

Christian Religious Leaders as Agents of National Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

There is an urgent need for all capable hands to join in the onerous task of developing the Nigerian nation. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1960, it appears that all the efforts of our past rulers have not impacted much in the rapid development of the human and material resources which abound in the Nigerian nation.

It is against this back ground that this paper focuses attention on the role which Christian religious leaders can play in the development of Nigeria. Since the early part of the eighteenth century when missionary activities from the Western world started springing up in various parts of Nigeria, there have been visible signs of efforts of Christian organization in the development of Nigeria. This is particularly true in the fields of education and health. This paper seeks to challenge Christian religious leaders to get more involved in the political administration of the country, social welfare programs and empowerment programs being put in place by various arms of Government. It is the contention of this paper that by so doing, the endemic corruption in the political life of the nation

will be drastically reduced, the financial resources of the country will be judiciously used for the overall development of the country, and the spate of youth restiveness both in the Niger Delta and all over Nigeria will be drastically reduced.

I. Definition of Terms

The two key terms in the title of this paper which require definition are “Christian Religious Leaders” and “development. In this paper, the term “Christian Religious Leaders” shall refer to all those who find themselves in leadership positions in Churches and Church-related groups, such as General Overseers, Pastors, Arch-Bishops, Bishops, Evangelists, Apostles, Deacons, Elders, etc. These are men and women of God who are looked up to by members of our various religious organizations for spiritual leadership of all kinds and at all levels. The term will also be used to refer to Presidents of such Christian organizations like the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Christian Council of Nigerian (CCN), the Organization of African Independent Churches (OAIC), among others.

The word “development” shall be used in this paper to connote all such programs that can lead to an improvement in the lives of the common man in Nigeria, leading to an enhanced style of living of everyone in the nation. Emphasis will be placed on policy formulations, social welfare programs, employment generation activities, and the continuous fight against corruption and mismanagement of the huge financial resources of Nigeria.

II. Introduction

The Daily Independent newspaper online of Tuesday May 23, 2003, carried an article titled “Rev. Chris Okotie and the Presidential Polls” written by Mr. Agboola. The author called attention to some social critics who argue “that the Nigerian political terrain is not meant for a gentlemen like the founding

pastor of the Household of God at Oregun in Ikeja.” According to these critics, “the shibboleth and the shenanigan involved in politics are not meant for people who prepare their flock for the hereafter. Also, the lies, intrigues and political chicanery are meant for those who are interested in the worldly powers and their perquisites.”

There is no doubt that comments such as the above have helped in no small measure in discouraging Christian religious leaders from venturing into the political arena in Nigeria. However, as Mr. Agboola also rightly noted, there are other social critics “who believe the calling of Chris Okotie as a Reverend, should not deny him his fundamental human right as a Nigerian to contest any elective post. Moreover, they are of the view that as an eclectic man, Rev Okotie is better placed to take Nigeria to a greater height.” Though Rev. Okotie failed to win the presidential election, he had made a statement that Christian religious leaders at the highest level of their service to God should equally be involved in the service of mankind through political participation.

However, Chris Okotie was just one out of the over thirty presidential candidates who contested for the 2003 and 2007 elections. He lost on both occasions. The question this paper seeks to answer is: “Where were all the other Church leaders and heads of Christian organizations in Nigeria when Chris Okotie was battling it alone?” Some like Christopher Odetunde in his write-up online titled “Religion and Politics – the Nigerian Nightmare” tried to show how religion and politics have become the opium of the Nigerian masses.” He contends that “religion must be the opium of the people when it seeks truth, fairness, and equity in all that believers do but not under the parody of Christianity.” This is the type of comments which Nigerian Christians are receiving from several quarters when it comes to the fusion of religion and politics.

Hank Eso in his piece “Nigeria: Religion as a tool of politics” opines that the use of religion for political ends “continue to impact negatively on our unity and trust” in Nigeria.

He argued that “nothing is as divisive as religion -- especially when it is used as a tool of politics.” He asserts: “Politicians have used religion to divide the country, just as they have used ethnicity to fan the embers of our national dichotomy. “ Viewed against the backdrop of the religious crises that have plagued this country, one can excuse the extreme views expressed by Eso. Indeed, some religious leaders have used religion as a divisive tool in the political turf of Nigeria.

Be that as it may, it is our intention in this paper to show that Christian religious leaders have had and can still continue to have positive influences in the developmental process of any nation. We shall draw on the experience of the Prophet Daniel in the Old Testament who played a great role in the development of the nation where he was called to serve as a political leader. This paper will then go ahead to draw out a road map for Christian religious leaders in Nigeria in their quest for the overall development of the Nigerian nation both from the spiritual and secular angles.

