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**WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY: A CASE STUDY  
OF PRIMATE (MRS) E. O. BABAYEMI OF JERUSALEM CHURCH OF THE LORD  
INTERNATIONAL (JCLI)**

***Adesanya, Ibiyinka Olusola***  
***Department of Religious Studies***  
***University of Ado-Ekiti, Ado-Ekiti***  
***sanyatimi@yahoo.com***

**ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the religious experience of women in Nigerian Christianity with particular reference to Primate (Mrs) E.O. Babayemi, the founder of Jerusalem Church of the Lord International. It discusses the religious experience of E. O. Babayemi, and her significant contributions and relevance to Christendom and Nigerian society at large. The study adopts multi-disciplinary approach of anthropology, phenomenology and hermeneutics. The significance of this study lies in the tremendous and imposing prominence and huge patronage of E. O. Babayemi, both by the people of Ado-Ekiti and its environs. The paper investigates her activities and practices, her acceptance within the Christian religions and Yoruba cultural patriarchal community. Based on these, the study recommended that the church should continue to embrace women and put a stop to all discriminatory attitudes against them.

**INTRODUCTION**

There has been in the recent years an explosion of interest and global focus on issues pertaining to women and gender discourse, with emphasis on the status, position and role of women from the perspectives of pure academics, politics as well as non-governmental organization. The interest and focus which bother on the religious restrictions and stereotypes of gender roles in leadership position. Also, scholars of religion particularly church historians, African Christian theologians and feminists have done significant studies and writings on the need for inclusion of women in leadership position of the church. (Akintunde 2001; 101-157, Amolo 2001; 31-39, Olajubu 1991; 70-82). It is however regrettable that there is a significant number of literature on women stereotyped in Christianity, but no serious academic focus has been given to their relevance and significance in Nigerian religious community. The objectives of this paper therefore is to highlight (a) women's religious experience in the Bible vis-à-vis Nigerian Christianity (b) the religious experience of E. O. Babayemi, her significant contributions and relevance in Christendom. The paper will be rounded off with recommendations and conclusion.

**WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE BIBLE VIS-À-VIS NIGERIAN  
CHRISTIANITY**

This aspect of the work will be focusing on three major issues namely;

- a. the meaning of the word Christian
- b. the place of women in the Old and New Testament period
- c. Christian women's religious experience in contemporary Nigerian society.

Each topic will be treated under three different sub-headings below:

**The Meaning of Christianity:** The word Christian according to Williams 180: 85, "...appeared to be Latin..." This is because of the fact that plural nouns ending in -iani - may denote the soldiers of a particular general hence, partisans of an individual. Christianity, therefore, may have originally been thought of as soldiers of Christ in the household of Christ or the partisans.

However, according to Ogba 2002: 175, the name Christian occurred only three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26, 26:26:28; I Peter 4:16) all pointing to the fact that it was a generally recognised name or title in the New Testament period. Although it is evident that there were other names which Christians themselves used and perhaps preferred. According to Lucan account of Acts 11:26, the name, Christians was intended and used for the first time for the purpose of degrading a company of people or the disciples of Christ at Antioch. Originally, the name was meant as a nickname meant for a reproach. This is why early Christians would have to answer the question. Are you a Christian? But it was later adopted by Christians who became commonly known by the name meaning Christ's people. Thus, up to now, the term Christian is used for both male and female who are followers of Christ.

**The Place of Women in the Old and New Testament Period:** In the Old Testament period, it need be noted that women like men, are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Although they are men's helpers (Gen. 2:20) yet they are men's companions. Therefore, in the Hebrew laws, it was observed that women like men were to be honoured (Ex. 20:12), feared (Lev. 19:3) and obeyed (Deut. 21:18). Even at home or in the community, women were to be reckoned with in their household, naming the children and being responsible for their early education. Women also attended the religious gatherings for worship, and brought their offerings for sacrifice. Women also took the Nazarite vows as they sought to dedicate themselves especially to the worship of Yahweh (Num. 6:2). Although the church was not started, as we know it today, by then, yet, women were of immense importance in all disciplines of life. Women were considered to be members of the family of faith. As such, they could enter into the most of the area of worship. The law directed that all men to appear before the Lord three times a year (Ex. 23:17, Lev. 23, Deut. 16:10). Apparently, the women went with them on some occasions (Deut. 29:10, 11, Neh. 8:2, Joel 2:16).

