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### Article

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#### THE ALL-LOVINGNESS OF GOD AND PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN NIGERIA: A REACTION TO AUGUSTINE'S PRIVATION THEORY

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### Abstract

This paper employs the philosophical tools and research method of critical analysis in examining the viability of Augustine's privation theory (especially its advocacy of the all-lovingness of God) in addressing the traumatic experience of persecution and ameliorating its impacts on Christians particularly among those in Nigeria. Augustine's privation theory obviously has great popularity in philosophical and theological scholarship primarily because it is a form of theodicy, and it asserts that evil of any kind is mere absence of good. It also posits that evil originated from man's abuse of his free will, and can be said to be non-existent because it lacks substance in created reality. Scholarly reactions to this theory have consistently been objectified either by furtherance of it as safe defense of God's omnibenevolent and omnipotent attributes in the face of reality of evil, or by a descent of it as a mere metaphysical defense of God whose identity and existence is logically inconsistent with the reality of evil. However, not much has been done in examining the implications of the basic claims of Augustine's privation theory, as a pro-theistic theory has on the life and the religiosity of Christians experiencing persecution, especially amongst Christians in Nigeria. This research establishes the fact that although Augustine's privation theory may be suitable for the strengthening of one's faith in God, its uncritical application in all aspects of life does not help persecuted Christians to relate sensibly to their experience. It therefore advocates a balanced position that strengthens trust in God, as well as the utilization of human potential in response to persecution.

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**Keywords:** All-lovingness, God, Christians in Nigeria, Persecution, Augustine's Privation Theory.

## **Introduction**

Persecution is a fact of life for millions of Christians across the globe. By way of definition, persecution is the act of harassing, oppressing, or killing people because of their difference from society (Barrett 693). This definition readily suggests that the one being persecuted is usually considered to have an identity at odds with others within the same social class. It could imply that the persecuted are considered to behave contemptuously of the accepted norms and traditions of the people, and subversive against constituted authority. While the quality of subversion is not usually a regular attribute, disparity in identity is essential. Identity in this sense does not refer to physical appearance or genealogy, but distinctive and defining habits and characteristics that are foundational to one's belief system. In the case of Christians, rejection of other gods because of their faith and confession of Christ as the only begotten Son of God in whom man's redemption and eternal life is guaranteed is undoubtedly an exclusive identity marker. From the first century A.D until today, Christians have become the primary victims of persecution and martyrdom. In Acts of the Apostles, Luke records accounts of the persecution and martyrdom of some Christians, including: the martyrdom of Stephen (chapters 6 and 7); Herod's persecution of the Church (chapter 12); the arrest and imprisonment of Paul in Jerusalem and Caesarea (Chapters 21–26). In addition, Eusebius of Caesarea, an early church historian, asserts that Peter and Paul were crucified in Rome, that James, sometimes called "James the Just," was thrown down from the parapet of the temple in Jerusalem and beaten to death with a fuller's club, and that James the son of Zebedee was beheaded (72). Post-Apostolic Christians who are often remembered for suffering persecutions and martyrdom include: Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Cyprian of Carthage, Perpetua of Carthage, Irenaeus of Lyon, Felicity of Carthage, and others.

Apart Christians experiencing persecution perpetuated them by external forces, early centuries Christianity witnessed what could be term internal conflicts owing to doctrinal difference. Such conflicts were between Orthodoxy and perceived heretic movements including Gnoticism, Arianism, Nestorianism, Marcionism, and others. Whether such conflict could be termed intra-Christian persecution is still a matter of scholarly debate. In our age, persecution of Christians is also rampant and severe. In January 2020, *Open Doors* (4), an international NGO advocating on behalf of persecuted Christians, released their annual *World Watch List*. *The World Watch List* provides an assessment of 50 countries where Christians face the most severe types of persecution. At the very top of the list are countries which show extreme levels of persecution: North Korea, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen, Iran, India, Nigeria, and Syria. Indeed, in the reporting period:

Over 5,500 churches have been destroyed, closed down or confiscated. In India, Christian minorities are subjected to extreme persecution which manifested in at least 1,445 physical attacks and death threats against Christians in 2019. In Nigeria, in 2019, approximately 1,350 Christians were killed for their faith.