III. Prophet Daniel as an Agent of National Development in the Old Testament

A cursory examination of the dictionary would reveal that there are four ways in which the word “prophet” can be interpreted:

1. Somebody who interprets divine will.
2. Somebody who predicts the future.
3. An advocate of something.
4. An inspired leader or teacher.

The first of these definitions is the one that is generally understood and accepted by the general public as describing the role of a prophet. According to Saliba (2006) prophecy can be defined “as a religious phenomenon in which a message is sent by God (or by a god) to human beings through an intermediary, or prophet.” The message may contain a reference to future events, but it is often simply a warning, encouragement, or piece of information. Prophecy in its fullest sense thus includes augury, divination, and oracles, which are techniques by which, it is

believed, the will of the gods can be learned. Prophets have often spoken in ecstasy, a state that may be induced by various methods, including dance or music. The emphasis of the prophetic message has varied, some prophets stressing the cultic, others the moral, and still others the missionary aspect of religious life. Prophets have appeared throughout history and in virtually all societies. It is in this sense that we must be ready to admit the fact that priests who officiate in African Traditional Religions are prophets in their own right.

Saliba (2006) further argues that prophecy was elevated to an unprecedented religious significance in Judaism and Christianity. According to Judaism, the prophet is an individual chosen by God, often against his will, to reveal God's intentions and plans to the people. As a bearer of divine revelation, he often experiences God's overwhelming presence and receives the strength to communicate to others what God has said, even though this may lead to persecution, suffering, and death. According to Hugbell E. W. Fosbroke (1965:201) "the ministry of prophets was in the first instance a ministry of the spoken word." In other words, the Prophet was in the business of proclaiming the word of God to the people.

Abraham J. Haschel (xii) believes that "the prophet is not only a prophet. He is also a poet, preacher, patriot, statesman, social critic, and moralist. There has been a tendency to see the essence and chief significance of prophecy in the display of one or other of these aspects. Yet this is a misapprehension of the intrinsic nature of prophecy." It is his contention further that "the prophet was an individual who said No to his society, condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacencies, waywardness and syncretism" (xvii). Though the prophets themselves did not compose speeches or even poems in which they developed a theme with some degree of logical consistency, there is no doubt that "their utterances were brief, pregnant oracles charged with an emotional intensity which found expression in a rhythmic form probably maintained unchanged through any particular deliverance." (Fosbroke, 206)

Christianity inherited the idea of prophecy from Judaism, and Christians interpret Hebrew writings in light of the teachings of Christ, who is considered the prophet promised in Deuteronomy. Indeed, in many respects Jesus was a typical Judaic prophet (Saliba, 2006). Prophecy was recognized as a gift in apostolic times, but it gradually disappeared as the hierarchical structure of the church began to develop toward the end of the 1st century, discouraging individual inspiration. Christian visionaries throughout the ages have often been called prophetic, but they never achieved the status of the great prophets.

The canonical prophets, whose books make up over a quarter of the Old Testament, were called by God to be organs and channels of revelation. They were men of God who stood in his council (Jer. 23:22), knew his mind, and were enabled to declare it. God the Holy Spirit spoke in and through them (2 Pet. 1:19-21; Isa. 61:1; Mic. 3:8; Acts 28:25-27; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). They knew he was doing so; hence they dared to start messages with “this is what the LORD says” or “an oracle of the LORD,” and to present Yahweh himself as the speaker of what they were saying. G. Ernest Wright (352) is of the opinion that central to the faith of Israel “lay the joyful proclamation that the God of the fathers had heard the cry of an oppressed people in Egypt, and by mighty acts of power had delivered them from slavery and made them a nation.” It was this belief that sustained their faith in God and in the work of the prophets.

Prophecy involved prediction (foretelling), but usually this was done in a context of declaring God’s warnings and exhortations to his covenant people here and now (forth-telling). The predictions had to do with the coming of God’s king and kingdom after purging judgments; the prophets’ chief concern was to exhort to repentance, in hope that for the present the judgments might be averted. They were primarily reformers, enforcing God’s law and recalling God’s people to the covenant faithfulness from which they should never have lapsed. With their preaching to the nation went prayer for the nation: they talked to God about people just as earnestly as they talked to

people about God, and they fulfilled a unique ministry as intercessors (Exod. 32:30-32 [Moses]; 1 Sam. 7:5-9; 12:19-23 [Samuel]; 2 Kings 19:4 [Isaiah]; cf. Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11).

