

CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Christian participation in politics and governance has always been a contentious issue. Each view on the involvement of Christians in politics has based its argument on its interpretation of certain New Testament passages that are found to be related to the relationship between Church (sacred) and State (secular). In a pluralistic society as Nigeria, what is the relevance of Christianity as a transformative institution to governance? Toward this end this paper will investigate the relationship between Church and State from history and endeavor to suggest certain factors that must be put into consideration in the approach of the Church in her relationship with the State. With the understanding that things are out of balance, this paper advocates a return to a more biblical model of church in her relationship with the state. The titles used to describe the church in I Peter 2:9 are very significant in this research in order to understand the nature and functions of an ideal Church in its environment. To achieve this, historical and exegetical methods will be employed in carrying out this research. There is nothing in the intrinsic nature of the Church as defined in the scripture that suggests her restraint from contributing to the governance of the State. Christians in Nigeria should understand that the Church and State are inextricable.

Keywords: Christianity, State, Politics, Participation, Model

Introduction

The immediate past President of Nigeria, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, stated during the official opening of the National Christian Campaign on social transformation on the 14th of June 2013 that the society has failed and part of the major factors to this is the Church. In fact, other religions were never mentioned in the speech as part of the factors. He said the Church contributed to the failure because "Bible teachings have been turned upside down". In other words, there is lack of proper understanding among Christians of what the Church should stand for in the society. This failure is the reason, according to him, for robbery, cultism, loss of values; "hard work, respect for elders, truthfulness, contentment... humility, patience, compassion, fairness, love, justice, obedience..."¹

Contrary to the complaint above is the outcry of Christians in Kwara State, Nigeria, on the shameless marginalization of Christians in Kwara State by the government and its

agencies in her Press Conference on 10th of September 2013 at Emmanuel Baptist Church, Sabo-Oke, Ilorin, Kwara State. The facts and figures presented in the conference show that Christians are marginalized in the State's political appointments, in employment, education and other related matters, stating that the Muslims have upper hand in the governance of the state.² This indicates that the Church considers the state to be unfavorable to Christians and not religion as it were.

Osun State Governor, Rauf Adesoji Aregbesola, a Muslim, was also accused by Church community within the state of attempting to Islamize the State. The accusation probably emanated from the impression that the state is a Christian State and so far, Christians have been occupying most of the political posts until in recent times when Muslims are developing interest.³ The Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs and National Council of Muslim Youth Organisation, Ekiti State, issued statements condemning Governor Ayodele Fayose for neglecting Muslims in appointments in favor of Christians.⁴

The factor that determines the relationship between the Church and Nigerian government could be tagged as religious and political. Some states in Nigeria are predominantly Muslim and are governed by them. In such states, Christians feel cheated that they are not given equal percentage in participation in governance or that their opinions are ignored, ditto for Muslims where Christians dominate. Based on the teachings that some Christians have had that politics is a dirty game, many Christians have no interest in partisan politics until recent times. Perhaps this is a reason why the Church has not been particular in grooming a Christian as a political leader that represents the Church even from inception. The problem is Christians who don't have interest in partisan politics desire that the government policies should follow Christian principles. Apart from Christians' involvement in partisan politics, the role of the Church as the prophetic critic of society is neglected today; instead, the chief emphasis is on the healing ministry of the Church, on Christianity as the antidote to anxiety, on the gospel's promise of peace of mind. And some of the few Christians that involve themselves in politics do so for selfish reasons.

This paper endeavors to suggest certain factors that must be put into consideration by the approach of the Church in her relationship with the State. It does not suggest a one sided return to prophetic criticism, that is making destructive criticism, but to call attention to the fact that things are out of balance. Therefore, this paper advocates a return to a more biblical model in the Church's relationship with the State. In order to achieve this, historical and exegetical methods are employed in carrying out this research. The former is necessary in analyzing past experiences of the Church and governments relevant to this work and the latter is important to establish the biblical model as is suggested in this paper.