The *World Watch List* 2020 does not give much hope for the persecuted communities, (7). Indeed, it presents a grim picture of the situation of Christians globally making it very clear that the persecution encountered by Christians continues to get worse. The report identifies that "in 2020, 260 million Christians live in 50 countries where Christianity is at risk of high,

very high or extreme levels of persecution. This is up from 245 million in 2019.” The report also emphasized some important, negative changes within global trends on the persecution of Christians. In the face of this reality, the question that continually begs for answer for ages is “why God would expose Christians (His faithful and lovely children) to such experience?” Blaming God for evil or defending Him has proven disoriented with the enormity of the reality of persecution, hence, the need for an alternative approach is advanced by this paper.

### **God and His Attribute of Love**

Within the theistic tradition, God is conceived as the Supreme Being, the only being worthy of worship because he is uniquely perfect. By its etymology, the terms used for the main ways of thinking about God are formed around the Greek word for God, Θεός *theos* and its Latin equivalent, *deus*. Θεός according to *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* primarily refers to “a transcendent being who exercises extraordinary control in human affairs or is responsible for bestowal of unusual benefits, deity, god, goddess” (Danker, 450). St. Anselm in his popular *Proslogion* describes God as “a Being than which nothing greater can be conceived” (Anselm, 45). This requires that whatever qualities are attributed to God, He must possess them to an absolute and ultimate degree. Hence, it is not just that God is the greatest conceivable Being but rather, being ascribed with such attributes, must possess all conceivable qualities to the greatest conceivable extent. Among those qualities traditionally applied to God, three stand out: God must be all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient) and all-good (omnibenevolent). These qualities however, are not the only attributes that have been so ascribed. Amongst others, it has been claimed that God’s existence must be independent of any other existences. God is accordingly a ‘necessary’ being, distinguishable from the ‘contingent’ beings of his creation. Also, Itene explains that God must be incapable of experiencing emotions or passions (and so impassible); that he must be independent both of matter (and so immaterial) and of time (and so eternal), and incapable of change (and so immutable) (17). By these explanations the existence of God is already inferred as well as His transcendence. By His transcendence we mean that God is above man and above the world in everything. He is neither a stranger to this world as with deism nor is he to be confused with the world as with pantheism. Amongst theistic believers, the belief in the existence of God who possesses the above listed attributes is most often indubitably taken for granted.

However, the fact of evil as a ubiquitous, and personal experience of same have also affected some believers resuscitation from their seeming “dogmatic slumber”. This awakening naturally arouses in them a query about the rationale to believe in God, and the rationality to continue to believe in God; a supreme being, who is highly held to be all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good in the face of seemingly needless suffering. The question that often begs for answer is; why an all-loving God would allow or expose His lovely children to suffering and persecution? Put it differently, why should evil happen to innocent (good) people with the full awareness of the omnipotent and omnibenevolent God? Such inquiry and reflection is usually associated with the theological, religious, and philosophical problem of evil. Udofia et al. (157), simplifies the problem of evil as a philosophical critique which emphasizes the inconsistency in the nature of God at the instance of the reality of evil, thus posing challenges on the traditional theological beliefs about God.

### **God's Attribute of Love in Christianity**

Among Christians, the term 'love' enjoys popularity of usage and emphasis in families, communities, association and so on. This is because of its value in human relational affairs. Love is loosely characterized amongst Christians because of the conviction that its true meaning is perfectly epitomized in the person of God. It is on the strength of this premise that Etuk and Etuk (57), conclude that "the Bible in its entirety is described as God's love letter to mankind". Hence, for Christians the term 'love' in its perfect form can be interchangeable with the person of God. The following biblical expressions substantiate this point; "He who does not love does not know God; for God is love (*agape*)" (1John 4:8, 16, RSV), "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*)" (Psalm 145:8, RSV), "Greater love (*agape*) has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friend" (John 15:13 RSV), "But God proves His love (*agape*) for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8 RSV), "For God so loved (*agape*) the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16 RSV). The Greek language and culture identify three (3) types of love, namely: *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. *Eros* is erotic or sexual attraction or affection to another person. *Philia* is a sort of love between siblings, friends, parents and children. *Agape* is the God type of love for mankind. Appraising the love of God for sinful mankind, Etuk and Etuk (61), submit; "*Agape* is loving until it hurts." Here an unconditional, selfless and sacrificial nature of God's love which manifests in creation and providence, and redemption of mankind is already inferred.

