condition and hope of the orphan and widow among the poor, the orphan and the widow were the most vulnerable (Church, 1991). The orphan was being referred to as a fatherless child even when the mother could still be alive. In both cases, no mature male figure could defend against unscrupulous persons who would wish to defraud these individuals out of their inheritance. Consequently, biblical (and nonbiblical) legal codes provide for the protection of the rights of the orphan and the widow as reflected in Exodus 22:22 ; Deuteronomy 10:18 and Deuteronomy 24:17-22 (ibid). Being that orphan has no one to turn to when oppressed, he reclines to God as his helper. God declared that He would be a Father to the fatherless and provide justice for the widow

(Deuteronomy 10:18 ; Psalm 68:5). James measured true religious character by a person's care for the orphan and the widow (James 1:27). The early Christians cared for the widows (Acts 6:1-8), but Paul limited these provisions because of abuses on the part of some as could be seen in 1 Timothy 5:3-16 (ibid). Metaphorically, the Greek word *orphanous* is also used especially in the Septuagint (LXX) to mean those Israelites who were living in apostasy or exile. It depicts the fatherlessness of Israel while they derailed from the ways of God. Being that God is their father, straying away from God connotes that they have gone away from fatherly instructions and training. The Greek word *cheras* means a woman whose husband is dead. The Old Testament equivalent of *cheras* is *almonah* and it refers to the needy as epitomized in widows and orphans in Israel (Smith, 1991). Metaphorically, *cheras* represent a city stripped of its inhabitants and riches. This understanding probably described the term *thlipsis* (trouble, distress, pressure, oppression, affliction, etc) which the orphan and widow go through in James church community. However, the text is not so specific and these burdens may involve physical requirements such as food or clothing, or they may be identified as emotional or spiritual needs (ibid). Church documents express an understanding of orphans and widows playing a role in the effectuation of holiness utilizing the sacrificial system as a framework. "In the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and in the Apostolic Constitutions, which parallel and expand it, the widow and orphan appear with the metaphor of the altar" (ibid). In this passage, there seemed to be an understanding that sees the orphans and widows as where we offer up pure and undefiled sacrifices for the purposes of holiness.

iii. *Episkeptomai*: The instruction to look after orphans and widows in their distress can be examined in three parts. First, the verb to look after (*episkeptomai*) is a compound verb in which the prepositional prefix *epi-* places an emphasis on the act of looking. The basic act "to look" becomes intensified for a possible meaning of "looking at observantly" or "examining," though this meaning would not fit the present context. It is used elsewhere to express the awe with which one describes a visitation from God himself (Lk 1:68, 78; 7:16). In the context of James's instruction, the verb would carry the connotation of giving active care or help. Here, then, it is proper to translate this verb not merely as "visit" (KJV, RSV, NASB) but as "look after" (NIV). It is the same verb used by Matthew in Jesus' warning about the future separation of people for blessing and cursing. When the Son of Man comes in his glory, some will be welcomed into blessing because "I was sick and you looked after me," while others will be sent into the eternal fire because "I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me" as reflected in Matthew 25:36, 43 (Osborne, 2013). Second, in specifying orphans and widows James is prescribing nothing new or innovative for the church. He is recalling an explicit theme in God's Old Testament revelation of his will, so that there should be no disputing that this is indeed what God accepts as pure and faultless religion. Psalm 146:7-9 describes God's commitment to care for the needy such as the fatherless and widows. Jeremiah 7:1-8 warns against placing trust in the presence of the temple while oppressing the fatherless and widows--an example of religion that is "deceptive" and "worthless" (ibid). Moreover, there was a specific instruction as to the category of widow and orphans that need the special care of the church. They are those in distress. Those in their distress refers literally to a pressing or a pressure, or figuratively to an affliction or oppression. In keeping with the Jeremiah passage, James has regard for the powerlessness of these people, their inability to protect or care for themselves (ibid). The phrase "to keep" is translated from the Greek word *τηρεῖν* (*terein*). The verb is in the infinitive form and in its context conveys the concept of purpose, or "in order that." Taking that into consideration, we might read that pure and undefiled religion is caring for orphans and widows in their distress in order to keep oneself unstained by the world (Corkum and Richter, 2011). *Terein* linked the action of true religion with the care for orphans and widows.

iv. *καθαρὰ καὶ ἀμίαντος* (*Kathara kai amiantos*): In the Greek sentence structure, the initial introductory fact is that these examples of behavior will demonstrate religion that is pure and faultless. The first of these two terms (*kathara*) is used in the New Testament to refer to purity of heart as well as a ritual cleanness of objects. The second term (*amiantos*) means "undefiled." Together, the two terms hold up a standard of purity, complementing the standard of worth raised in 1:26. The terms emphasize that the examples of active obedience about to be presented are to be desired and practiced by all who seek a genuine, uncorrupted religion before God (Osborne, 2013). This type of religion so described here conforms to the Christian practice of giving.