The Relationship between Church and State

The statement of Jesus in Mark 12:17: "give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's", was accepted by the early Church to mean the existence of two separate orders which has been popularly understood as "the separation between the Church and State", an American conception (the relationship between Church and state in Britain remains mutual). This was not difficult for the early Church to accept because the Roman government did not accept Christianity as a proper religion. This lasted till around A.D 313 under the reign of Constantine who also joined emperor Licinius to issue the edict of Milan, a manifesto of toleration when Christianity was granted full legal right. Subsequently, there was serious tension in the relationship between the two parties when each grew more powerful. The conflict that arose could not be avoided even though both claimed to be Christian and Holy. The difficulty is that the Church and State overlap. In Africa, as inherited from the West, the relationship of Church and State has usually being discussed in terms of the "separation of Church and State," which often suggests that the Church should have no contribution to politics or governance, or that the Church and the State are of separate entities, separate tasks, and an attempt to marry both is thought to be a compromise.⁵ In essence, it is thought that both the State and the Church would better retain their purity and integrity if separate. From the statement of Jesus (Mark 12:17), he never discouraged political participation for the faithful.

Several reasons have been suggested why church and state should be separate. Firstly, it is argued that the church would be tainted if closely identified with a corrupt state or government which will imply loss of her moral authority. Secondly, participation of the church in state politics in a pluralized or secular community would lead to religious conflict which is already on in Nigeria.⁶ Third, participation of the Church in State governance may lead to diverting the primary assignment of the Church, which is spiritual and of eternal value, to pursuance of mundane and temporal things. Hence there are dangers in reducing evangelization to preaching economic and socio-political issues and politicization of the Church. This was emphasized by Pope Benedict XVI that the State is responsible for justice in the society and that the Church is responsible for the religious. Fourth, the responsibility of the Church is simply to obey the constituted authority and not making further contributions to the governance (Romans 13).⁷

In the Second Vatican Council, the subject was well discussed and terms were well defined. According to the council, bishops, priests and the religious are not to participate in politics of the state, but the laity which also belongs to the Church could. "Since the lay person by his or her baptism shares in the priesthood, kingship and prophetic ministry of the Lord Jesus, the involvement of the laity is part of the mission of the Church which is sent into the world as light of the world and salt of the earth."⁸ In Paulinus' interpretation of the Second Vatican Council's decision on the matter under discussion, discouraging involvement of clergy in politics does not mean that the clergy cannot give advice, correct or support an initiative. These must be done without partiality. The

council further states that the individual members of the Church act in many ways to bring about a better world without direct involvement in politics, such as in their daily business activities, belonging to professional bodies that enhance the betterment of the community.⁹ This may be totally applicable in a Christian State where Christianity is seen as the dominant religion and may not be applicable in other States where Christians are struggling for recognition. Priests could take up the responsibility of leadership of a State when necessary.

The shift in the understanding of the scriptural injunction on the relationship between Church and State, encouraging Christian participation in politics, has prompted calls for Nigerian clergy men especially in the southern and northern parts of the country, to participate or be politically active in the governance of Nigeria, a pluralized State. Christians are encouraged to be heavenly conscious by being earthly useful; contributing to the growth and betterment of the temporal abode which is a responsibility to man and it requires accountability. This is reflective in the contribution of a renowned Nigerian Christian clergy, by name, Pastor Tunde Bakare, who noted while having a flash back that “following the return to civil rule, religion has become a major factor in the determination of election outcomes especially since the 2003 elections in which General Muhammadu Buhari first contested for the presidency, as he has often been erroneously associated with religious fundamentalism. The import of this factor got to what some might have thought would be a crescendo in the 2011 elections when, for the first time in Nigeria’s history, a pastor stepped into politics as running mate to General Buhari.”¹⁰ Bakare and Chris Okotie’s involvements in partisan politics have been considered to be in deviance to the position of the Christian Church that the clergy is only expected to be God’s oracle. Barrett’s analysis of models of Church seems to be significant here because it is taken from history. Examining this analysis may help in relating the experience of the Church in Nigeria with the Apostolic and Mediaeval Churches.