The entire narrative of the Bible is an encapsulation of these two events; creation/divine providence, and redemption. In creation, mankind (*Adam*) apart from other creatures was privileged to share an identity with his Creator by being "made in the image of God". Also, God proved His providence by evidence of the sufficiency in the Garden of Eden. When this dignity was lost in the Fall, God took the initiative to restore it in the act of redemption. The whole process of rescuing mankind from the bondage of sin and eternal damnation through the sacrificial work of Christ known as sacrificial atonement is a profound manifestation of God's love for man. The sacrificial death of Christ is the pick of God's love for man. This narrative of God's love is known in philosophical and religious discourse as God's omnibenevolence. Philosophically, God as omnibenevolence is understood and seen as God who is all-good, and all-loving at all-times. Within the context of God's omnibenevolence, His omnipotence and omniscience are already presumed. This is because if God must be all-good then He must not be limited in power or knowledge of any sort to exercise His goodness. Therefore, to be omnibenevolence infers ultimately omnipotent and omniscient. This necessarily follows that, since God is all-good and all-loving, accordingly, He must act always in ways that are absolutely ultimate. That is, His actions or inactions are expected to be the best possible approach in any prevailing circumstance. This implies also that plausibly, if there is no best option or action available, for the sake of His lovely children, He must necessarily change the events, situations, and circumstances. Consequently, if possible and when necessary, He is trusted to bring about the state of affairs that are both determinable and creatable as well as optimal within the limitations of physical reality.

Therefore, when Christians speak of their God as being omnibenevolent, the above points are the expectations they have in Him. These expectations are founded on divine categorical assertions and imperatives such as: "It is the Lord who goes before you; he will be with you, he will not fail you or forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed" (Deut. 31:8 RSV), "...I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children" (Isa. 49:25

RSV). "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7 RSV) and many similar promises of providence. Consequently, when Christians experience suffering and persecution, the import of such experience on them transcends beyond the academic level of mere contraries between divine attributes and the existence of evil. Indeed, whenever one experiences suffering, the first and immediate emotion the experience naturally arouses in every Christian is a feeling of disappointment and doubt in God. Not even the best of Christians has overcome such feeling. For instance, John the Baptizer who had earlier declared Christ as the Messiah (John 1:29) became doubtful of the messianic identity when Jesus failed to rescue or even visit him in prison. John sent this message to Jesus, expressing his seeming disappointment in him; "Are you the Messiah (redeemer), or should we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3). Also, Job cursed the day he was born when his suffering became unbearable (Job 3:1). This is the reality surrounding the concept of divine benevolence.

### **Instances of Persecution of Christians in Nigeria**

It will be an onerous task to give a complete synopsis of instances of persecution of Christians in Nigeria given the fact that Christians in Nigeria are persecuted almost daily, especially after Governor Ahmed Sani Yerima declared Sharia Law in Zamfara State in 1999 (Hammed and Egbewole 369), and the advent of Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen subsequently. However, for reason of currency and precision of the work, some of the instances of persecution of Christians in recent times are documented here. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January, 2025 according to Balog (1), "Islamist extremists attacked Christian communities in Nigeria's Middle Belt. It was one of the worst massacres that claim 47 lives." A year before, killing of Christians was reported in the same State at the Gboko Diocese of the Roman Catholic Church. Such incident of massacre of Christians on the very glorious and happy day of Christmas could be very disheartening. Accordingly, *Aid to the Church in Need* (ACN) added that the militants also "burnt down eight Catholic Churches including, St. Mary's Parish, as well as the parish house, clinics, schools and other houses." On account of that incident, at least 6800 people were reported missing or displaced from the affected communities. In Borno State on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2025, *Persecution.org* (International Christian Concern) reported:

Boko Haram is escalating attacks on Christian communities in Chibok, Borno state, displacing more than 4,000 Christians in recent days. In a series of coordinated raids, Boko Haram targeted the Christian villages of Njila, Banzir, Shikarkir, and Yirmirmug, burning homes, torching churches, and killing five people. During the most recent attack on Monday, terrorists descended on Shikarkir and Yirmirmug in the early morning, displacing more than 1,500 residents.

