



An “Absence of God” from Public Life? The Disconnect between Faith and Life in the Church in Nigeria

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Nigerians profess and worship God everywhere—including in public places—but too many leaders behave as if God were absent from public life. Though Christians and Muslims alike believe that leadership comes from God, for many the God in whom they claim to believe is not a God they truly fear. Worship functions to secure public approval rather than to promote public good. Regrettably, this occurs in a country where Christians constitute a significant percent of the population. So, we must ask: Where is the public vocation of the church? Do Nigerian Christians separate their faith from the life they lead in public office? What are the consequences for national development of divorcing faith from public life?

In this essay, I attempt to answer these questions, while arguing the need for the church to reclaim its public vocation of living out the faith in the public sectors of our national life. In the first part of the essay, I explore the inadequate public vocation of the church; in the second part, I discuss the implications of connecting faith and life in the public sphere, something that might produce a national transformation.

God only appears to be absent in Nigerian public life, because of the presence of many corrupt leaders and the failure of the church to challenge them. The lack of public involvement of the church is denial not only of the goodness of creation and incarnation but also of Christ himself.

INADEQUATE PUBLIC VOCATION OF THE CHURCH

The church is experiencing phenomenal growth in Nigeria, perhaps as nowhere else in Africa. John Thomas Didymus claims that the church in sub-Saharan Africa has grown from 9 million in 1990 to almost 400 million in 2012. He reports, “Nigeria alone has over 80 million Christians, more Protestants than in Germany where the Reformation began.”¹ In fact, a casual visit to public places in Nigeria will no doubt convince one there is a close connection between the faith Nigerians profess and the life they lead when in public office. Religious symbols and language are displayed and used in public places without reservation. The Bible is used by Christians while taking the oath of public office. There are many state government houses in Nigeria with a chapel built by the government where Christian public officers worship on Sunday and pray together during working hours on weekdays. Since religious faith permeates virtually every aspect of the private and public lives of Nigerian Christians, one might expect that this faith would restrain them from committing structural sins in public office.

But ungodliness reigns in Nigeria, in the form of injustice, bribery, and corruption in public life. The Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index 2011 ranked Nigeria as the 143rd most corrupt country out of 183 countries in the world.² Money laundering, corruption, and other related public crimes are rampant. The faith Christians profess, which should spontaneously inform their actions, does not seem to impact their conduct in public life. The effect of this disconnect between faith and life on national development is not hard to perceive. Nigeria, which is home to over 150 million people, is ranked as the sixth largest exporter of petroleum in the world.³ Nevertheless, despite all of this wealth, the great majority of Nigerian citizens are poor⁴ due to a form of ungodly leadership⁵ that abuses power and authority to oppress and impoverish the people. In the face of this, the church has done little.

Unhappily, significant numbers of public servants who appear religious in their respective churches are the same people who act in “ungodly” fashion in their discharge of public responsibility. The same public servants who are respected as

¹John Thomas Didymus, “Images of Indigenous Nigerian Churches—Christianity in Africa,” *Digital Journal Reports*, April 21, 2012, at <http://digitaljournal.com/article/323394> (accessed April 23, 2013).

²Countries and territories are scored from 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (very clean). Nigeria scored a 2.4. Olukorede Yishau, “Transparency International Ranks Nigeria 143th [sic] on Corruption Index,” *The Nation*, February 12, 2011, at <http://www.thenationonlineng.net/2011/index.php/news/28348-transparency-international-ranks-nigeria-143th-on-corruption-index.html> (accessed April 23, 2013).

³Sa’idu Sulaiman, “Rich Nation, Poor Citizens: The Missing Links for Increasing Output and Alleviating Poverty in Nigeria,” January 23, 2008, at http://www.africaeconomicanalysis.org/articles/gen/rich_nation.html (accessed April 23, 2013).