Four models of the Church

1. The first model of the church as analyzed here is not first chronologically. It is connected with the Roman emperor Constantine, under whom Christianity became the official religion of the Roman state dating back to fourth century in the Christian Church Era (Constantinian Model).¹¹ Constantinianism became a pleasant terminology to the Christians because contrary to the previous experience, where the Roman Empire was persecuting the church and executing Christians, Emperor Constantine was the first to introduce the establishment of Christianity as the state religion, although there were other factors that led to this. Hence, the Roman Empire became the protector of Christianity. Christianity which was tagged *religio illicita* became *religio licita* and it later became illegal not to be a Christian. Christians who were not allowed in the state affairs were recruited into state army, worship services that were holding in houses moved to large basilicas, this was when infant baptism became very necessary since citizenship in the state was equivalent with membership in the Church which has become so compulsory.

In fact, church leadership changed so that authority was vested in the priest and there was strict adherence to the church hierarchy. This sudden shift led to a major shift of spiritual “awaiting God’s final victory over the powers in the age to come, to primary concern about the fate of each individual’s soul”. After the fall of Roman Empire this model continued to shape the church in the mediaeval Europe, although there were always some dissenting religious movements, especially in the late middle Ages. In Europe it was compulsory (except Jews) that everyone must be a Christian, and church attendance was mandatory at least once a year (normally at Easter). In the sixteenth century, constantinian system was not challenged by the mainstream reformers. Subsequently, a ruler could decide who became the Bishop and could as well choose whether the established church was Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed. That the Anabaptists refused to baptize infants was considered a political act, a rejection of the Constantinian model of the church, and affirming that commitment to Christ and the church is all that is important. Members should lead lives of discipleship.

The major function of this model of church is that it was out to satisfy the government since it was made by the government. In other words, the state owns the church. Therefore, it gives moral support to the state at any rate and in return expects the state to give it privileges. Considering the union between the two parties in this church model, it could be concluded that it is good, but may not be functional in a religiously pluralistic society, such as Nigeria. It can survive in a homogenous ethnic communities and small villages.

2. The second model of Church is the Church as voluntary association.¹² This, in fact, is the legal status of the Church in Nigeria. Just as associations are instituted for the purpose of seeing to the needs and care of their members, so is the Church viewed. Denominations are required to register with Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC). The Church in this model takes care of people’s spiritual needs. The Church is a place where people choose to be for molding of lives, to learn how to do things in the society in such a way that they will benefit the society. The Church’s relationship with the State here suggests a body that reforms the government. The good people in the Church are mobilized to work in their vocations in a Christian manner. Churches of this model can be liberal or conservative, evangelical or mainline. They are interested in operating by democratic principles. These Churches want to be really part of the establishment that runs the affairs of the State. They could be regarded as aristocrats. But some have also adopted this model to make people realize what their civic responsibility is in their service to God.

3. Another model of the Church can be described as a vendor of religious goods and services.¹³ “This is the entrepreneurial mega Church that offers a wide variety of goods and services.” The major concern of the churches that fall under this category is making a large populace of members. Therefore, social-spiritual packaging is employed in order to meet the need of the modern humanity. This model is the rising star because it is full of

fun or entertainment, social functions, attempt to psychologically bring relief to the oppressed by organizing different programs and so on. As a result of the economic fall and some hazards in the society, this church model tends to provide solution to the problems and give hope for the future.

This is the Church that claims to "meet my needs." The focus is on individual needs, individual self-actualization, and individual salvation. The individual is the consumer; the Church and its staff are those with a product or services to market. The verb most often used in connection with the spiritual filling station model of the Church is "shop": "I shop for a church."

4. The fourth model, which is more biblical and is indeed followed in some congregations, is the Church as a holy nation.¹⁴ In this model, the Church uses the language of peoplehood, of being a pilgrim people, strangers and aliens in this world, but they belong to the kingdom of God. The Church is not the kingdom of God, but an agent that points to the reign of God.