Eyewitnesses account provided in that report included the fact that "Boko Haram militants targeted Christians during these raids, intimidating them and demanding they convert to Islam or face death." The violence destroyed Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa, a church, and the loss of livestock, food supplies, and livelihoods. On the February 14, 2025, the *Baptist Press* reported that "about 50 Christians were killed, dozens kidnapped and homes destroyed since late January in several attacks spanning southern to northern Nigeria." The publication also included a report that in the month of January 2025, at least three pastors were killed in attacks in Kaduna and Gombe states. Some of the major incidents of Christian attack highlighted in the report included; the killing of Rev Bala Galadima, an Evangelical Church

Winning All (ECWA) pastor, in an attack at his home in Lubo, Gombe State, on February 9, 2025, the killing of Rev Bitrus Saleh still of ECWA, was kidnapped along with three other Christians in Majagada village on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, 2025 by suspected Fulani militants.

Similarly, on the February 12, 2025, *Persecution.org* (1) reported that, “at least 22 Christians were killed in series of attacks on villages in Plateau state, Nigeria when armed groups occupied Christian communities in Mangu Local Government Area, the hometown of Plateau State Governor, Caleb Mutfwang, preventing residents from accessing their homes, farms, and places of worship. The affected Christians were shown on record lamenting over the loss of their loved ones, destruction of their homes, farms (their major source of livelihood) and their place of worship. On the 26 of July, 2025 the *National Public Radio* NRP (an American based international broadcasting firm) reported the brutal killing of 160 people in Yelwata community of Benue State. Highlighting the excruciating impact of the incident, NRP (1) laments:

Villagers scrub streaks of blood from the walls of brick huts and barns. Others still search through torched sacks of crops, clothes and scattered belongings, to salvage what they can, weeks after the massacre. Dozens of attackers stormed the farming village of Yelwata in Benue state—Nigeria’s fertile breadbasket—killing at least 160 people. Armed with rifles, machetes and fuel, they struck as families slept. The assault, one of the deadliest in recent memory, sparked outrage from religious leaders and lawmakers around the world.

Although NRP attributed the cause of the massacre to the deepening crisis between farmers and herders in northern Nigeria, it also described Yelwata as Christian community, thus alluding to the possibility of the massacre being motivated by some religious factors. However, some scholars are skeptical about describing the killing of Christians in Northern Nigeria as a form of persecution. They prefer squeezing the experience into a more secular and global phenomena like violence and insecurity. For instance, Olusakin and Sibani (56), apart from swiftly avoiding the use of the term “persecution” in describing the unfortunate killings of Christians in Nigeria, carefully debated the attribution of such killings to religious differences. They argue, “Many factors contribute to insecurity and violence in Nigeria. They are socio-political, socio-economic and socio-religious”(58). The prefix “socio” to all the identified causes stated above to contextualizes or limits all incidents of ‘insecurity’ in Nigeria to some social factors. This is a subtle way of saying that even some conflicts with religious coloration are primarily motivated by social factors. However, contrary to the views of Olusakin and Sibani, Williams Abba unequivocally stated that the killing of Christians in northern Nigeria is a clear case of persecution. He attributed the root cause of persecution to; a global rise in radical or fanatical Islam, poor Islamic theological education, and the quest by Islamic scholars and politicians to persecute Christians for the gains of political and religious dominance in the country (Abba 33). Nevertheless, while debate remains an academic issue, the existential implications of the persecution of Christians in northern Nigeria cries aloud for concern. In the face of these calamitous incidents, one cannot help but wonder how much toll such incident has taken on their physical and mental health. Also, how that has influenced their faith and love for God, and their general perception of life, and most essentially why God would allow His lovely children to suffer such agony repeated.

### **God's Love and the Reality of Persecution: The "Why" Question**

Although, some pastoral theologians like John Pless have argued that whenever anyone is faced with persecution on his own part or the part of others, a philosophical argument is often the last thing such a person wants to hear. In his words, "agonizing inquiry like the "Why" question may appear irritatingly superficial at the instance of suffering"(6). Accordingly, Long (75) opined that, "what usually appeal to the heart most are compassion and empathy, and the proper response may simply be to listen and try to share the other's grief and questions." Following Pless and Long's positions, we are persuaded to believe that at the experience of evil such as persecution the problem of evil calls more for pastoral care than for a philosophical debate. Perhaps, that may be true at least from a pastoral perspective. However, David Hume's analysis of one's disposition as a Christian in the face of agony affirms that asking the "Why" question (a philosophical inquiry) is inevitably natural. Hume (524) opined:

Each man feels, in a manner, the truth of religion within his own breast and from a consciousness of his imbecility and misery, rather than from any reasoning, is led to seek protection from that Being, on whom he and all nature is dependent. I am indeed persuaded that the best and indeed the only method of bringing everyone to a due sense of religion, is by just representations the misery and wickedness of men.