⁴As of 2010, the National Bureau of Statistics estimated that 60.9% Nigerians live on less than \$1 per day. Gbola Subair, “Nigeria’s Poverty Level Rises, Hits 71.5% ; Sokoto, Niger Top List of Poorest States,” February 13, 2012, *Nigerian Tribune*, at <http://tribune.com.ng/index.php/front-page-news/35947-nigerias-poverty-level-rises-hits-715-sokoto-niger-top-list-of-poorest-states> (accessed April 23, 2013).

⁵By “ungodly leadership” I mean a type of leadership that neither fears God nor loves the other in the discharge of its public responsibilities.

upstanding members of their churches are also those who indulge in all sorts of fraudulent and vicious corrupt and unjust practices in public office.⁶ Femi Aribisala puts it more bluntly:

Thieves and robbers are Satan's gifts to the churches. Visit the mega-churches in Nigeria and you will discover the people seating [sic] in the front-row are the big-time thieves who have robbed the country blind. Everybody knows they are crooks; nevertheless, they have pride of place in the churches. Their seats are reserved. The messages preached are carefully-crafted [sic] so they are not offended and remain comfortable in their thievery.⁷

Church leaders often preach against corruption and injustice in high places, but they do not reject the huge donations from members proven beyond any reasonable doubt to be corrupt. To exacerbate matters, the church too often resists rather than aids the popular public protests organized by civil society and patriotic Nigerians opposed to corruption and the mismanagement of public resources. Such popular protests are often considered by the church as a breach of public peace; yet what actually breaches public peace is not the fight for justice and liberation but the perpetration of injustice and oppression. For the church, the public peace is maintained when Nigerians uncritically remain silent rather than speak out in protest against injustice and corruption.

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The church in Nigeria is so obsessed with self-preservation and personal salvation that it has little or nothing to do with issues of justice in public life. This explains why the church is preoccupied with sustaining its oppressive hierarchical power structures rather than public engagement. The church in Nigeria is, therefore, increasingly abandoning a model of servant leadership, as exemplified by Christ himself, for a model based on power. This abandonment has resulted in hierarchical structures of leadership that alienate clergy from the laity—the very clergy/lay distinction that Luther condemned at the time of the Reformation. Samuel Zalanga suggests that

Protestant African Christianity is just like pre-reformation Christianity in terms of its structure and how it treats the laity—very hierarchical. Protestants at one point attacked the Catholic Church on the question of hierarchy but they are as hierarchical, if not more, compared to Catholic Church in this respect. Some leaders of Protestant churches are more difficult to reach com-

⁶“EFCC: Former PHB Boss Atuche Used Stolen Funds To Pay N45m Church Tithes,” *SaharaReporters*, September 26, 2013, at <http://saharareporters.com/news-page/efcc-former-phb-boss-atuche-used-stolen-funds-pay-n45m-church-tithes> (accessed April 23, 2013).

⁷Femi Aribisala, “Money Laundering in the Churches,” *Vanguard*, Octover 7, 2012, at <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/10/money-laundering-in-the-churches/> (accessed April 23, 2013).

pared to when Jesus was living and traveling across Palestine....Some denominational leaders have security guards. Jesus, however, rebuked his disciples when they were chasing people from coming close to him.⁸

Too many Nigerian church leaders consider themselves to be the supreme lords of their churches. Tragically, many of these leaders now demand the same privileges accorded secular leaders, whether or not their members can afford it. The “big man” complex, which is the characteristic feature of Nigerian political leadership, has crept into the church. The church often identifies itself with those in power—with the rich and the privileged rather than the poor and the oppressed. Some church leaders live an ostentatious lifestyle at the expense of poor members who do not even have enough to eat and yet are required to contribute towards the development of the church. This only translates into personal aggrandizement of the church leaders.⁹ Zalanga writes,

The lifestyle of many Pentecostal ministers who have private jets is the functional equivalent of the life of the Renaissance Popes. Christianity among the great majority of denominations in Nigeria and Africa has become domesticated and bourgeois-ified. Its egalitarian principles have been siphoned out of it. The message of Christ has been repackaged to fit the demands of neoliberal consumer capitalism....Material wealth has become the best indicator of one’s position in Christ.¹⁰

The mainline churches see God’s mission in the world merely in term of saving lost souls and preparing people for heaven, not minding that we are saved by Jesus not merely to go heaven, but to live an abundant life here in this world (John 10:10). Preaching is too often moral exhortation rather than proclamation of the gospel. Intended to address personal moral issues, it hardly addresses systemic evils perpetrated in public service.