Daniel was a Jewish leader and prophet who lived in the court of the king of Babylon. The Old Testament book of Daniel tells his story. We know nothing about his parents or family, but he probably came from a long line of noble Jewish families (Daniel 1:3) (Jeffery, 364). According to one guess, Daniel was about 16 years old when he and his three friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, were taken from Jerusalem to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel, renamed Belteshazzar (meaning “may Bel protect his life”), was to serve the king as a member of his court (Jeffery, 368). He earned a reputation for intelligence and for total faithfulness to his God. After three years of instruction, he began a career in court that lasted nearly seventy years (Daniel 1:21). Earlier on, Daniel was asked to interpret one of Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams, in which a great image collapsed and disintegrated when struck by a stone. God revealed the meaning of this dream to Daniel, who explained it to the king. Nebuchadnezzar gratefully offered him a job as the governor of Babylonia, but Daniel asked that his three friends be given the job instead. Near the end of Nebuchadnezzar’s life, Daniel was able to interpret another dream (Daniel 4). That dream suggested that the king would soon lose his sanity. Daniel urged the king to repent of his sins (4:27), but he did not and lost his mind for a period of time (Kennedy, 415).

After the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 BC, Daniel dropped from public view and was given a lower position in the royal court. Although he received visions from God (Daniel 7-8) during the reign of the Babylonian king Belshazzar (555 and 553 BC), it was not until 539 BC that Daniel made another public appearance. During a banquet hosted by Belshazzar, the king profaned some sacred vessels stolen from the Jerusalem temple. A hand suddenly appeared in midair, and wrote on the palace wall these words: “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin.” The king and his

court sent for Daniel to interpret the message. Daniel, in interpreting the handwriting on the wall, did not fail to tell the king that there can be “no life without God” (Kennedy, 431). According to Daniel, the bottom line of the message meant that the end of Babylon’s kingdom was near. That same night Belshazzar was killed by the Persians, who attacked and successfully overtook the capital city (5:30. See Owens, 410-411 on the historical accuracy of the predictions of Daniel in this text).

Under King Darius the Mede, Daniel became one of three “presidents” (administrators) of the realm (Daniel 6:2). Willmington (233) observes that “Daniel, now over eighty, was still blessed with so much skill and ability that Darius was considering elevating him over the other two presidents.” The word president (ⲡⲣⲉⲥⲒⲃⲉⲛⲧⲁⲓⲥⲁⲓ appears five times in the Bible, and only in the book of Daniel: 6:2, 3, 4, 6 and 7. Owens (413) opines that “the precise meaning of the title president is not clear.” However, he continues “the word president is generally taken to be a Persian word for chief, head, or overseer” (Owens, 413). According to the online version of the book Making Sense of Daniel, “When Darius saw Daniel's superiority, he intended to promote him to take charge of the empire.” This was because “Daniel had an excellent spirit, which is invaluable in commerce and politics.” Robinson (100-101) quotes Rules as observing that Daniel must have been made “First Lord of the Treasury.”

It is therefore clear that the office of president which was given to Daniel was no mean office. Apart from the King, it was the next in terms of rank. In the Nigerian setting, the position of Daniel could adequately be equated to that of the Vice-President or the President of the Senate. Though he was recognized as a religious leader, yet he was given one of the highest political office in the land at that time.

From this brief discussion of the life of Daniel we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Daniel was a man called by God and who remained faithful to that call in spite of all opposition from political enemies.
2. When it became necessary for Daniel to interpret visions and dreams which portend negative consequences for the reigning kings, Daniel did not hesitate to speak the mind of God. He consistently remained the oracle of God in the midst of pagan influences and practice.
3. When he was appointed to the position of administrator of one of the provinces by King Darius, he ruled so well that his fellow administrators became jealous of him.
4. Though initially when he was to be given political office he rejected it, and give the opportunity to his three friends, he later accepted another offer to become governor. This shows that Daniel was a progressive minded man of God who took decisions based on prevailing circumstances. He was not averse to holding public office.
5. Throughout his years of public service, Daniel influenced the reigning kings positively such that progressive policies were made, though some of them were short-lived. The fact that the king was ready to proclaim to all the nations that the God of Daniel is the true God and must be served by all is a demonstration of the positive impact of Daniel on the development of the nation at that time

IV. Christian Religious Leaders As Agents Of National Development in Nigeria

The political climate in Nigeria since independence in 1960 did not witness the involvement any Christian religious leader who was head of a church or Christian organization like we witnessed in the 2003 and 2007 when Rev. Chris Okotie ran for the presidential office. This writer believes that if Nigeria is to

develop positively, then more Christian religious leaders must be ready to enter into the political arena in Nigeria.

