

AFRICAN THEOLOGY OF NATION BUILDING: AN IMPERATIVE FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Timothy Barga

Department of Theology
Saint Augustine's Major Seminary
Jos, Plateau State
timbarga2@icloud.com

Abstract

The fundamental question that this article wrestles with is to what extent African Christian theology has contributed to nation building in Africa and Nigeria in particular. The proposal here is that theology has its own contributions to make but that this depends on the deconstructions and reconstruction of the live faith that advances Africa development. For instance, in an insightful article first published in 1974, John Mbiti a professor and leading African theologian lamented what he called the theological paralysis of the church in Africa. This undesirable situation arose as a result of the failure of Christian theology to adequately articulate itself to the point that it addresses the real concerns that African nations are facing. These concerns include issues that have to do with corruption, politics of hate speech, ethnicism, political ideologies and instability, economic imperialism, and poverty. Admittedly, progress has been made in some of these areas since then, but one of the areas where theology has continued to exhibit intellectual shyness is in the area of democratic participation of the church. This article sails to demonstrate how theological discourse could lead to nation building in our nascent democratic governance and development of the people.

Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that most African countries are still experiencing political instability in spite of their so-called democratization. It is also a fact that life aspirations and life spans have been cut short due to the unsavory consequences of the situation. Because of this experience, the church is obliged by the demands of the biblical tradition and the exigencies of political reality, consciously to live at the nexus of powerlessness and power. In other words, even when located on the side of rulers and in ministering to a government that seeks to promote social justice, it is to do so in solidarity with those who suffer most in society. This mandate is distinctly expressed in Jesus' manifestoes. The church which is faithful to the prophetic biblical vision can never allow itself to become trapped within the limits of what the rich, the powerful, and the dominant forces of society insist is realistically possible. It is theologically and

morally obliged to reject obsolete first-world visions of economic development, which amount to the economic development of the few at the expense of the many and maintain first-world privileges at the expense of third-world countries. This paper is focused on how theology in the African context leads to nation building.

Discipleship as Nation Building

Jesus' injunction to the Christian to be "Salt" and "Light" is a metaphorical way of saying that Christians should get involved in society-building by influencing and seasoning the human society. In other words, a Christian can make his/her contribution towards nation-building from any standpoint: moral, domestic, social, educational, commercial, economic, administrative, political or religious.⁶⁹ In this way, the church in Africa needs to consider theology of nation building through its discipleship in the society. From this context, Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw discipleship as a nation building agenda. He described the Christian identity and community in terms of the life of Christ. In 1933, he defined the place of Christ in relation to the state and civil society. As such, Christ is there at the centre of humanity, history and nature. With the term "center" Bonhoeffer wanted to emphasize that Christ is the beginning and fulfilment of all new existence in all ages. His notion of "centre" must be understood as grounded in his communitarian Christology. Since Christ exists as the church, the church is both the (communitarian) centre and boundary of the state, civil society, in a two-fold relationship. The Christian congregation stands at the point at which the whole world ought to be standing; to this extent it serves as deputy for the world and exists for the sake of the world. On the other hand, the world achieves its own fulfillment at the point at which the congregation stands.

This dialectic in Bonhoeffer's theology is of vital importance. On the one hand, the Christian congregation that is the local faith community exists for the political and socioeconomic community. It cannot retreat and still be called the church. On the other hand, the church can no longer express its presence in civil community in such a way that the other spheres cannot achieve their own fulfillment. The church can no longer boast the final word on the formation of community and the nation. It joins all the spheres of society in a healing cycle of

⁶⁹ Anie, Gold Okwuolise. "Christian Theology of Work: Its Implications for Nation-Building in Nigeria". *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, Vol. 9 Dec 2004, p 58.

transformation.⁷⁰ The African church does this as a force of liberation in the society alongside the civil organizations.