With this assertion, David Hume declares suffering, first as an undeniable and unavoidable reality of life. Second, he alludes to suffering as a factor associated with religious belief and identity. As Christians, the experience of persecutions conflicts with our deepest convictions and expectation about God for love, protection and care. It arouses fundamental reflections which challenges the reasonability of our belief in God whom we consider all-loving and all-powerful, in addition to other virtuous qualities. The imports and implications of such reflections cannot be undermined. The mystery then is how to unravel the reasonability of God in permitting His beloved children to be subjected to all forms of persecution, when He has all the powers and "love" to stop same. In reaction to this perplexity, philosophers and theologians have passed the following verdicts on God:

- i. **God is not the Creator of this Wicked World:** Gnosticism is a first century Christian sect which was later considered heretic because of its supra-biblical nature of explaining natural realities. According to Castillo (2), "Gnosticism comes from the Greek word *"gnosis"* which means to know or knowledge." One of the realities that occupied the interest of the Gnostics was the existence of evil in the world. Wondering the source of evil in the world said to be created by a perfect God, the Gnostics filed a suit for logical inconsistent against any attempt to associate the creation of this with an infinitely wise, perfect, powerful and just deity. They accuse the Christians for dragging their God to hopeless state of logical contradiction, by their confession of Him as both Creator and Father Almighty. Accordingly, Shahbazi (16) argues that, to the Gnostics, based on the apparent imperfection of the world, the conclusion is self-evident that God Almighty; perfect and just, cannot be the creator of this imperfect world. Setting the premises for their argument, the Gnostics among other views holds that there is an irreconcilable separation between matter and spirit, the former being totally evil, the latter being purely holy. The world they say is completely constitutive of matter which explains the cause of the attendant evil in it. On those premises they submit that the world could not have been created by a holy, perfect, and just God, rather it was created by a lesser god

whom the world is a reminiscence of his imperfection. The creator they called "Demiurge". On the strength of this argument, Christians are fixed with a dilemma. They either admit that their Almighty God is not the creator of this imperfect world, or to accept the logical contradiction of a "Perfect God" creating an imperfect world. The Gnostic position though very old still command popularity in modern time of its logical consistency. However, for the Christians, admitting any part of this dilemma will obviously rob God of his identity and dignity as the Creator Almighty.

- ii. **God has Abandoned the World:** Another way to account for evil in the world created by a perfect God is the consolation of one's self with the conviction that God has abandoned the world after creation. This position is rooted in deism. According to Umoh (45), "Deism is a religious view which affirms the existence of God and His status as the creator of the world, but at the same time denying his interference or intervention in the course of its development or progress." The implication of this view as Duzgun (888, cf, Umoh 45), noted is that "God has no hand in the running of the universe after creation. God only traces the route of his creation but does not accompany them in their journey." For the deist therefore, the universe is on its own after creation. Similarly, suffering resulting from either moral or natural causes is assumed to be influenced by natural laws to which God left the functioning of the world unto. J. L. Mackie is famous for the advancement of the view in contemporary era. In his work *Evil and Omnipotent*, Mackie (206-7) argues that it is logically inconceivable to admit both the existence of God and the existence of evil at the same time. He argues:

The good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.

Therefore, by inference from Mackie, the acceptance of persecution as an existential reality is technically an announcement that God may not exist or if He does exist, He has abandoned the world. This position strongly suggests to Christians a humanistic approach to persecution. That is, when experiencing persecution and other forms of suffering, they need not lament to anyone including God. Rather, they should hold their destiny in their hand, and make effort to defend themselves. This also, implies that Christians should accept persecution as their fate and be ready to endure its ordeal, or change the narrative by fighting back. The "God has abandoned the world" ideology is absolutely in sync with contemporary humanistic philosophy where man is challenged to accept his rightful position as the master of his own destiny and the measure of all thing. But has God really abandoned the world? That is a question for philosophical debate.