Using the example of Prophet Daniel in the Old Testament, let us suggest a road map which Christian religious leaders in Nigeria could follow in order for them to become effective agents of national development. We shall look at four specific areas: to serve as social critics, establishment of church-based skill acquisition centers, establishment of church-based microfinance banks, formulation of Government policies.

1. Religious Leaders as Social Critics/Crusaders

Prophets in the Old Testament did not operate from one place like most preachers of the Gospel do today. They went from place to place proclaiming the message of God. Today, preachers in our various Churches are recognized as the prophets of God. It is incumbent on all preachers to use their pulpits to speak out against the political irregularities of any government in power. Preachers must stop hiding under the cloak of separation of religion and politics and fail to address pressing socio-political mal-administration of any ruling government. Anthony Cardinal Olubumi Okogie of the Roman Catholic Church readily comes to mind as a fitting example of a fearless social critic. He was always prepared to take on the government at any point in time he discovered that government activities are detrimental to the interest of the masses

James Muilenburg (292) submits that the history of the religion of the early monarchy in Israel reveals that “the dominant interest of this period is political and social rather than religious.” Christian religious leaders of our time should see themselves as the voice of the voiceless in times when the Government seeks to silence the voice of the majority. They should realize that their spiritual calling also entails involvement in the socio-political events of their time. It is important therefore that all heads of the various Christian groups, for example, Christian Association of Nigeria and Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, take it as part of their religious duty to subject the

policies of Government to serious scrutiny. Where they feel dissatisfied, they should call press conferences and address the nation.

In terms of social re-engineering of this country, it is important to note it is incumbent on religious organizations like The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN) sponsor bills to the State and National Assemblies that will impact positively on the lives of the masses in this country. They must be on the side of the masses in the formulation of Government policies. They should be at the vanguard of correcting social abnormalities through legislation. The leaders of these various organizations should take the lead in this direction.

2. Church-Based Skill Acquisition Centers

There is no gainsaying the fact that the Church in Nigeria has always been at the forefront of educational and healthcare development in Nigeria. The various primary, post primary, and tertiary institutions established by various denominations in different parts of Nigeria is a testimony to the involvement of the church in the educational development of the country. The same is true of healthcare centers run by some denominations which transverse the landscape of Nigeria. Even the worst critic of religion would readily admit that the church in Nigeria has acquitted herself creditably in these two fields.

However, recent events in the polity have thrown up the serious issue of skill acquisition for our unemployed and restive youths. The teeming youths in Nigeria are jobless, including those who have passed through the four walls of tertiary institutions. Civil servant jobs, work in the banking and oil sectors of the economy are becoming scarce to come by. Thus when the militants in the Niger Delta who were granted amnesty by President Yar 'Adua in 2009 surrounded their arms and ammunitions, the problem was how to rehabilitate them. That was when it dawned on the nation that there are not enough skill

acquisition centers to cater for the needs of these unemployable youths.

This is therefore an area where Christian religious leaders can pick up the gauntlet by setting up Church-based skill acquisition centres to train our teeming youths in employable skills. The products of the tertiary institutions set up by various denominations are also in the labour market. It is time that Christian religious leaders put their heads together and pump funds into the establishment of skill acquisition centres instead of competing on the number of tertiary institutions to be established. There is a seeming competition among various denominations in the establishment of church-based Universities. We are suggesting a shift in focus to the establishment by denominations of skill acquisition centres. These skill acquisition centres will concentrate on crafts and arts, welding and fabrication, tailoring and fashion design, practical skills in setting up agricultural projects, like fish farming, poultry, etc. Products of such centres would not need to wander in the labour market. In stead they will become employers of labour and thereby have a positive impact on the development of the economy.

3. Church-Based Microfinance Houses

Papa Ayo Oritsejafor, founder and head of Word of Life Bible Church, Warri, and the current President of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigerian (PFN) about four years ago, led members of his church to establish what has become known as Eagle Flight Microfinance House. This writer was privileged to watch this project grow from its inception to what it is today. There is a section in the city of Warri known as Mechanic Village. Eagle Flight Microfinance House set up shop right in the midst of the market with a small caravan. Today that caravan has given way to a banking hall right there in the midst of the market people.

Papa Ayo reasoned that since the ordinary groundnut seller cannot walk into the conventional commercial bank and be given a loan of N10, 000.00, the Church will do something to aid all these small-scale businessmen and women to boost their

trade. The result has been overwhelming. This is a concept which most of our denominations, whose annual net earnings in a year run into billions of Naira should think of. It is our contention that micro-credit schemes sponsored by the churches and church-based organization will receive better patronage than even those operated by the government.

