

# Nigerian Women and their Perception of Miraculous

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## ABSTRACT

*There seems to be something of the divine in women when it comes to being committed to issues. Once they are convinced, they can spend and be spent without counting the cost. This is the fruit of their God-given tenderness as mothers. However, if by error a woman gets committed to a wrong issue or wrongly committed to a right issue, then there will be disaster because normally they are unstoppable. Using a critical and expository philosophical approach, the paper turns its searchlight towards the typical Nigerian women's attitude towards their perception the miracle.*

**Keywords:** *Women, miraculous perception*

## INTRODUCTION

We have decided to start this little write-up with the words of an old Jewish Rabbi: "anyone who does not believe in miracle is an atheist; one who believes too much in it is an idiot." Miracle is a very topical issue in Nigeria today. One needs to just turn on one's television, switch on one's radio set, cast a glance at banners or billboards decorating all parts of our towns or look at the hundreds of newspaper advertisements to be convinced that the reality under discussion is not only contemporary, but very much at home with us. Miracle centers, spiritual "laboratories", healing homes are the most advertized commodities in Nigeria today. The innumerable billboards and sign posts bear ample testimonies to this fact: Today something must either be a miracle otherwise it is nothing or would not merit any attention.

In other words, we are living in a country where miracle is everything and everything is miracle. We are finding ourselves in a setup where every pastor is expected to be a thaumaturgist otherwise he is not qualified to be 'a servant of God.' The situation is approaching sheer madness. Must every priest be a healer? Yes, of course. Must every priest be a medical practitioner or midwife? The answer is emphatically 'no'. Whoever thinks otherwise must be joking with something very serious; but that is actually the case with Nigeria where "not to be seen performing a miracle or claiming that you can make a mighty ocean run dry in the religious circle today, may be described by some

ignorant religious zealots that such a person is not “a charismatic priest or pastor” (Dedua, 2002). Taking all sicknesses to be spiritual is as dangerous as taking no sickness to be spiritual. It is here that lays the crux of the matter: Are all claims to miracles legitimate? Does it not seem that some of them are manipulations for selfish motives? Are true miracles still possible today? Do people sit down to reason about the inconsistencies and contradictions they at times walk themselves into, before they actually give in to miracle claims? In today’s world does the craze and unnecessary craving for miracles not throw many into the hands of fake miracles workers? Do many false claims of miracle not jeopardize the authentic and orthodox tenets of religious belief? Who are the most exploited? And who are the exploiters? In very many cases, believers in miracles do not even know what they believe in or what they are yearning for; they do not agree about what really a miracle is – what really constitutes a miracle. Some do not know and do not care to find out what its aim is and the role miracles play in their religious lives.

### **Conceptions and Misconceptions**

Listening to testimonies from those who purportedly have benefited from miracles one thing becomes indisputable: There is no unanimity concerning what miracles are all about. People do not know what they are in search of in the name of miracles. The meaning, significance and implications of the miraculous are taken for granted; each person has his conception, understanding and definition. Common to all these understandings of miracle are the undertone that the miraculous episode is a spectacular event (even if unthinkable) performed by God *just to prove that He God is my powerful protector against my enemies*. Even if it means promising a credulous believer that God would miraculously change the only one Naira, the local Nigerian currency that he has into billions of dollars at a twinkling of an eye, people would still believe especially if they are the prospective beneficiaries. The only survivor in an accident in which all others died would cry alleluia for a miracle performed in his favour forgetting the others that have perished.

### **Defining Miracle**

It was Aristotle, the Philosopher, who insisted that for any discussion to be fruitful, all involved must agree on the use of terms. Accordingly, definitions are of great necessity, especially for discussions of this nature. Though those fully involved in ‘miracles’ scarcely give a thought about definitions and meanings of the term, scholars find in them powerful indispensable tools for fruitful discussions. We define words according to the use we want to make of them. When David Hume, an empiricist defined miracle he did so with his entire

empiricist project in mind: namely to demonstrate the feebleness and fallibility of the human mind in the face of non-empirical realities. Hence he warns reason to beware of its “temerity when she pries into these sublime mysteries”; advising her to leave a scene so full of obscurities and perplexities (and) return “with suitable modesty, to her true and proper province, the examination of common life”. Hume (1975) then defines miracle with the intention of denying its reality thus: “A miracle may be accurately defined, *a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent*”. Generally a miracle is said to be “an extraordinary event, which is perceptible to the senses, effected by God and functional within a religious context as a sign of the supernatural” (Pater, 1967).