4. James 1:26-27: Implication for the Nigerian Christian

i. Self-Discipline (v.26): Here James made it clear that the practice of religion requires high sense of self-discipline especially that of speech. Offensive utterances are opposite of true practice of religion. This is a challenge to the church, to teach the members to learn how to control themselves in speech. The Bible even admonishes the Christian to speak words that are edifying to the hearer.

ii. Economic Transformation of the Needy in the Society: The church that practices pure religion in the opinion of James is the church that put into consideration the welfare of the less-privileged in the society. These less-privileged persons in the society include the orphans and the widows. These group of people in the society constitute the Old and New Testament understanding of the poor. They were to be economically transformed so that they can have food to eat. This is a challenge to the church in Nigeria. The mission endeavour of the church should be universal in such a way that it can develop capacities to adopt the orphans in the church and outside the church.

iii Soteriological Mission to the lost and Needy: Apart from the economic transformation of the less-privileged in the society, the church in Nigeria must not forget that there is still a lost mankind which stands, spiritually speaking, widowed, orphaned and destitute of the family of God. He who is the God of the widow, the orphan, and the poor, who redeemed a helpless Israel out of Egypt, has made provision for that humanity at the Cross and the Christian is His ambassador as reflected in Galatians 2:20; John 20:21; and 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 (Richard, 1973, pp. 223-234). James' concept of pure religion is in deed a challenge and a recipe for the contemporary church Nigeria for a holistic mission venture which must include the lost especially the less privileged in the society where the church is situated.

iv. Socio-Empowerment of the Orphans and Widows: The orphans should be given a human face in the society. They should be allowed to make their own contribution to the society. They should not be deprived as a result of their predicament. They should be loved and cared for by the church. When they been oppressed, the church must fight for them. According to Smith, three groups of people of the lower social classes in need of legal protection from the rich and powerful who sometimes abused them (Job 24:3-4) were the orphans, widows and the poor in the society of Israel and as such, God's promise of care for the poor, the orphans, and the widows was a tremendous source of hope during times of severe difficulty (Smith. 1991). The Baptist church should do same to these group of people in the church and society. They should be helped to gain human dignity and confidence.

v. Moral Purity in the midst of cosmic impurity: Keeping unstained by the world is a specific concern for purity. "This concern for purity has a direct bearing on the first part of the definition. It is important for Christians not to get caught up in the quest for status and wealth (Ziglar, 2003, p.275). The thrust of James's admonition is moral rather than sociological. Christians must find away to live in the world without adopting its corrupt value system. The mark of true Christian is the ability to live above the sin in a sinful world (Sleeper, 1988, p.67). In fact, it is the driving point in the entire letter; the holiness that God desires is effectuated by the works of our faith. It is by these works that we are left unstained by the world. The work of caring for the needy (orphans, widows and the less privileged in general) in the society in their distress is the purest because it addresses the direst distress and it is undefiled because the earthly reward is being unstained from the world.

5. Conclusion

This paper has shown that the concept of religion in James 1:26-27 indeed posed some challenges to the contemporary church in Nigeria. Here James presented humanitarian obligation as core of pure religion in the society. James' view of religion also specifically mentioned that the attitude of the individual Christian and the Church community as a whole to the orphans and widows in the church community must be positive. This is what makes the church to be pure and righteous indeed. The church is admonished to care for the orphans, widows and the indigents in general.

This understanding of religion as presented by James 1:26-27 shows to Nigerian Christians that are caring for the orphans, widows and the indigents in the church community implies self-discipline, economic transformation of the needy in the society, soteriological mission to the lost and needy, socio-empowerment of the orphans and widows and moral purity in the midst of cosmic impurity. It is within this understanding that Nigerian Christians can claim that Christianity in Nigeria is pure and true.

6. Recommendations

- i. The church in Nigeria should be proactive in the issue of caring for the poor by planning a poverty alleviation scheme for the poor in the church.
- ii. In order to make charity an effective ministry in the church in Nigeria, the church should organize bible based poverty alleviation seminars periodically to enlighten the membership on the subject matter.
- iii. In order to effectively implement charity ministry, the church in Nigeria should set up a standing committee to work round the clock for this purpose like it was done in Acts 6: 1-7.
- iv. In order to provide shelter for those orphans and widows that are homeless, the church should build a house in the mission's compound or elsewhere in the community to accommodate such orphans and widows.
- v. In order to properly feed and clothe the orphans and widow so housed by the church, church members should donate food items and cloths on daily and periodical bases respectively.

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