The scripture teaches that men were always to be the spiritual leaders of the family, but women were able to share in this role alongside their husbands. Women served at the door of the Tabernacle (Ex. 38:8). Both men and women contributed their valuables for use in the buildings of the Tabernacle and the Temple (ex. 38:8; I Chr. 25:5-6). The laver for ministry in the court of the Tabernacle was made of brass from the mirrors of the women only (The Shepherd Staff: 1983). However, a very important point that needs to be emphasized here is that the priesthood of the Old Testament was entirely male. The Hebrew culture gave advantage to men more than women in this area. Only the males were specifically commanded to be numbered for this purpose (Lev. 3:9-15). Despite these subordinate positions in which women were placed, it is gratifying to note that the Hebrew

scripture portrays women in leadership positions in the religious and political sphere. Corroborating this, Jeremiah says:

There is no indication that women were ineligible for or incapable of leadership authority in the female world. They were presented as prophetesses and a judge. Huldah, Miriam and Deborah and a host of others served in both the temple and the tabernacle. (Jeremiah 1969: 372).

In the New Testament, the Bible recorded that Jesus has a number of encounters with women. Jesus forgave, taught and healed women just as he did for men. Women served him and provided for his needs, Graham 1994:15 writes that these women possibly widows had control of their own finances. It was out of their generosity that Jesus and his disciples were at least partially supported. It is therefore noted that, inspite of the limitations that had been placed on women by the culture of that period, women were free to follow Jesus and to take part in his ministry in the world. Women were free to exercise some freedom, make some choices and where issues of faith are involved like men, they are accountable for their choices or actions. A final indication of the dignity accorded women in the ministry of Jesus is seen in the importance given to women in the resurrection. In Christ day, women were not considered reliable witnesses. Josephus warns for example, "but let not the testimony of women be admitted on account of the levity and boldness of their sex" (Borland 1991: 48). Shreiner however writes that, even though the testimony of women was not received by courts... Jesus appeared to women first, showing again their significance and value as human beings (Shreiner 2005: 40).

Apart from the evidences that women were active in the ministry of Jesus, one however notes that Jesus limited the area of their activities when he chose his apostles. It implies that, Christ not only valued women very highly, but also demonstrated a clear role distinction between men and women. Nowhere in the issue seen more clearly than Jesus' selection of only men for the role of the apostle. Many biblical feminists question the significance of this obvious role distinction or explain it as cultural or as temporary. For instance, Sandra M. Schmeinders writes that:

Jesus had every reason to select women as members of the twelve, and therefore, the fact that he did not do so was not intentional. Thus, there is basically no historical ground for regarding the twelve as the first priests and this should not be used as criterion for excluding women from priesthood. (Sandra M. Shrneiders 1977:227-233).

Therefore, even though clear distinctions is seen in Christ's choice of the apostles, and in the exclusive type of work they were given to perform, no barriers need to exist between male and female, in the issue of leadership position of the church. The twelve apostles did not set a pattern for future leaders - not in ethnicity, not in number and therefore possible not in gender. Moreover, in the rest of the New Testament, there are evidences that women were very active in the ministry of Paul, inspite of the fact that verses such as I Corinthians 14:33-

35 and I Timothy 2:11-12 usually wrongly interpreted made it clear that there is a line to be drawn. Some women who contributed to the success of Paul's ministry included Priscilla, Phoebe, Syntyche, Euodia, Dorcas, Mary, Lydia, Eunice and the likes. All the above biblical passages and examples have revealed that women were not excluded from serving God and their churches. However, it is pertinent to see all these in the context it was written.

### **CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

In Nigerian Christianity, women were not passive but active in adding colours and beauty to worship. In many of our churches, they serve as Deaconesses, lay preachers, evangelist and the likes. Although, these ordained deaconesses of our time are still restricted to the office of the deaconess, evangelists and sometimes elders in the church, yet, it was not all that easy for them to be ordained clergy. This practice characterizes historical denominations such as the Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, the Baptists and the Apostolic Faith. The above notwithstanding, there are women in the forefront of evangelism both in the orthodox and African independent churches. For instance, as noted by Olajubu 1991:74-75, Lady Evangelist Makanjuola a.k.a Omo Jesu, a member of the Anglican Diocese of Ilorin, is known for open air crusades and healing ministry. Also, Mrs Ajileye, a member of Mount Olives Chapel that belongs to the Anglican Diocese of Ilorin, is another example of women leader. By comparison, women in African independent churches were given greater involvement in their leadership affairs. Women are spiritually important as men, many of whom are charismatic leaders of their churches. Many of the independent churches are headed by women who are respected for their display of charismatic gifts (Babalola 1987:40). Examples include, D.S. Oyekan of Christ Apostolic Church who was a prophetess, Lady Evangelist Bola Are of Agbala Daniel Church in Ibadan, Lady Evangelist Bola Odeleke of Agbara Olorun kii baa ti (Power of Pentecostal Church) in Lagos, Sophia Odunlami, first prophetess of the Faith Tabernacle and the likes.