Though it can be argued that this particular definition may not agree with many others in terms of their strictness or looseness in usage, yet the basic elements constituting the modern understanding of miracle are more or less present. “Extraordinary” here means that such an occurrence must create a radical and remarkable contrast with the usual and habitual course of nature that people are acquainted with. There must be a disruption of the normal flow of nature that we are conversant with. Therefore miracle presupposes nature as regular and uniform.

*Miracle in the strict sense must show itself not merely as that whose explanation evades us, a prodigy, but really as something which infringes on the law of nature. The very notion of miracle therefore presupposes at least a vague consciousness of the regularity (operation of some order) in nature – a reality which is alleged to be occasionally violated by miracle (Umoh, 1988:33).*

It is because of this characteristic that miracle causes amazement, fascination, astonishment and awe. What is worth taking note of here is that there is no extraordinary without the ordinary. A mere prodigious nature of an occurrence does not make a miracle. Though all miracles are astonishing, not all astonishing events are miraculous. An event can be incomprehensible, astonishing, awe-provoking and inexplicable without being a miracle. There are issues that science is unable to explain today but which it will be able to analyze fully with all ease in the future. That is why science is called an open-ended venture. On its own a prodigy does not make a miracle. This is what many believers have failed to understand. For instance, a particular writer refers to the Genesis creation story as a miracle: “The very story of creation as we read in Genesis is shrouded in mystery. The concept of creation ‘*Ex nihilo*’ has no scientific explanation and as such is miraculous” (Ikpo, 2002). This is ridiculous. So whatever spectacular event science cannot explain must automatically be called miracle.

Another feature of miracle in the definition is perceptibility by at least one of the external senses. This means that a feeling, sentiment or thought, which are very private to individual, may never qualify as miracle no matter how astonishing, because of inaccessibility to the public. A miracle must be public. A third characteristic is that miracle should have divine authorship. God alone can bring about miraculous happenings. What then become of all these noisy preachers (miracle workers) who claim to perform more miracles than their counterparts in favour of their flock? True 'miracle workers' never lay claims to any miracles; they never assign the performance of any miracles to themselves. If at all, they may accept they are mere instruments in the hands of the Creator.

One now sees the danger of people flocking to crusades because it is organized by such or such a man of God, a great miracle worker. At any rate true believers recognize God not only as the author of miracles but of every event in the universe. Anyone who does not recognize God in and through the ordinary would never see his hands in events called miracles, no matter how fascinating. From the definition we can extract another quality belonging to the miraculous; this is religious contextualizing. Miracles are only meaningful and significant within the religious circle or context. They form part and parcel of God's salvific plan. In other words, miracles do not occur to display God's power or as a manifestation of His might or dominion over nature. Neither is it meant to consolidate any pastor in his role as the only reliable servant of God. Rather 'God performs miracles not to astonish or ask for His bewilderment, but to seek His obedience, faith and trust' (Ogbuja, 2002). God uses miracles to teach us in various manners. In performing miracles, God does like a school teacher, who seeing the students distracted and absentminded in class, hits his hand heavily on the table in a bit to recall their attention (Cantalamesa, 1988). Miracles come in a coded language and therefore interpretation is mandatory. The decoded message is always more important and more significant than the unusual occurrence itself.