The models analyzed above represent the methods by which churches in Nigeria operate. Each is meant to meet needs of the community, but as seen above, they have some measure of limitation apart from the last one that is "Church as a holy nation"

Exegesis of 1Peter 2:9

The titles used to describe the Church in I Peter 2:9 are very significant in knowing the nature and functions of an ideal Church in its environment. These titles include *γενος εκλεκτον*, meaning a chosen generation. By implication, it suggests that the generation is the favorite suitable for a function or meant to serve a purpose.¹⁵ This title was formerly given to the whole Jewish Church, i.e. to all the Israelites without exception, all who were in the covenant of God by circumcision, whether they were holy persons or not, are here given to Christians in general in the same way; i.e. to all who believed in Christ, whether Jews or Gentiles.¹⁶ *Βασιλειον ιερατευμα* means a royal priesthood. Moses in Exodus 19:6 calls them a kingdom of priests and since all believers are called of God to sacrifice to God, then it means that all believers belong to the priesthood. *Εθνος αγιον*, meaning a holy nation implies those who possess the same habit, practice the same custom and are united in manners. The adjective *αγιον*, meaning holy, shows that they do not participate in anything that is popular and abominable which the pagan world around them do. *Λαος εις περιποιησιν* which means a peculiar people, is a name of ancient Israel adopted and particularly used to refer to a Church of Christians gathered from among the Gentiles.¹⁷ It is expected that Christians, as God's priests, maintain a separate position in this cosmos. Christians are not to be isolated, because the world needs their influence and witness; but they must not permit the world to infect or change their status. Separation is not isolation; it is contact without contamination.

The Task of the Church

Having examined what the scriptures paint as the ideal for the Church, it is necessary to consider the task of the church in her relationship with the government.

- The Preaching of the Kingdom – This was the primary assignment of Jesus and was continued by the early church. For example, Philip in Acts 8:12, Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:22, Peter in Acts 2 and John the Revelator in Revelation 1:9 and so on. The gospel message of these servants of God is that Christ is now not only head of the church, but head of every ruler and authority as in Eph. 1:20-23. Part of the task of the church is to make known the wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities (Eph. 3:10). As Barret rightly notes: “In every cultural context, no matter how benevolent or hostile the governments and societies around it, the Church is called to demonstrate an alternative culture and an alternative politics, an alternative ethics, in dialogue with the surrounding cultures”.¹⁸ but this must be generated from the spirit of Christ who is the Head. Barret further states that:

What standard of behavior do we have a right to expect of government? First, God does not have one set of rules for governments and another set of rules for everybody else. God has one will for all people. God wills that all people come to salvation, peace, and justice and enter the reign of God. At the same time, we should not expect that territorial states are going to be able to act in Christian ways, ultimately. But we can speak to government in the hope that it can move from where it is now one step closer to the will of God. Our job as a church is to be ambassadors, to carry God's message to the other nations, and to do this with integrity and clear loyalty to God's nation¹⁹

- Discern the nature of the powers in the context in which the Church finds herself- The context in which the church receives nonprofit tax status or is consulted by governments is quite different from a context in which people are being killed for their faith. The Church is expected to react when the government attempt to oppress.

- Discern the critical points of dissent from government and the culture that supports it. Christians may be part of the government, but the government cannot be wholly Christian. For example, Nigeria as a “secular State” cannot be wholly run by Christian principles since the laws are not made by Christians alone. This also applies to interpretations, worldviews and approaches to issues. The Church therefore has the task to establish and defend areas that affect her.

- The Church has priestly role to play. Here the church is to pray for those in authority, teach and direct the leaders and followers and declare the mind of God in rebuke and opposing wrong ideas. The Pastors/ Heads of the Church should address the ills plaguing

the Church such as disunity, tribalism, undue emphasis on materialism, cravings for power etc.

- Fanaticism or Public embarrassment on government from the pulpit cannot solve the problem. This is what Mala, Simon Babs and others emphasized. Some priests in Nigeria have involved themselves in such that they take side and make prophecies that eventually failed. This brings more disregards for the Christian religious leaders.²¹

- The church is to be a model of "a holy nation"- The Church does not need to pass the bill of how we live a peaceable live, restoring peace, justice and social welfare in the society that she belongs. There are several things the Church may not be able to do, in fact, sometimes attempt to do such would be by violence. Examples are bringing up a child to become a good citizen of the state, moral training, ensuring peace in the community etc.