Politics in the Context of Salvation

If one may ask, what does politics have to do with salvation? Politics and government often appear as terrains of corruption, dirty game, favouritism to special interests, lust for power, and exercise of force against law-breakers. Admittedly, these do characterize African politics and indeed the politics of every people in every time. However, Christians understand that although sin infects every social institution, sin's effects are not total in themselves. Institutions retain their God-given purposes to assist his people to live peaceably and justly in this world in need of redemption and to find eternal life. It is easy to see this with the family. We know that our own families and those around us are less than perfect, just as pope Francis said no family is perfect. But they remain families, still called to the purposes for which God created them, in mutual love and support, raising children, transmitting of culture and faith across the generations and economic sustenance. We do not give up on family nor do we regard it as irrelevant to our salvation, even when it fails in one or more of these missions. Instead we work to renew and enhance it to produce fruit.⁷¹

It is the same with politics and other social institutions. They are less than perfect, but they retain their original call in the case of government, to promote justice, to advance the common good, and to protect human rights and dignity. In a democracy, the people of God also have power, and strict scrutiny awaits them if they fail to engage in political and social action to advance justice, dignity, and the common good and more so if we fail to call elected officials to task when they violate their trust. If the political system is corrupt, it is not only they who are the problem, but the electorate as well. Christians must understand that faith is not a private matter between the individual person or group and Jesus, nor is it something that happens only at Mass or any Christian service on Sundays. Christian faith is essentially social, fundamentally community oriented. Faith pertains to the whole of life. Thus, salvation is intimately connected not just to our individual, private holiness or sinfulness but also to family life, workplace behaviour, interactions with neighbours and in small Christian community and affective social life as whole. This truth challenges the often-heard statement that

⁷⁰ Rüssel, Botman. "Who Is Jesus Christ As Community for Us Today?" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 97 Mar 1997, 35.

⁷¹ Cochran, E. Clark and David Carrol Cochran. *Catholic, Politics and Public Policy: Beyond Left and Right*. Maryknoll; New York: Orbis Books, 2003, 3.

society will improve only when individual people become better Christians. If only people were more honest, faithful, morally pure, generous, kind, and loving, the argument goes, then our world would be a better place. This of course is the fundamental principle to nation building. Society is better when individual behaviour is better. Nevertheless, individual goodness is not enough. Because human beings are social, social institutions also need reform, and this means involvement in public life in the right direction.⁷²

Political Mission of Theology

A theology which fails to address the most urgent questions asked by ordinary people and given the bias of the church in favor of the marginalized people, especially their questions is not theology at all because theology is the discourse of God in relationship to people's mentality and needs. It is little more than an academic exercise in uncovering archaic or dying religious beliefs and reified doctrines about God. Ultimately, it is an escape from the challenge of discerning the liberating presence of God in the midst of the struggle for a better world. Such a theology, suggests Gustavo Gutierrez, is a false theology.⁷³ False, because theology has the critical and permanent task of promoting liberation from every form of captivity in each new age.

For this to happen theology's first task is to probe and understand "the meaning of the time" (Lk 12:56) within which we live. Closely related to such an exercise is social analysis, the separating of the different components of a policy or political program, with a view to uncovering its true intent and actual consequences towards our final destiny. It involves uncovering the causes of suffering and exploitation in society, as well as identifying the signs of new birth that reside within the community--as a basis for both confronting the state and encouraging programs of hope and renewal for a radical transformation.

Important in this regard is the need for the church to heed the warning not to judge by outward appearances. Things are not always what they appear to be. Jesus warned that the leaders may "look fine on the outside but are full of dead bones and decaying corpses on the inside" (Mt 23:27). When the prophet Samuel

⁷² Barga, Timothy. *Pastoral Challenges of the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching to African Traditional Values*. Jos: Pastoral Institute Press, 2018, 27.

⁷³ Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," quoted in Anthony Gibbon, *Capitalism and Modern Social theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Weber*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1972, 42.

was sent to search for a new king of Israel the Lord warned, "Pay no attention to how tall and handsome he is . . . I do not judge as people judge. People look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7). To "discern the signs of the times" is to "see deep"; it involves hard-nosed and critical analysis. Karl Marx warned: "Whilst in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, our historians (read theologians) have not yet won even this trivial insight"⁷⁴. The church has too often allowed itself to be persuaded by nice words and simple explanations. Called to be as gentle as a dove, the church is also called to be as wise as a serpent.

The most important political task of the church is "to tell the truth." It is to reach behind what rulers and others profess to be, in making known the actual effects of their policies and what it is they really stand for. It is to analyze political policy, to expose its consequences for the poor and to anticipate its long-term effects on society as a whole. In response to this obligation, during 1989 Christians in South Africa joined in a nation-wide Defiance Campaign against unjust laws under the banner of the Standing for the Truth Campaign. It resulted in resistance against oppression and exploitation inherent to certain economic and social laws and practices which were promoted in the name of democracy, economic development, and Christian values. It resulted in thousands of Christians being beaten by the police, brutalized, arrested, and imprisoned for insisting that a government that does not serve the common good is theologically and morally illegitimate. Without such vision, the people suffer in the dark.