### **Credulity and Incredulity**

There are many attitudes toward the miraculous, but we shall focus our attention in this paper on two – credulity and incredulity. Credulity and incredulity are two extremes and opposing concepts. Before taking on the implications of these extreme views I would wish to start with the warning of an eighteenth century French Philosopher, Maurice Blondel. He affirms: "Credulity is as harmful, as dangerous and as destructive to faith as incredulity. In other words, someone who believes in just anything, somebody who believes too much is as dangerous as one who believes nothing. A credulous person believes

everything and anything without using his or her God-given reason. Such would be wallowing in contradictions. A typical credulous person argues that since faith is all it takes for salvation, then what is needed is just believe in whatever the man of God says. This involves ignoring totally the intellect and its indispensable role in religious matters. This attitude often refers to Tertulian's dictum is presented thus philosophically: *Credo quia absurdum est*, or *Credo quia impossibile est* – I believe because it is absurd or I believe because it is impossible (Angeles, 1981). The only reason for believing, according to this view is that the reality in question is incomprehensible to reason or appears unclear to ordinary human understanding. I therefore call on faith (which can swallow indiscriminately) to take over.

Here we are in the territory of blind faith, in the department of those who see a black thread more clearly in the dark. According to this view, the only reason why people believe in miracle is that the phenomenon seems absurd to human reason, so faith is brought in just to accept without questioning. For a strong adherent of this group, the best preparation for semester examinations would not be intensifying lessons, frequenting classes or studies, but rather a week long dry fasting to make the impossible possible miraculously. My piece of advice to this group is that God is not a god of confusion. Faith itself is, and in fact must be reasonable otherwise fideism results. There is no faith-free knowledge and there is no knowledge untainted and 'uncontaminated' by faith. Even science is based on trust; belief in the formulae of those who invented theories and experiments.

From the opposite camp are those who believe only whatever is rationally and scientifically provable. Whatever eludes human scrutiny and empirical proof is not real for them. In philosophy they are called rationalists and their doctrine intellectualism. Our message for them is that not everything can be proved empirically. If the brain must be brought out to prove to a certain Thomas that he has one, then that is pure foolhardiness. Such an attitude is what is termed incredulity and at the long run results in the denial of everything about God. This is atheism. They are non-believers, not only in miracles, but also in everything transcendent. Yet we know that religious realities would never subject to laboratory sort of tests and proofs.

Wherever we find ourselves in life, certain things must be taken on faith. Knowledge also involves acceptance on faith. Knowledge involves faith and faith involves knowledge; a person cannot have faith in something of which he is not aware, and he would scarcely claim to be aware of something unless he had faith in the reliability of his powers of apprehension (Burkill, 1963). As John Paul II argues, "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth".

### **To which Camp do women belong?**

From the onset we must guard against generalization. Our intention here is not to single out women for blame or force them into a pre-fabricated mold for judgment simple because they are women. Yet we have to admit that generally each gender has its peculiar fashion of doing things – apprehending, evaluating, appreciating certain realities or reacting to certain issues. And this time our main focus is the womenfolk. Feminist controversies have no place here. Our preoccupation under this heading is really to ask: to which side of the miracle controversy do Nigerian women belong? Even though some cultures consider women to be the weaker sex, experience teaches that universally women are known to be capable of very strong convictions, decisions and tough-mindedness. Often women are stronger believers than men. Once committed they are usually more faithful and more devoted than men, especially in religious matters. Women are consequently more prone to the miraculous than men. The reasons seem obvious. Religion has a lot to do with tenderness, sentiments, emotion and love, without however throwing rationality overboard. Now our concern is how the poor Nigerian women who are devotedly struggling to make ends meet for their families are faring especially in the hands of prosperity gospel preachers invading the country like wild swamps of locust. Especially, as Odiong (1993) has observed that today pastoral efficiency is now synonymous with one's ability to bring about the 'extraordinary' I have touched on this issue elsewhere:

*As a follow up to the above gloomy picture of the Nigerian economy on the masses and the promise of rapid divine interventions, is the compromising preaching of Prosperity Gospel as a breakthrough and liberation from earthly shackles of biting poverty. Such "liberation" constitutes the only understanding of the term miracle as far as Nigerians are concerned. Crusades, conventions and healing sessions are frequented simply because of miracles and pastors are regarded as experts who assault God into yielding to the demands of the miserable (Umoh, 2013: 661).*