- Christians are called not only to be it and to say it, but to do it. What can we do together with secular governments? Where can we work together with integrity? This depends on our context and the critical points of dissent that we have discerned. The church will need to discern where it can cooperate with government faithfully without letting the church get "absorbed into government". The church will need to practice being different from the bad state and staying connected. Or there may be times when one has to disconnect particular projects or to suffer for righteousness' sake.

Conclusion

Nigerian experience as regards the relationship between Church and State is multifaceted: the reason being that the nation is not made of a religion. In fact, this is included in her constitution. A citizen of Nigeria has the right to practice any kind of religion he or she likes and that does not stop a person from being eligible in the direct participation in government or contribution to the nation's governance so far the person has the merit. Be that as it may, the Church as a religious organization recognized by the State has the right to contribute to the governance of the nation ditto for other religions recognized by the State. From the Nigeria Christian understanding, the tension over the relationship between the Church and State has been religio-political. It is religious in the sense that Muslims have upper hands in governing some States. It is political in the sense that certain policies made by the government may not be in agreement with Christian principles or do not favor the body of Christ.

From the analysis above, the method of relating with the government should be in line with what the scripture describes the Church to be – A Holy Nation. It is not possible that Christian principles must be fully followed in making policies, if it is intended, then the Church has roles to play in grooming Christian political leaders²² and giving them support at various levels. The Church should emphasize in her teaching the Christian work ethic and what should be the moral obligation of the Christian citizen to the nation. The Church in Nigeria had had no plan for the governance of the society not to talk of setting political strategies. Planning and strategizing will bring a positive result on the yearning of the Church in her relationship with the state.

Lastly, the Church should not expect that the government should be perfect and void of frailties, that being the reason for which the Church has been called out.²³ Hence the Church is to be a prophetic critic that would help straighten the path of the nation. This should be done sacrificially.

Endnotes

1. Yemi Akinsuyi, "The Nigerian Society has Failed Says Jonathan" *This Day Live*. Tuesday 05 November, 2013.
2. J.O. Folaranmi, Marginalization of Christians in Kwara State. *The Nigerian Tribune* of Friday 13th September, 2013.
3. Adesoji Adeniyi, "Aregbesola's Education Reform Policy Best for Osun" *The Nation on Sunday*, October 20, 2013, p. 7. Prophet Abiara reacted against the initial complaint of Christians on the reform encouraging Christians to be patient.
4. Alexander Olufemi Afolabi Okebukola, "Religion and Governance: Nigerian Experience" in *Religion and Governance in Nigeria*. Ed. By J.K. Ayantayo et al. Religious Studies Series, Vol. 4, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2012. Owen C. Thomas, a student of Paul Tillich, opines that spirituality, which is understood as referring to inner and private life, is synonymous to religion, usually understood to refer to outer and public life in the sense that spirituality is expressed in the body, community, institutions, traditions, doctrine society, etc. Therefore spirituality is so much concerned about the public life. Owen C. Thomas, "A Tillichian Critique of Contemporary Spirituality" in *Religion in the New Millenium: Theology in the Spirit of Paul Tillich*. Ed. Raymond F. Bulman et al (USA: Mercer University Press, 2001), p. 221. See also David Jowitt, *Christianity: A Concise History*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited, 2010, p. 223
5. The question of whether Nigeria is a secular state is crucial. Considering the definition, objective. effects and the religious life experience, Nigeria "is certainly not a typical secular state where the influence of religion is deliberately kept in check". See M.A. Bidmos. *Interreligious Dialogue: The Nigerian Experience*, Lagos: Faculty of Education, University of Lagos, 1993. P 4. Also see J.T. Oderinde, *An Introduction to Social Ethics and Contemporary Issues* (Ilorin: DELMA & Sons Press, 2012), p. 83 indicating that the supremacy of the Nigerian constitution over all authorities defines Nigeria as a secular state and that there is no prevalence of any religion's idea on the constitution. Hence, all religions have to tend their practices toward what the constitution dictates. Judith Hill, "Secularization: A New Testament Perspective" in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*. Vol. 29. 2, 2010, p. 107
6. Olubayo O. Obijole, Christianity and Governance: A Critical Review of Rom. 13:1-7 in the Nigerian Context, in *Religion and Governance in Nigeria*. Ed. By J.K. Ayantayo et al. Religious Studies Series, Vol. 4, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2012. George O. Folarin, stated that while Romans 13 does not explicitly urge disobedience to ungodly government and its policies it implicitly suggest that, but the approach is another thing entirely. The Challenge of Romans 13:1-7 to Civil Governance in Nigeria. in *Religion and Governance in Nigeria*. Ed. By J.K. Ayantayo et al. Religious Studies Series, Vol. 4, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2012.
7. Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, *God, Nigeria, and the Church, A Theological Essay on the Church and Politics in Nigeria*. A Paper Presentation in Abuja Nigeria On the Occasion