Nation-building theology must emerge in relation to the posing of tough and uncomfortable questions about the global economy, international alliances, national development programs, and such local issues that affect the lives of ordinary people at a material and spiritual level. For this to happen, church leaders and theologians continually need to be exposed to the insights of critical economists, social scientists, and political analysts. Theology and ministry outside of this encounter are at best simply irrelevant. At worst, wittingly or unwittingly, they can become part of a national lie.

The report of the First Assembly of the All African Council of Churches which met in Kampala in April 1963 warned against the inherent danger of dictatorship that lies just below the surface in most nation-building exercises. The task of the church, concluded the assembly report, is to be "the watchman in the midst of

⁷⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez. *A Theology of Liberation*. London: SCM Press, 1974, 13.

the nation.”⁷⁵ At the most practical level this requires the church to develop concrete strategies in continuing solidarity and alliance with the poor which is invariably a logical implication of liberation theology to promote justice and equity in the new society. This could involve boycotts, civil disobedience, and political protests. These strategies were effectively employed at significant personal and communal cost in the struggle for independence and, where circumstances demand it, need to be resorted to yet again. But nation-building necessarily also involves a sharing in the process of government, in consultation and being part of the creation of a new justice-oriented culture and milieu.

Theological View to Political Questions in Africa

Another way that Christian Theology can aid the development of the people from their own perspective is through conversation on topical issues that arise in that realm. This may be referred to as social action, which is different from social ministry. While social ministry seeks to alleviate the sufferings of people, social action attempts to deal with the societal structures, which cause and perpetuate such sufferings. The call for this kind of involvement has come from different quarters. Kenneth Kaunda, a former president of Zambia, while referring to his country’s clergy and their nonchalant attitude to socio-political issues, stopped short of an outright indictment when he said, “is not a disproportionate amount of their time and intellectual talent solely devoted to matters of domestic ecclesiastical concern? Would it be unkind of me to say that many of the clergy have completely shut themselves off from the ongoing life of our nation”⁷⁶. These comments are revealing especially as they are coming from a political leader himself. The situation that is being described exists in varying degrees in other African countries. There is obvious need for the leaders of the Church to bring their intellectual talent into the service of their nation. Mwai Kibaki, a onetime Kenyan president, put it in a different way:

Politics and religion are inseparable. To suggest that politics should be left to politicians and religion to the clergy is a terrible intellectual arrogance... This way tends to suggest that through some mysterious magical process,

⁷⁵ Drumbeats from Kampala: Report of the First Assembly of the AA CC. London: Lutterworth, 1963). Reprinted in C. Villa-Vicencio *Between Christ and Caesar: Classic and Contemporary Texts on Church and State*. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1986, 175-76.

⁷⁶ John Enyinnaya. “A Theological Approach to Political Transformation in Africa”. *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* Vol. XI, 86.

some politicians have become specially qualified as to be the only ones to pronounce on political issues.⁷⁷

In this sense, there is an apparent unity that runs through the whole task of national development. Nation-building is one huge, demanding and multifaceted task that requires the contribution of all. A nation can use all the contribution it can get from her citizens in this enterprise. There are times when commitment to the nation will lead the church and her leaders to speak against a government and seek to make it accountable to the people. It must always be some in mind that the government and the nation are not synonymous. When a government, that is, the group of persons who have been charged with the running of the affairs of the state at a particular point in time, fails in carrying out the specific functions of state it has been assigned, then it introduces a state of conflict and oppression. This leads to disaffection and depression. To such Christian theologians cannot be silent. This is one of the ways Christian theology can be made to be of service in the process of nation building.

Hypothetically, Christian theology must even be open to the possibility of the use of revolutionary measures in the process of political transformation. When a government insists on policies that enslave and pauperize the citizens, the church must be open to the use of strong and far-reaching measures to remedy the situation. However, since revolutions as pointed out by Henry Okullu, are usually destructive and in many cases do not succeed in correcting the problems they set out to correct, it should be the primary duty of the Church to prevent revolution from happening.⁷⁸ This it can do by striving in the course of its witness to society to establish and maintain justice even if it means opposing the government of the day such that revolutionary uprising need not occur.