Nature has made them this way. From physique through energy, emotions (reaction to sensations: fear, pleasure, anguish etc.) to sentiments, women are different. A woman is more caring and more given to whatever she cherishes. McGrath (1977) paints a beautiful picture of a typical African woman in these words: "In work, she can do 12-15 hours of work daily... In love, her body follows the same pace as her work. Sexual desire is spread through her whole body. It takes time for her to feel sexual desire, but it lasts longer. Woman is

like another fire, slow to start but burning longer”. As we all know, women are often more thorough going than men. It may take more time to get them involved, because of their natural propensities. Yet once convinced and committed, the sky is their limit. Women fellowship is a point in view here and as McGrath observes:

*She sees things linked together. If they have had quarrel the night before her whole day will be spoiled. For her, feeling, mind and body are one. It is almost impossible to give herself only physically... In convictions (beliefs, attitudes) she understands with her heart. She understands persons, situations from the inside; she feels, she senses things. She is generous. She gives herself completely. She can even give her freedom when she loves. She sees god as a Person whom she trusts. She seeks security in God. She goes to God more with her heart. As a whole, she is more changeable, more touched by small things ...she does not make decision once and for all, but changes according to the needs of the people around her (McGrath, 1977:21).*

With all these and many more traits, the mothers are very special when it comes to issues like miracles. In the Bible and history women have shown themselves tough believers. I can only cite the heroic martyrdom of Saints Perpetual and Felicity as examples. With all this dedication and unreserved self-giving, you can imagine a poor Nigerian won't drown in the waves of innumerable claims to miracles, especially by the prosperity gospel preachers. Many Nigerian women do not miss crusades, miracle sessions, tarry nights, anointing and healing services while still professing their faith in their mainline churches. They go there in search of fortune, mostly wealth, health and other material benefits. That is all they expect from whatever miracles preachers are promising. Going to such gathering to worship God or pay him homage is a forgotten issue. In Nigeria women are the most exploited by the impending waves of craze for miracles.

## CONCLUSION

Now here is my message not only for Nigerian women but for all Nigerian Christians. No well-meaning Christian can comfortably deny the reality of miracles. Though we are not bound to believe all claims to miracles, Christians must at least believe at least one miracle, the resurrection of Christ. I also believe in miracles; I am not therefore a fortiori against miracle claims. They happened during the time of Christ; they still happen today. Ironically, anyone

who does not believe in miracles is an atheist; but anyone who sees prodigy everywhere is mentally not balanced. What then should be the attitude of the Nigerian woman in the face of all these noisy advertisers of miracles on media? With the proliferation of miracle claims in our country, there is need to be judiciously prudent. Not only Nigerian women, but all well-meaning Christians should steer a middle course between fanaticism and religious insensitivity. They should agree with Ikpoh (2002) that Christianity is greater than miracles. If miracles are to be accepted, they must be accepted as part of our Christian belief and cannot be made the ground for it. Women should not allow themselves to be exploited and their God-given tender qualities to be interpreted as spiritual fickleness. Miracles, when authentic, are not ends in themselves. They are signs of something greater - the real thing. A true miracle should generate faith, and faith reiterates our covenant/bond with God. Miracle presupposes faith because only faith can recognize miracles. Miracle is only miracle for those who encounter God in ordinary events of nature. Hence, no amount of fascination can convince or convert an obdurate atheist. The miraculous is only an aspect of God's creation. In the area of physical healing, we should know that miracles were not intended to do away with the medical sciences; miracle workers are not physicians. I therefore beg to conclude this write-up with this biblical passage:

*Hold the physician in honour, for he is essential to you, and God it was who established his profession... from God the doctor has his wisdom, God makes the earth yield healing herbs which the prudent man should not neglect. Then give the doctor his place lest he leave; for you need him too. There are times that give him an advantage, and he too beseeches God that his diagnosis may be correct and his treatment brings about a cure. He who is a sinner toward his Maker will be defiant toward the doctor (Eccl. 38: 12, 4, 12-15).*

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