- of the Celebration of the Silver Jubilee of The Episcopal Ordination of His Excellency Most Rev. Dr. John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan Metropolitan Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Abuja, Nigeria 28/1/08
8. <http://saharareporters.com/2015/01/05/seven-signs-2015-elections-will-shipwreck-nigeria-pastor-bakare>. He claims "... I do what I do just because I desire a Nigeria that works, not because I seek any political office. However, it is my considered opinion that capable men and women who love God and love the people must offer themselves to serve when the opportunity arises"
 9. This is necessary relating to the thought of Olawoyin stating that "the fact that there are many churches in Nigeria and that governors are religious does not make them rightly related to God..." Olusegun Noah Olawoyin, 'Governors' and Robbers: St Augustine's Political Philosophy. in *Religion and Governance in Nigeria*. Ed. By J.K. Ayantayo et al. Religious Studies Series, Vol. 4, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2012.
 10. Tunde Bakare: 'I trust Buhari but not his environment', Pastor ... pulse.ng/.../tunde-bakare-i-trust-buhari-but-not-his-environment-pastor-say.
 11. Lois Y. Barrett, An Essay presented at the Fourth Annual Restorative Justice Conference, October 25, 1996.
 12. *ibid*
 13. *ibid*
 14. *ibid*
 15. Joseph H. Thayer, "εκλεκτος" in *Thayer's Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2003, p. 197
 16. Adam Clarke's Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright © 1996, 2003, 2005, 2006 by BibleSoft, Inc. All rights reserved.
 17. *ibid*
 18. Lois Y. Barrett, An Essay presented at the Fourth Annual Restorative Justice Conference, October 25, 1996.
 19. *ibid*.
 20. Abigail Tanu, Prophet Nathan's Ministry: A Model in Church Governance for Contemporary Pastors in Nigeria. in *Religion and Governance in Nigeria*. Ed. By J.K. Ayantayo et al. Religious Studies Series, Vol. 4, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2012. She emphasizes that some of the Nigerian Pastors who have sycophantic attitude, bad reputation and diminishing public confidence should deal with them.
 21. Simon Babs Mala and Jude Akanbi, The Roles of Religious Leaders in the Actualization of Good Governance in a Multi-Faith Nigeria. in *Religion and Governance in Nigeria*. Ed. By J.K. Ayantayo et al. Religious Studies Series, Vol. 4, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2012.
 22. Samuel Kehinde Fabunmi, Christian's Participation in the Sustainability of Democracy and Good Governance in Nigeria. in *Religion and Governance in Nigeria*. Ed. By J.K. Ayantayo et al. Religious Studies Series, Vol. 4, Department of Religious Studies, University of Ibadan, 2012. Certain individual Christians who have held the post of leadership at different levels in Government before and now are not free from the vices the church preaches against.

23. Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), p.169

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<http://saharareporters.com/2015/01/05/seven-signs-2015-elections-will-shipwreck-nigeria-pastor-bakare>.