- iii. **God must be forgiven for the Evil in the World:** In the 19<sup>th</sup> century an American Psychologist and Philosopher, William James opined that evil is indeed real, but God lacks the power to remove it. James' dilemma is that either God is able to remove it but chooses not to, or God wishes to remove evil but lacks the power to do so. Either way, God's goodness and omnipotence is put to test. To James, it is absolutely unthinkable profoundly contradictory to the identity of God, conceiving that God is wanting in benevolence. Consequently, James accents the second proposition. Asserting that God in His benevolent would naturally wish to remove evil, but obviously lacks the power to

do so. This point is elaborated in Rabbi Harold Kushner's best-seller book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* published in 1981. The book is an anguish-laden attempt of the Rabbi to come to terms with a painful illness that claimed the life of his young son. Struggling with issues of God's providence and mercy, creation and chaos, the Rabbi can finally only conclude that those who suffer must "forgive God." Believing that God's intentions might be good, but that His power is limited seems to be a better solution than calling into question His goodness (16; Cf. Pless 6). Both James and Kushner's arguments resonate with the tenet of a third century philosophical cum religious movement, Manichaeism. "Manichaeism teaches that the world is an arena in which two opposing cosmic forces incessantly contend, one good, and the other evil" (Coyle 8). Therefore, in response to the reality of evil, the Manichean submits, "God is doing the best he can against evil but find himself facing an independent opponent as formidable as he" (Biegalska 95). The religious term for such view and other related ones is Dualism. However, the exclusivity of divine attributes such as; incorruptibility, inviolability, and immutability and so on, are a strong testament against the notion of two beings with opposing moral identity having those attributes. Nonetheless, the reality of evil seems to furnish Manichaeism with existential justification for its belief. In the face of such demeaning appraisal of God, believers and Christians in particular are left with the challenge of deciding whether their God is lacking in love or lacking in power, since it is natural to conceive that He cannot possess both in absolutism yet allow evil in the world.

### **Augustine's Privation Theory: Damage Control**

Privation theory is credited to Saint Augustine of Hippo (13<sup>th</sup> December 354 to 28<sup>th</sup> August 430 AD). Saint Augustine was exposed to the agonizing reality of persecution that seemed to define Christianity in that era. Christians were generally rejected as unenlightened and uneducated religious fanatics, who practiced cannibalism and incest (González 27). There were also an institutional disapproval and repudiation of Christianity as an illicit religion. Christianity's status as an "illegal religion" (*religio illicita*) enabled the then Roman government to sanction the killing of Christians by anyone including non-government officials. Such killing was usually justified by a '*liturgia*' (worship or service) to the Roman gods and a propellant for divine blessing to the State. Instances of such killings provided in both sacred and secular literatures include: stoning of Stephen (Acts 6), incessant killing of Christians by Saul (Acts 9), crucifixion of Peter and Paul in Rome, persecution of Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna (Litfin 45).

Indeed, such unfortunate reality of persecution which apparently subjected God's omnibenevolence to rational test motivated Augustine's interest on the reality of evil. On a general note, the difficulty associated in confessing the divine attributes of God and accepting the reality of evil defines what is called problem of evil. The question then was; how can an omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient God allow His lovely children to suffer the affliction of evil when he has the power to stop same? But for Augustine, a privation theory of evil holds that evil originated from man's abuse of his free will, and can be said to be non-existent because it lacks substance in created reality. This was not only an answer to the problem of evil but a clarification of terms before dealing with the problem (Jiang 2). A careful study of some of the major works of Augustine such as; *Confession*, *City of God*, *Freedom of the Will*, and *Enchiridion* in which he addressed this reality attest to this fact. In his writings, one can readily see in him, a philosopher and a theologian, who was not merely interested in the logical or intellectual exercise or debate concerning the problem of

evil, but also engrossed with the task of consoling physically, emotionally, and psychologically bastardized people whose life or existence had no worth in the eyes of their persecutors. Such consolation Augustine believed must be characterized by a proper definition of evil, elucidating the fact about its origin, and a testament about the place of God in the face of it.