But what are the issues that have provoked his varied positions on women roles in the sacramental ministry. Views are often expressed in such a way as to end the debate - "women themselves don't want to be ordained" or "women do not like women ministers". Besides, it has been said that those who are opposed to women ministry have consistently referred to both I Timothy 2:11-12 and I Corinthians 14:34. The above factors seem to becloud what may be the reason for the reluctance of a large number of Christians to consider women into the priestly ministry. More precisely, it can be said that the prohibitions is simply based on cultural prejudices as rightly observed by Hope Amolo 2001:36. However, whatever might be the various reasons given, it is worthy of note that Nigerian women had and are still playing innumerable roles in Nigerian Christian denominations. In the light of the foregoing, the next sub-heading of this work will be focusing on the religious experience of Primate E.O. Babayemi of Jerusalem Church of the Lord International. This aspect of the work is significant in the sense that it will bring into limelight the immense contributions of a woman in a patriarchal Nigerian religious environment.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRIMATE E.O. BABAYEMI AND HER RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

Primate Mrs E.O. Babayemi of Jerusalem Church of the Lord International was born on 28<sup>th</sup> December, 1942 to the family of Late Mr and Mrs Omokehinde Adubiario of Odo Ado in Ado-Ekiti. She got married to Mr E.O. Babayemi in 1970. The marriage became unpleasant as Mrs E.O. Babayemi suffered temporary barrenness. While she was looking for solution to her problem, she was introduced to the Church of the Lord Aladura, (CLA) Odundun Street in 1974. The CLA at No. 1 Odundun Street, Ado-Ekiti was established in 1965. There were few members attending its Sunday services due to the prominence of the Anglican Church and the Christ Apostolic Church in the area. Though members of other denomination used to attend its open revival services. The church was not known until 1974. The event that brought the church into prominence was the claim by hitherto barren woman, Mrs E.O. Babayemi. It was claimed that she received her miracle of child bearing in the CLA, Odundun, Ado-Ekiti. She also received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thereafter, Mrs Babayemi who was a member of the Anglican Church in Odo-Ado and a successful trader decided to show appreciation to God by making a vow to leave the CLA. She concentrated on the problems of barren women and children by taking them to the mountains of prayer. As a result of her activities and charismatic gifts, she got more followers from the prophet of the church. Her popularity caused a problem, a committee was set up by the local branch to examine critically her sources of spiritual power. The development led to a schism within the church in Ado-Ekiti.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> September 1987, Mrs E.O. Babayemi claimed that she received God's directive to leave the Church of the Lord No. 1 Odundun Street, Dallimore, Ado-Ekiti to establish her own branch JCLI, 2006. On 20<sup>th</sup> September, they held their first service under a palm tree at its present site under the spiritual leadership of Mrs E.O. Babayemi. Many female members joined them. Branches of the church, some of which were established between 1996 and 2004 could be found in Ijero-Ekiti, Igede and Igirigiri road in Odo-Ado, Ado-Ekiti. There are also many branches outside Ekiti and other countries such as Britain, Ghana and USA. It is worthy of note that the restrictions hitherto placed on women by the mainline churches notwithstanding, the Aladura movement exemplified by the CLA had tried to rediscover female spirituality. The attitude of the Aladura Church to women could be seen as an appreciation of the creative and mystical powers of women. (Jegade 2010: 89-95). However, the relevance and significance of Mrs E.O. Babayemi will be discussed under two main sub-headings below:

#### **The Practice of Praying and Faith Healing:**

Prayer is central to the life and ministry of Mrs E.O. Babayemi. She engages herself in constant prolonged personal and private prayers and fasting such as seven day, twenty-one-day and forty-one-day. She organizes a regular fortnight prayer meetings for members. All her activities are done in and around her church premises. People come to Mrs E.O. Babayemi both from within and outside Ekiti State, with various kinds of problems such as barrenness, deafness, dumbness and protracted illnesses. In some of our visits to the place, it was noted that both male and female constituted the clients, females were more in number and they included people from all religious denominations. The fact that female clients are

usually more in number than male clients may be explained from the fact that problems associated with child-bearing and women-related issues such as protracted waiting for suitors, prolonged pregnancy and barrenness, have negative and terrible implications mostly on women hence, women's patronage. From the inception till date, the church has been under her and been an oasis for women in search of the fruits of the womb (children). This was one of the factors, which had endeared the hearts of many people in Ekiti and its environs to the church. The issue of women infertility was discovered to have created unique roles for her and that is why she is popularly known and called 'Iya Ewe' (the mother of children).

Besides, it is important to note that Primate Mrs E.O. Babayemi usually prescribes and uses olive oil, water, local sponges and local soap for therapeutic purposes. She claims to offer only prayer on these items particularly during their annual convention, which the clients need to use as prescribed. They also make use of palm fronds which they have prayed over for protection and to ward off evil. Moreover, ritual bath is usually recommended for any clients whose case is very severe.

### **The Practise of Divine Delivery and administration of Holy Communion**

Primate E.O. Babayemi demonstrated her sense of belonging in the area of divine delivery. The church has maternity home where only the church midwives are employed. The maternity home has helped in the safe delivery of children who have not only become responsible citizens of the community but of Nigeria at large. Contrary to the belief of some churches that women cannot administer the Holy Communion, Primate E.O. Babayemi happened to be the one doing this in her church. The communion services are led by her, and even through this, many have gotten solutions to their problems. According to her, she said, she does not believe that it is only men that are qualified to administer the communion. Rather, since God has made her the head, then, she has no option but to administer the sacraments.

### **Other areas of relevance of Primate E.O. Babayemi will be highlighted below**

1. Successfully over-seeing the affairs of the church at both local and international levels.
2. Counseling of couples and settling quarrels among people in her church.
3. Visiting of solitary mountain tops to communicate with God undisturbed and undistracted on behalf of her congregation.
4. Exercise authority to appoint and transfer Pastors to different branches of the church.
5. Promotion of communal spirit and unity of faith.
6. Placing much emphasis on House Fellowship and Bible Study to strengthen the weak in faith and spreading of the gospel.

However, like every other women, Primate Mrs E.O. Babayemi has her own challenges both from the public and within the church. According to her, some women used to pass some uncomplimentary remarks about her. The common and usual saying about her is, "*o ti fi ori oko e gba pa'aro*" literally translated as, "the husband is under the influence and control of his wife". Often time, her lifestyle is misunderstood and therefore becomes object of sympathy and ridicule. But whatever might be the case, the women must awake to the fact that, they need to love and encourage whoever is in position of authority. This is

because it may be their turn in another time to assume such positions. How would they feel too if such bad remarks are passed about them? Women should learn to speak with one voice and have one mind because a kingdom cannot rise against itself and not fall. Then on the part of men, there are some of them who says, they cannot be under the authority of this woman. A male once said:

You mean to allow a woman to be my Pastor, God forbids. Thank God I am not a novice of church doctrine and the scripture that says, a woman should learn in silence. How would it sound that I am under a woman Pastor or woman Bishop? It will never happen.

From the above, it could be rightly deduced that, most men are too conservative about this matter. But it is necessary that men should learn to accept women for what they are. Even though it is a fact that differences between women and men exist. Gender difference does not imply inferiority or superiority. A woman is not less than a man because she is a woman, and a man is not more than a woman because he is a man. They are both man, but they are different. The differences are to be seen as complimentary, the female was created to help the man in that, whatever a man lacks, the female has. The female's emotional feeling will balance the male's thinking, and this should be well-considered by men.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we have identified the significance of religious experience as very important, and in fact crucial to the emergence of women in the new expression of Christianity in Nigeria, using Primate Mrs E.O. Babayemi, the founder of Jerusalem Church of the Lord International as a case study. We have noted that spiritual experience is potent in religious leadership and that women are always relevant if stereotypes in our religious attitudes are objectively stripped off our mentality. This paper suggests that academic study of religion should engage more in focusing on case studies relating to religious experience and women spirituality. This is because, it will reveal the capability of women and their leadership potentials.

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