In this context, Jesus may be seen as the ultimate example in this effort to stand for the right and against the wrong. Contrary to the pictures of an apolitical Jesus which some have tried to paint, it can be seen that Jesus exerted a great deal of political influence. Richard Cassidy, in his work, "Jesus, Politics and Society", has shown how the Jesus of Luke's Gospel was indeed a serious threat to go man rule and any established authority which did not reflect the idea of society which he stood for.⁷⁹ His position regarding material possessions, the poor, women and other marginalized people was not consistent with the status quo. In response to

⁷⁷ Ibid., 87

⁷⁸ Ibid., 87

⁷⁹ Richard Cassidy. *Jesus, Politics and Society: A Study of Luke 's Gospel*. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979, 87.

a social order premise upon domination and exploitation, Jesus insisted that social relationship must be governed by the themes of service and humility. “He refused to defer to or cooperate with political officials who were responsible for maintaining unjust societal patterns, He even called Herod “that fox”⁸⁰ (Luke 13:32). All these may be understood as some form of social action towards nation building.

Great Christian thinkers through history have followed in this example of Jesus. Karl Barth, the renowned Swiss theologian of the last century, was known to have strongly opposed Nazism which led to his suspension from the University of Bonn. He even pioneered the convening of the “synod of Barmen” in 1934, which issued the “Barmen Declaration” opposing the policies of Nazi Germany. Dietrich Bonhoeffer of Germany also opposed Hitler’s regime at a time when many theologians had been cowed into obeisance and concurrence. North America had Martin Luther King Jr. who led the fight against the enslavement and oppression of African Americans in the United States of America. Finally, the contributions of Desmond Tutu of South Africa to the dismantling of apartheid is still within living memory⁸¹. These witnesses are examples of resources to nation building in their times. These are examples other African theologians and Church leaders can follow so that the Christian faith will continue to be relevant to the yearnings and aspirations of the people of Africa.

African Theological Reconstruction

The commitment of the church in Africa to take this obligation on itself emerged in the 1960s with the euphoria of independence sweeping across the Continent. World War II has cajoled Africans into defending "democratic freedom" and "self-determination" among the nations of North Africa and Europe. They had fought and died alongside their colonial masters, and they returned home, their hearts were fired with a desire for a freedom of their own.⁸² When independence came to nations that colonial powers had claimed during the last century in the scramble for Africa, the call was for the church to share in a nation-building process in order that the people of this continent is brought to stand on its feet. However, notes Andrew Hasting, an African church historian, the colonial task of the missionary had been simply to require African converts to remain indifferent to political concerns. As a result, many African Christians leaders saw

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 87

⁸¹ Cohrane, C. Arthur. “Barth, Karl”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th Ed., Vol. 2, 726.

⁸² Villa-Vicencio, Charles. “The Kingdom of God and People's Democracy Towards a Nation-Building Theology for Africa.” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Vol. 74 Mar 1991, 5.

no connection between religion and political liberation.⁸³ This has been a damaging opinion to our nation building theology in our contemporary times. Some, in turn, collaborated with their imperialist overloads abroad observes Shula Marks.⁸⁴ This hangover is still in play till today. The first general secretary of the All African Council of Churches (AACC), Donald M'Timkulu, in 1962 sought to incorporate the African will to be free into the life of the church. African Christians, he warned, "are growing impatient with so-called non-participation in politics.... Freedom from colonialism means the freedom and obligation of all nationals to participate in the nation's political life. It meant, he said, being "involved on the ground floor in the task of nation-building"⁸⁵ This is necessary because the people of a nation must be concerning all that affects political and religious. Because these are what the colonial masters effected Africa with. This view often robs our people of participation in political affairs.

Yet soon the euphoric expectation that political liberation would herald a new age of socio-economic development and political democracy, radically improving the quality of life of all Africans, was shattered. Colonial nations and super-powers were not prepared to surrender ideological and political influence in the former colonies--and neo-colonialism, corruption, and political opportunism turned the dream of independence into the nightmare of new forms of oppression for several African nations. First-world nations refused even within the limits of their own self-interest to redistribute the vast capital resources which they had derived from colonialism. They refused to loosen their strangle-hold on the world economy and African nations were plunged into debt, becoming trapped in the cycle of spiraling interest rates. To this was added the devastation of drought and famine, and the economic divide between African nations and their former masters increased.⁸⁶

Despite these devastating factors, there are African nations that have made outstanding progress since independence in building the essential infrastructures of education, health care services, communications, and social stability in the wake of war. Zimbabwe is only one such nation. At a continental level, however,

⁸³ A. Hastings. *A History of African Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 21.

