

**ORIGINALARTICLE****The Themes of Universalism and Racial Theology in Acts of the Apostles as a Solution to Discrimination in Nigeria****Offiong Offiong Asuquo**

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**Abstract**

Universalism refers to something that is general and applicable to everybody, while racial theology is the theology which tends to favour one race to the detriment of others. In the book of Acts of the Apostles, Luke who is believed to have written it, highlights this discriminatory racial theology through various events, but at the same time, he tries to debunk and reject this theology by showing that salvation is universal. This paper attempts to relate Luke's position to the Nigerian society which is characterized by discrimination, tribalism and sectionalism. It advocates that, despite these differences, Nigerians should learn to treat all others like brothers, irrespective of their differences.

**Keywords:** Themes of Universalism, Racial Theology, Acts of the Apostles, Nigeria.

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**RACIAL THEOLOGY AND UNIVERSALISM IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES**

The concept of racial theology could be identified in the dialogue Jesus had with his disciples shortly before his ascension (Byron 2012). In chapter 1 verse 6 when Jesus had promised them the baptism of the Holy Spirit, they asked him specifically whether he will restore the kingdom of Israel at this time. The question revealed a nationalistic concern for the Jewish race. This was discriminatory. In verse 8 of the same chapter, they were commissioned to be witnesses after they would have received the Holy Spirit. Their witnessing was to start from Jerusalem and Judea before extending to Samaria and other parts of the world. This order of arrangement showed a sort of preference for the Jews who lived in Jerusalem. However, Luke immediately rejected any element of discrimination by stating that the witnessing will extend to every part of the world. In other words, he indicated the universality of the witnessing

which was aimed at bringing salvation to all.

The element of discrimination can also be seen in Acts 2 verse 7. There, we observe that only the Galileans were first baptized with the Holy Spirit on the Pentecost day, but Luke tries to cancel any impression of discrimination by showing that the disciples spoke in various tongues derived from Asia, Europe, Africa and Middle East (Gilbert 2002). These tongues were spoken with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, showing that God did not actually discriminate by first giving the Holy Spirit to the Jewish believers, but he also cares about other races. This view reinforced in verse 17 of chapter 2 which quotes Prophet Joel's prophecy that, in the last days, God will pour out His spirit on all flesh. This universality is further echoed in verse 39 of chapter 2 which says that the promise is for all that are far off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

The universalism of salvation is also illustrated in verses 1 and 4 of Chapter 8 (Moore 1997). These verses show that the church in Jerusalem was scattered abroad due to persecutions, they went about preaching the gospel in the areas they stayed. Verses 26 to 40 of the same chapter also speaks of the conversion of the Eunuch of Ethiopia by Philip, this indicates that salvation was not limited only to the Jews. The story of Cornelius' conversion in chapter 10 also has elements of racial theology on the surface, but when it is closely examined, it will reveal the universality of salvation (Woodington 2017). The story says that Cornelius, a religious centurion had a vision in which an angel of God told him to send for Simon Peter who will explain the way of salvation to him. The fact that he had to send for Peter a Jew, to explain salvation to him, indicated a sort of preference or setting a part of the Jews as pertaining to religious affairs, otherwise the angel would have explained the way of salvation directly to him.

Peter himself tried to re-echo this segregation in the vision in which he refused to eat any unclean or common animal. But he was urged by God not to discriminate between any of his creatures as they were all acceptable. This meant that Cornelius and other gentiles were acceptable to God, and Peter must not refuse to go to them. When he went and ministered the word to them, they received salvation and the Holy Spirit fell on them also, indicating their acceptability to God.

The conversion of Cornelius and his household completely obliterated the concept of racial theology, that is, the view that salvation was only for the Jews, ceased to exist. Hence, the church started to spread beyond Israel. The disciples, who travelled out to Gentile countries, took the gospel with them (Chapter 11, verse 20). Notable among them were Apostle Paul, Barnabas and Silas. Paul and Barnabas specifically embarked on missionary journeys to evangelize the Gentiles. In chapter 13 verse 46, Paul said that since the Jews had rejected the gospel, he and his companion had turned to the Gentiles. In verse 47 of the same chapter, he goes on to say that the Lord had sent him and his partner to be a light for the Gentiles, that they should take salvation to the

farthest part of the world.

Their first missionary journey covered areas like Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, the second journey covered Cyprus, Syria, Cilicia, Galatia, Macedonia, Philippi, Athens and Corinth. The third journey extended from Ephesus through Macedonia Greece, Troas, Miletus, Tyre and Caesarea. The extent of these journeys and the spread of the gospel to these gentile areas, indicate that salvation is for all.

Although Luke acknowledges the concept of racial theology which holds that the Jews are God's chosen race and that salvation was first offered to them, nevertheless, he has shown that salvation was not limited to them alone, rather they were meant to be instruments for the spread of salvation to the world.

## **AN APPLICATION OF THESE THEMES AS A SOLUTION TO DISCRIMINATION IN NIGERIA**

It is a fact that there is widespread discrimination in Nigeria (Offiong 2016a; Offiong 2016b). This could be traced to the action of the British colonialists who amalgamated the Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914 and introduced the system of divide and rule in order to enhance easy administration (Undiyaundeye 2011a; Undiyaundeye 2011b). This was also to enable them to effectively control the economic resources which were located in the south. But this divide and rule policy encouraged divisions, differences and social apartheid among Nigerians (Egbe & Okoi 2018). This situation has continued till today and has contributed to incidents of discriminations based on tribal, religious and other differences right down to states, local governments, clans, lands and even streets of residences.

Other manifestations of these divisions and discrimination include the mass killings of people of southern Nigerian origin in the north during the political crises in the 1960s, the events of the civil war, the various coups and counter coups, the amassing and squandering of the country's oil wealth selfishly by the political class and their associates (Undiyaundeye 2010; Aloba *et al.*, 2016; Inyang & Adoga-Ikong 2017). The themes of racial theology and universalism in Acts could help in reducing these differences, if they are understood and applied. For instance, it is noted that although salvation, the gospel and the Holy Spirit were first given to the Jews, yet, they were later extended to all other nations all over the world.

Similarly, in the Nigerian scene, a simultaneous application of these two themes or ideas to various aspects of life where discrimination occurs will ensure that, although people first give preference to themselves, their family and loved ones in the use and enjoyment of resources and privileges, nevertheless they will equally and later on extend the same privileges and resources to all others who deserve them. However, the limitation to the successful application of these themes is that some Nigerians are not Christians, many do not understand these themes and may not desire or know how to apply them. Furthermore, the greedy and selfish nature of many, makes it difficult for

them to extend any help to others.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Luke has illustrated in the Acts of the Apostles that, the Jews were a privileged people, due to this salvation, the gospel and the Holy Spirit was first given to them. However, he further shows that these benefits were not limited to them, but were also extended to other nations without discrimination. This paper advocates an application and adoption of a similar approach to the granting of privileges, giving of positions and sharing of resources to people in Nigeria. On this premise, it implies that employments, admissions, promotions or appointments which are given to indigenes or a group of people of common affiliation, should also be given to others. Even though kindness may begin at home, it should not end there, it should be extended to outsiders. 'Thus, what is good for the goose is also good for the gander'. Despite the limitations, the themes of racial theology and universalism in Acts of the Apostles are of great relevance to the problem of discrimination in Nigeria.

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