Consequently, for the definition of evil, Augustine said it is a privation (absence) of good (Augustine 12). To say that evil is privation is to believe that all evil reduces down to a lack something that should be there. "Thus, for a human, blindness is a privation, but a lack of wings is not" (Collins 2). On this model, evil is an absence of due goodness, rather than a positive, independent existing thing. In the opinion of Collins (2), "Evil, according to this view, is metaphysically and perhaps epistemologically parasitic on good. Situating his definition within the context of creation, Augustine argued that evil has no substance in existence; meaning that evil does not truly exist (Augustine 97). This is because to Augustine, existence is grounded in creation, which means that anything that could be said to exist must have necessarily had an instance in creation. Evidently therefore, Augustine concludes that evil was not part of God's creation because at the completion of creation account God appraised all creature as good and devoid of evil. For Augustine, to be is to be good. "A thing "is" only insofar as it is good, and insofar as it is not good as it could or should be, it *is not*." Hence, evil came in subsequently as a corruption of the good nature of God's creation through man's abuse of his freewill. This abuse is traceable to the narrative of man's fall according to Genesis 3. With the above argument, Augustine dismissed the Gnostics claim that the world is too imperfect to be a creation of a perfect God who is full of love and power. According to Augustine, the world was created perfect. However, seeming imperfection in the world came through man's sin which resulted from the abuse of his freewill (Augustine 131). In his analysis of God's love, Augustine gave a subtle attack on erroneous claims that God has abandoned the world, and that He must be forgiven having the good will to save mankind but lacking the power to do so. In his words; "The love of God is broader than the measure of man's mind" (Paul 2). The argument here is that the Gnostic conclusion is erroneous because it is limited to what Augustine called "Human Perspectival Prejudice."

Perspectival prejudice suggests that human beings by their finitude nature are confided to assessing their problem in life from a narrow and myopic perspective. Having a broad view of human problem will include assessing God's reason(s) for allowing suffering and pain, although we may not fully comprehend the meaningfulness of such reason(s). From this premise Augustine concludes that indeed, there is no pointless evil in the world. God does not allow evil to exist because he lacks the power to stop it but because he has a reason for allowing it. To every "evil" there is an implicit good. In his *Enchiridion* Augustine asserts "God is so powerful that He can even make good out of evil" (6). In sum, Augustine recognizes that there are many things we call evil which are not truly evil. This is because we often take a limited view of the world, comparing certain things to others, focusing on how certain things are destructive of others. Because our common conception of evil involves disharmony, we are led by our limited perspective to apply the term "evil" to things that appear, from our limited vantage point, disharmonious even though they are, in the grand scheme of things, perfectly harmonious with the natural order. Therefore, the claims that the existence of evil implies the non-existence of God or that he allows evil in the world because he lack the power to stop it could best be described as a subject of man's limited understanding of realities around him, without any recourse to sound reasoning. After all, according to Evans (139), "It is hard to see how finite human beings, with our imperfect and

selected understanding of the ultimate meaning and pattern of the universe could claim to know that any evil is utterly pointless.”

When confronted with the question: Why would God create man with natural proclivity to do evil through the gift of freewill? Augustine argues in his book, *Confessions*, that man was created perfect. The creation of man with freewill and the consequent ability to do both good and evil is the true identity and uniqueness of man in comparison with other creatures (195). God’s purpose for giving free will to man was not to expose him to the possibility of choosing to do evil, but to make him unique and morally responsible. He adds that if God stops us from exercising our freewill even in choosing evil, our freedom is denied, and then we would not even be able to do good (Augustine 131). Hence, it is better that God allows us to be free even though our freedom has resulted in evil. God’s goodness and omnipotence are compatible with the existence of evil in the world.

### **The Weakness of Augustine’s Privation Theory**

Augustine’s Privation theory can be summarized with the following propositions:

- i. Evil as a privation means it is lacking in substance.
- ii. Evil originated from man’s abuse of free will therefore man and not God is to blame for evil in the world.
- iii. God has a purpose for allowing evil in the world.

No doubt, this position has a therapeutic advantage on the believers. This is because, by claiming that evil does not have substance in existence, Christians are pacified not to concentrate their emotions on the fact of evil in the world which is transient, and evident in the fact that one can be sick now, but gets well the next moment. Augustine’s privation encourages believers to keep trusting in God’s omnibenevolence especially given the fact that the seemingly imperfection in the world was not part of God’s creation and plan for mankind. Also, his privation theory provides that God has desirable purpose for allowing His beloved children to experience evil, thus building a ray of hope even in the face of unfortunate circumstances. However, Augustine’s privation is unfortunately lacking in a realistic and intentional approach to the problem of evil. The bottom line is the weakening of man’s proper sense of engagement with the reality around him. Let us analyze these points diligently. In relation to the claim that evil lacks substance in reality, this presupposes it non-existence; that may be obvious to any persons with an average philosophical acumen, the explicit weakness of this argument is a sharp disintegration of the union between substance and existence. If existence and reality could only be associated with the things that were created, how do we account for emotional feelings of love, affection or pain and hate?