4. Christian Religious Leaders as Partisan Politicians

The Pope is recognized by all the governments of the world as a Head of State. Whenever he visits a country, he is given a reception that befits his status as a Head of State. If the Popes who have held this position have been able to use their offices to the good of the Roman Catholic Church, why do we think that if a Pastor becomes a Local Government Chairman, a State Governor or the President of this country he will not have a positive impact on the lives of his people? This was what motivated Rev. Chris Okotie to contest the presidential elections in 2003 and 2007. More Christian religious leaders should take a cue from Rev. Okotie and contest elections at Local, State and Federal levels.

It is the contention of some Christians denominations that if their Pastors are allowed into partisan politics, it could divide the Church along party lines and throw the church into confusion. It should be noted that all pastors, by their training, respect the views of others. In fact if there is any person who is trained in the art of tolerance and living with criticism and contrary opinions, it is the pastor. Most pastors who are graduates of reputable Seminaries and Theological Institutions are trained not just in the art of preaching but in administration, counseling, psychology, sociology and the art of governance. It is the contention of this writer that if Christian religious leaders, that is heads of churches, are allowed to be involved in partisan politics, the following are the likely benefits that will accrue to the country.

a. Since by virtue of their training the first constituency of a religious leader is the members of his church, if we have more of

such leaders in our National and State Houses of Assemblies, then we can be sure that laws emanating from these chambers will be aimed primarily at the benefit of the masses.

b. The fear of God, the Bible says, is the beginning of wisdom. We make bold to say that just like Prophet Daniel was given wisdom by God above his peers, so too God will endow religious leaders in such offices as President, Governor, Minister, Commission, or Local Government Chairmen, uncommon wisdom to rule this country.

c. A man of God, by training, knows that material wealth is only a means to an end and not an end in itself. With religious leaders as Presidents, Governors, Ministers, etc. the incidences of stealing from the public till will be drastically reduced. At that time the massive fund being used to combat corruption can then be diverted to more useful purposes.

d. Sunday Bobai Agang in his paper “Repositioning religion, faith and ethics for a sustainable economic transformation of kaura community” said the aim of his paper was to push “for the need to re-instill character virtues such as honesty, truth-telling, trust, hard work, selfless service, moral rectitude, integrity, God-fearing, and patriotism.” Adeney (101-103) gives six virtues that should characterize a religious leader in public domain: constancy, regularity, faith, fearlessness, cheerfulness and earnestness. This writer affirms these are the virtues we need both in the public and private sector of Nigeria with a view to turning around the fortunes of this country for good. We say that Christian religious leaders stand a better chance in showing by examples what these virtues can do in the life of a politician who truly fears God. Maclaren (71) has the following words of advice for those Christians who find themselves in leadership positions in the public domain:

Be content to be tried by a high standard,
and do not wonder, and do not forget that
there are keen eyes watching your conduct,
in your home, in your relations to your

friends, in your business, in your public life, which would weep no tears, but might gleam with malicious satisfaction, if they saw inconsistencies in you. Remember it, and shape your lives so that they may be disappointed.

When a Christian religious leader is able to heed the advice of Maclaren in the political landscape of Nigeria, a process of social re-engineering would begin to take place such that leaders in high places will know that they are accountable to the people they claim to serve. Then and then alone can true and positive development take root in Nigeria.

Ministers of the Gospel should be free to run the affairs of their Churches while taking active part in the partisan politics within their locality. A serving Pastor should be free to choose the party he wants to belong, and be actively involved in their activities. If and when an opportunity presents itself for him to contest for an elective office, or be appointed to an office, he should be free to do so. We submit that if and when this is allowed and practiced on a large scale, we shall witness a massive transformation in partisan politics in this country. When men and women of integrity begin to be identified with partisan politics, then we shall no longer refer to politics as a dirty game.

IV. Conclusion

We agree with Adeniyi (101) when he opines that “the essential nature of religion to co-exist with politics for the achievement of unity and development in Nigeria remains the same and it will continue to be so.” He affirms: “The absurd faces of religion that we see in the field of politics are the manifestations of human beings that negatively politicized religion.”

There is no gainsaying the fact that religious leaders all over the world have impacted positively in the development of their various communities. Regardless of the negative criticism

which is thrown at religious leaders, their contributions to the development of their immediate communities have never been doubted. It is therefore time for Christian religious leaders to be actively involved in the political life of this country. They should stop standing aside and allowing unbelievers to continue to run the affairs of this country. They should be more actively involved in partisan politics so that the socio-economic development of this country can be fast tracked.

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