⁸⁴ Shula Marks, "Ambiguities of Dependence: John L. Dube of Natal". *Journal of Southern Africa Studies* 1 1975, 126.

⁸⁵ M'Timkulu, D. *Africa in Transition: The Challenge and the Christian Response*. Geneva, AACC and WCC, 1962, 18.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

it is not an exaggeration to speak of the "failure of Africa." King Moshoeshoe II, in an important address to the Lesotho Council of Churches in 1988 observed with dismay that:

after more than thirty years of so-called development . . . millions of Africans are still constantly hungry, millions still live in entirely inadequate conditions and have grossly insufficient access to education, to health care, and many basic necessities for decent living. There is ample evidence, he suggests, to confirm that abject poverty in Africa has grown in proportions never experienced before.⁸⁷

A great deal of responsibility for this must be laid at the doors of generations of colonialism and the determination of neo-colonial powers who continue to dominate this continent. But not all the blame can be placed here.

Africa would be most irresponsible to suggest that it bears no responsibility for its plight. A child cannot a child forever. To do so would be to mimic the trivial excuses of former colonial dictators who insisted that it was the 'communists' and a few anarchical agitators who were responsible for the tyranny with which they were obliged to rule. Again, it demonstrates lack of confidence and patriotism to look inward for freedom. At the 1984 Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Archbishop Desmond Tutu called African delegates to the assembly to a special meeting, reporting that he had witnessed the violation of basic human rights in Africa that reminded him of what he had seen in South Africa. "Why have you been silent?" he asked the African church leaders. "While Africa is guilty of violating human rights," he continued, "our task in South Africa is made that much more difficult".⁸⁸

Trading moral blame aside, today in this 21st century, Africa is to shoulder the responsibility of her own burdens, and the great leaders of this continent Julius Nyerere, Robert Mugabe, and others are on record, as saying precisely this. This awareness, said King Moshoeshoe II, in his keynote address "has caused us to look to our own resources, to search the realms of our own culture, history and

⁸⁷ Villa-Vincenio 6.

⁸⁸ Desmond Tutu. "Black Theology/African Theology Soul Mates or Antagonists." *Journal of Religious Thought* Fall/Winter, 1975, p.8.

traditional religion, our own politics and economics, as well as our own African Christian faith".⁸⁹

Democratization of Leadership

For a genuine nation building to happen and appreciated, political and ecclesial leaders need to understand people's plight at all level. A nation-building theology which takes the liberatory incentive of the gospel seriously is necessarily a theology that supports and promotes democracy at every level of society. It operates from the assumption that the best and most effective way to ensure human rights and to promote the eradication of racism, sexism, and classism in society is to enable the full and unqualified participation of people of all races, all sexes, and all classes in all aspects of society. The gospel is a message of equality for all people before God. This has something to do with full participatory democracy.⁹⁰ A democracy that upholds and respects people right of choice of elective leadership where their votes count.

For the church authentically to promote this message, it is obliged to democratize its own structures. One of the consequences of the historic Constantinian alliance between church and state has been the emergence of a hierarchy of control in the church similar to that which exists within the state. Indeed, in many situations the church is today more authoritarian, more hierarchical, more oppressive and less democratic, and less participatory and less liberating than the state at many levels.

Judgment begins with the household of God. Today there is a revolution sweeping through the church. A new theological vision of the church's place in society is emerging from among ordinary, often oppressed, and frequently alienated Christians. Church leadership and theologians are to listen and learn afresh from such people, who are challenging ecclesial sexism, racism, and classism. A pertinent question is whether the new wine of God's liberatory presence that is sweeping across Southern and South Africa can be contained within the old wineskins of institutional church structures designed for a colonial age.

⁸⁹ King Moshoeshe II. "Key Note Address" 12 August 1988, Mazenod Conference Centre, Lesotho.

⁹⁰ Villa-Vicencio, Charles. "The Kingdom of God and People's Democracy Towards a Nation-Building Theology for Africa." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Vol. 74 Mar 1991, 11

Cultural Empowerment

A nation-building theology has a special obligation to empower the nation to become involved in the ongoing quest for national liberation, as well as political and economic independence. It is to be part of what Antonio Gramsci has called “a cultural battle to transform the popular mentality”.⁹¹ It is to facilitate the emergence of a social force that empowers the poor and marginalized people of society. For this to happen suggest Villa-Vicencio “the people of Africa are, without being parochial or isolationist are obliged to look to their own resources and discern the Spirit of the Lord within their own culture, history, and identity. Africans are to discover within the experiences of the political, economic, and social history of this continent resource with which to incarnate the spirit of liberation”⁹².