Indeed, this position plays down on the relevance of human emotions to the overall well-being of the human person. This view apart from its tardy attack on realism as a fact limited to creation. It is an artful attempt to undermine the principle of idealism which accents the importance of the mind; the act of comprehending reality. If the existence of evil which in most cases is merely felt emotionally is considered non-existent then the reality of the suffering especially when experienced by others will be approached not with the required compassionate spirit of love and empathy. Insensitivity to the ordeals faced by others will enjoy a glorious ascension. Here, we will succeed in creating a world not different from Thomas Hobbe’s ‘State of nature’ or Charles Darwin’s ‘Natural Society’ where life becomes insecure, brutal, nasty, and short (Sheikh et al. 41), because the value of social existence and co-existence is abnegated by principle of survival of the fittest. Thus, no proactive measure toward the amelioration of human experience could be advanced.

### **Finding a Balance**

It is unarguably true that a philosophical discussion on the reality of evil, especially at the instance of such brutal killing of Christians may not really be an interesting line of conversation. No one who is faced with the excruciating effects of persecution would be interested in the claim that evil is unreal, or even the atheistic view that God does not exist because evil does. Indeed, such conversation could be rightly considered the height of one's insensitivity to another's plight and a trait of sadism. This is how often Augustine's privation could sound to people who feel the hurt of evil. Privation could readily be concluded as a philosophical or theological disposition which is completely detached from human reality. Notice also that faithful Christians at the instance of persecution would not quickly appreciate a proposition that directly undermines their faith in God no matter how grievous such attack might be especially given the conviction that persecution is a moral evil. If through religious experience and revelation, a Christian had come to know God as a loving and good being, he would not only have evidence that God is not the cause of persecution, suffering, pain, and other evils in the world but also that He has reasons for allowing evil, even if he does not know what those reasons are. In fact, to faithful Christians all through ages, Christianity has never supposed that God's purpose in the creation of the world was to contrast a paradise whose inhabitants would experience a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of persecution. The world to them is a pathway to eternal bliss and not the place of such bliss.

In the words of a second century Greek Church Father, Irenaeus (145) "The world is a place of 'soul making' or 'person making' in which free beings, grapple with the tasks and challenges of their existence in a common environment, may become "children of God" and heirs of eternal life." This implies that there is no guarantee of a total state of fulfillment in this world, human life in the world is in a state of transition to the ideal world. This implies that, in contrast to the philosophical conversation around the reality of evil, which seeks to either defend or blame God, Christians must be encouraged to accept persecution as reality inevitable and intrinsic to their identity. Jesus said, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19 ESV). Such a statement which identifies Christians as people not at par with others naturally raises the question of identity. What does it mean to be a Christian? Particularly, what does it mean to be a Christian in the midst of other religions especially in Northern Nigeria? For Christians, their faith in Christ as the only condition for having a relationship with God and the only path to eternal life is an exclusive identity marker. This implies that just as Christ was hated because of His messianic identity, Christians are bound to experience such hatred for their identity as Christians. Such experience does not negate God's benevolence, or imply His impotence or ineptitude, but stresses the overriding corruption in this world to the extent of accenting the inestimable value and necessity of eternal life in heaven. On the other hand, in the spirit of pragmatism, Christians in the affected areas have the constitutional rights to call on the government of Nigeria that is obligated by the Constitution for protection of life and the property of the citizens to be sensitive and proactive to their safety and security. Blaming God or defending Him offers no meaningful solution to the reality of persecution in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Evidently, neither Augustine's privation theory which seems to play down the reality and gravity of human suffering nor the atheistic argument which demeans the person of God and

the sensibility of believing in Him could really console and give hope to persecuted Christians. Our proposal is a pragmatic approach to persecution. This approach involves accepting persecution as an existential reality inherent in Christianity and consoling oneself with an eternal hope. The position of this paper therefore is in agreement with Lewis (45) on the subject of God's Omnipotence. Omnipotence means the possession of an unlimited right and freedom to do anything; hence, God's omnipotence is not undermined if he allows suffering, but same could be undermined when in our desire to be free from the experience of suffering pushes hard to condition Him in order to always make Him to act in tune with our perceptions and desire. Such a God whose existence and functionality are determined by finite beings will certainly not be worthy of worship. Let God be God!

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