The biblical imperative speaks of the emergence of a new heaven and a new earth. For Paul this translates into an obligation to proclaim a message which gives rise to new people. The old Adam (and Eve) is to die and people are to be reborn in Christ. This, at the level of nation-building involves a theologically inspired new consciousness, grounded in moral and communal rather than material and individualistic incentives. The task of the church in this regard includes engagement in the constitutional process and law-making but also in promoting the social values inherent to the gospel, forgiveness, and a willingness to bear one another's burdens. Central to these values is an economic obligation to proclaim the values of economic justice. Relevant to this is the biblical teaching on the jubilee year within which injustices will be reversed as an incentive towards economic reconstruction. Recognizing that there is no single blueprint for economic reconstruction and that each emerging new society is obliged to rebuild structures from such resources and in relation to the levels of development that exist at a given time in history, the church has a special obligation to promote values that favor the poor and promote such levels of egalitarianism that are possible on earth. This is a task involving the important question as to which cultural resources best serve this responsibility. Nation-building and cultural empowerment are necessarily to be contextually specific according to the mentality and needs of the people. Too many politicians and national seers with limited popular support have sought to inspire a qualitatively different society on African soil by appealing exclusively to European-inspired doctrinaire Marxist ideologies, to the neglect of indigenous, contextual, and

⁹¹ Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith Edited. New York: International Publishers, 1971, 348.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 10.

religious values that have for centuries been part of the African psyche. The egalitarian and communal ideals of the Christian tradition though often buried under generations of some brands of missionary imperialistic religion which shows special concern for the marginalized of society are to be reaffirmed if the church is to contribute meaningfully to empowering the poor and creating a new society.

As Kwesi Dickson rightly observes, the continuing debate between African cultural theology dominant in many parts of Africa and South African black liberation theology is pursued continuously. The important question is whether the empowering and liberating resources being sought are to be found in mining cultural resources hidden within ancient pre-colonial traditions of Africa or within contemporary socio-economic and political circumstances.⁹³ Leaving aside the details of this debate, it is worth noting the observation of Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

African theology has failed to produce a sufficiently sharp cutting edge ... very little has been offered that is pertinent to the theology of power in the face of the epidemic of coups and military rule, about development, about poverty and disease and other equally urgent present-day issues. I believe this is where the abrasive black theology may have a few lessons for African theology.⁹⁴

Traditional symbols continue to be powerful ingredients in African culture in nation building theology. Black and other liberation theologies recognize, however, that human identity embraces more than culture. It also fundamentally embraces political and economic identity. Until African theology addresses these sources of alienation it does not address the hard reality of African deprivation and oppression. on the other hand, only to the extent that liberation theology develops a spirituality that speaks to the soul of Africa will it mobilize and empower the sons and daughters of this continent.⁹⁵

A theologically liberating African spirituality is yet to be born. African culture refuses to separate the sacred and the secular and it is here that a theology which

⁹³ Kwesi, Dickson. *Theology in Africa*. London: Longman and Todd, Maryknoll Orbis, 1984, 126.

⁹⁴ Desmond Tutu. "Black Theology/African Theology Soul Mates or Antagonists." *Journal of Religious Thought* Fall/Winter, 1975, 126.

⁹⁵ Villa-Vicencio, Charles. "The Kingdom of God and People's Democracy Towards a Nation-Building Theology for Africa." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Vol. 74 Mar 1991, 10.

empowers the poor must begin. When Africans celebrate their religion, John Mbiti has said “they dance it, they sing it, they act it”⁹⁶. Resistance culture in South Africa has incorporated that section of the church that is given to liberation, and religion has as such enriched and empowered the struggle against apartheid. In a new South Africa and today in independent sub-Sahara Africa, it is the task of the church to contribute towards a liberating culture of national unity. But that culture, like any other form of culture, can only emerge from the actual participation by the church in the struggle for liberating unity. Today in South Africa and elsewhere the struggle for political rights is giving rise to a culture offering the poor a sense of hope and human dignity. For the church to fail to share in this process is for the church to fail to address its liberating obligation to society. This kind of theology requires the church to rediscover public and communal service as a Christian vocation. The early Lutheran and Calvinist traditions are rich with teaching along these lines. A theology of public service is an important ingredient to a theology of nation-building. A nation-building theology suggests Villa-Vicencio:

has the important task of relativising all cultural prejudices before the unqualified gospel incentive that all of God's people might always become free in all situations. Theologically this means that all contemporary quests for human emancipation are to be weighed and measured against God's promise of total liberation. It also means that the Christian tradition itself needs to be weighed and assessed in the light of each new experience of liberation in society, which anticipates the eschatological rule of God on earth.⁹⁷

The Writings of the Church Fathers on Political Democracy

The teachings of many Church Fathers which were based on the Scriptures and Apostolic Tradition have helped to define genuine democracy and form the basis of many renowned democratic Constitutions, Legislation and Judiciary of many governments in nation building. Those that have left an impact on democratic governance include:

i. Clement of Alexandria's *Theologiae Sententiarum*

Through this document, the Church Father maintained that every Christian has a duty to support a government which has its roots in the Biblical principles of liberty, justice and legitimization. Good governance is willed by God. Good obedience to legitimate leadership is also willed by God. One can be a good

⁹⁶ Mbiti, S. John S. *An Introduction to African Religion*. London: Heinemann, 1975, 126.

⁹⁷ Villa-Vicencio, Charles, 11

Christian and achieve one's salvation while defending a political philosophy other than the political egalitarianism; just as one was able to be a practicing Christian in the days of the Roman Empire while accepting the regime of slavery, or while holding to the political rule of unquestionable dictatorship.⁹⁸

ii. Polycarp's De Trinitate Expositio

In this book, the martyr who died in 155 A.D. pointed out that leaders in secular society are God's ministers and stewards. They have, therefore, to look after the people with love, justice and humility. Most of all they have to help the people of God attain the eternal life that was won by Christ on Calvary. He further stressed that Christianity is simply living effectively and affectively, building healthy relationships between the Creator and the creatures. In his view, Christianity provides guidelines for the right way of achieving liberty and progress without exploiting others through jealousy, greed or war. The community which embraces faith, hope and love, embraces the Trinitarian God and Trinitarian liberty.

iii. St. Augustine's Humanae et Regulae Pastoralis Liber

Saint Augustine stressed that political leaders are duty-bound to care for the weak and poor members of the society by ensuring that justice, where the lowest in the society have a share of the created goods, is adhered to. Under Divine Law, every public officer is obliged to promote the cause of the poor at all costs and not merely out of the former's superfluous goods. Material benefits, where need arise, should be given with love while aiming at helping the recipients to develop themselves towards independence. The Saint observed farther that the greatness and prosperity of a government is determined by how its poorest are cared for. When every citizen (rich and poor alike) is empowered with knowledge, energy and tools for wholistic liberty and progress, then he/she serves best the community for the common good and salvation.

iv. St. Justin's Dialogus cum Tryphone

Saint Justin instructed that every government, must honour and advance the welfare of society as well as the dignity and total vocation of the human person. It is important that every human being created in the image of God understands and obeys intelligently God's Law in the community. The voter and the elected should both follow this Law since nobody is above it and nobody is beside it. It is only the person who is guided by the Divine Law that becomes the source, the

⁹⁸ Majawa, Clement. "The Church's Role in Defining Genuine Democracy in Africa". AFER, Vol. 42 No. 1 - No. 2 Feb - Apr 2000, 61.

centre and the purpose of societal living towards liberty and salvation. This was confirmed by St. Basil in, *Destruam Lorrea Mea*, when he wrote:

The fundamental purpose of societal governance and living must not be the mere living together without a vision. It must not be a mere multiplication of citizens for a big state. It must not be for personal fame, or profit, or domination. Rather, it must be for the service of God and human beings; and indeed, of the whole human beings, viewed in terms of Christian principles and the demands of his intellectual, moral, cultural, spiritual and religious life. Christian life should 'not' be separated from genuine politics, since the two vocations are the servants of the same Trinitarian God.⁹⁹

By such understanding, a theology of nation building is realized.

Christian Involvement in Politics

The need for Christians' involvement in politics is not just a demand for mere fulfilment of participation but of a call to transform the society for the common good for which a man or woman is tasked with. The Gospel has the power to transform political structures. If as the Bible says authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus (Matthew 28:18), how will authority come about without our involvement in transforming the society in the direction of good governance? How do we bring his kingdom to bear on this world if the world is left in the hands of evil people? If Christ is both the king and the judge of his kingdom, and he is the designer and the constructor of the kingdom, Christians can only be co-operators with him in the process of his kingdom as reflected in politics and other social involvements. Aside, in canvassing for political positions, Christians must exercise their franchise by going to polls at all elections to cast their votes for the right individuals to deliver on the goods of good governance.

As John Ojo assents, "if Christians are truly expecting the coming of the king, the Christ, they must get ready by preparing the world in all areas including politics for him. If the world is corrupt, Christians must prevent it from further corruption even if they cannot redeem the corrupted".¹⁰⁰ If the world is corrupt, it is because Christians are corrupt, and if the world is liberated from corruption and decay, it is because Christians have participated in its transformation by

⁹⁹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

using inherent power of the gospel.¹⁰¹ When Christ then returns He will bring perfection to the world bettered by His disciples.

Christians today can do more than comforting and healing those who are victims of structural evils by not giving them only aids. They should attack or prevent the evils themselves in order to reduce the number of victims to be cared for. One of the ways to do this is to be involved in the machinery to operate the structures of the society. The Church has been performing the role of a Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). It has been caring and comforting those who are hurt not only by thieves but also by oppressive structures. The Church, however, should not be satisfied or comfortable with this mission alone, though important. It must struggle to prevent thieves, predators and oppressive powers from harming their victims who are innocent people of God. This prevention is better than cure. The Church should be seen preventing crises rather than waiting to care and comfort victims of crises. This is why the mission of justice, development and peace organ of the church should go beyond providing aids to victims of insurgency.

Biblical revelation calls Christians to commitment to God with their whole life in the service to their neighbours. Politics forms a part of human life and it is not irreconcilable to the general purpose of creation. It is part of human stewardship under the sovereignty of the Lord of history. Christians should not divide the world in their understanding of it. "Instead, we should have an integral sense of one life in one world under one king who will judge our political life".¹⁰² Government is part of God's will and God's means of controlling or regulating human affairs in the society. Many of the social ills in the society are traceable to structural problems caused by political leaders, who stir the atmosphere with many preventable social problems in the society. Good leaders are God's servants. They serve God by rewarding good deeds and punishing evils (Rom 13:3-4). Justice and transformation can only be expected when God-conscious men and women take active part in political as well as other sectors of their communities.

The Role of the Church in Promoting New Democratic Order

Undeniably, the Church is and remains the conscience of society. This means that the Church can never adopt an attitude of being satisfied with the status quo. However good the social situations may appear to be, it is the mission of the

¹⁰¹ Barga, Timothy. *Pastoral Challenges of the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching to African Traditional Values*. Jos: Pastoral Institute Press, 2018, 58.

¹⁰² Ojo, A. John. "A Case for Christian Involvement in Politics for Justice and Peace". *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* Vol. XIX (2) 2014, 84.

Church to strive to make it even better. The Church's relevance, as the conscience of the society, is embedded in its incessant challenging of the status quo. It is on this basis that any new political order with which the populace can identify and hold as their own must be central to Church's evangelical mission. Consequently, the Church should endeavour to address the root causes of present threats to democracy. All human affairs are imperfect, and so is the practice of democracy. Due to disillusionment and apathy towards politics, the general public hardly believes in the common good. Working for a better social order, a better polity, in contemporary Africa is something that is often taken for granted. In an ideally democratic society the common good depends not on the ethical efforts of the individual leaders. It is guaranteed a priori through the social structures. This is because ethical behavior is always at risk it is always imperfect and changing. Therefore, the freedom and justice of the state must be moved from individuals onto societal structures. The Church must preach against oppressive structures as well as think of better ways to build them a new. The Church must condemn and label any democratic sin as a social and structural sin. In all, it is not the ethical principles and behaviour of the political class that carry the structures. Rather, the structures themselves should shape how those who live and work in them behave.

Another compelling challenge that African democracy faces is the so-called tyranny of numbers brought about by political mergers or gladiators who seek power at all cost. The so-called political mergers in contemporary democracies in Africa can at best be described as disunited hostile juxtaposition of individuals supported by lack of information and by the sacrifice of ethics on the altar of human relationships. Politicians unite for nothing else but political expedience of winning votes, and not on anything that can further the common good of the populace. This is a sheer rejection and invalidation of morality for which the Church stands.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Yaye, Christopher Oyó. "Rethinking Democratic Structures in Africa: Towards an Integrated Consensual Theory". *AFER*, Vol. 59 Nos. 1 - 2 Mar - Jun 2017, 144-6.