The manner of living out faith and life in the public sphere is no better among the neo-Pentecostal churches. Though they believe salvation is not just a spiritual and moral transformational experience but also liberation from material predicaments such as sickness and poverty, they do not address injustice, which is the fundamental cause of these predicaments. The neo-Pentecostal “gospel,” which hinges on the individual’s attainment of material success, tends to exacerbate rather than reduce corrupt practices in the country because it fails to address the means through which the material success of all is attained.

Sadly, there is a nonchalant attitude among churches in Nigeria, whether mainline or neo-Pentecostal, toward political and social injustice. There is no theological or biblical basis for the Nigerian church to remain publicly insensitive.

⁸Samuel Zalanga, “In the Name of God... the Commoditization of Faith: The Need for African Liberation Theology,” n.d., at http://www.baobabafrikaonline.com/faith_as_commodity.htm (accessed April 23, 2013).

⁹See George Arbuthnott, “Bishop Oyedepo Accused of Exploiting British Worshippers - DailyMail,” *Sahara Reporters*, October 21, 2012, at <http://saharareporters.com/news-page/bishop-oyedepo-accused-exploiting-british-worshippers-dailymail> (accessed April 23, 2013).

¹⁰Zalanga, “In the Name of God.”

Many Nigerian churches have been very good at offering strict biblical injunctions regarding sexual morality, but have failed to address the poverty and social injustice that are the basic causes of our economic and political misery. The church should do the latter without neglecting the former.

Sexual morality, no matter how important, is not the heart of the gospel. Jesus did not say in Nazareth, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim the good news of sex and marriage,” but rather “to bring good news to the poor...release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). No wonder Paul argues that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking (and by extension, of marrying and giving in marriage) but of peace, justice, and righteousness (Rom 14:17, cf. Matt 23:23).

IMPLICATIONS OF CONNECTING FAITH AND LIFE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

“Faith,” as used in this essay, means neither human assent to facts about divine salvation nor the exercise of our human virtue and emotional commitment to Christ. Faith is the gift of righteousness bestowed on us by God in Christ by which we are transformed into a new creation. Thus, faith is not what we have to do nor a decision we have to make for Christ. Rather, because of what Christ has achieved for us, we are set free to believe and rejoice in God. As Gerhard Forde claims, “God does not wish to be one in whom you have to believe but rather one in whom you would want to believe. God has acted in Jesus so as to set us free for that. God wants to be desired and enjoyed for his own sake, to be more than just needed or necessary.”¹¹ Suggesting that hearing is the means through which faith is created, Forde insists that faith is “the state of being grasped and captivated in the Spirit by the proclamation of what God has done in Jesus.”¹² The object of faith is the external and sacramental word of God’s promise, the certainty of which does not depend on our will, but upon God’s faithfulness to the promise even while we are unfaithful.

Therefore, since we live not by sight, but by faith alone, individual Christian life is not something internally or externally perceptible to us by sight. As Walther von Loewenich accurately states, “The Christian life can never be fully identified with the empirical life that we lead. The Christian life is an object of faith and, as such, it is hidden. What we see is never the real thing; only God and faith see this innermost core.”¹³ Von Loewenich, who likens our life to hidden treasure in a field, says that whatever is affirmative in our life is hidden under contradiction: a wholly righteous and wholly sinful life.¹⁴ Such hiddenness of our Christian life safeguards the faith-centeredness of the Christian life. The reality of our Christian life is hence

¹¹Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 140.

¹²Ibid., 137.

¹³Walther von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) 114.

¹⁴Ibid.

eschatologically bound with Christ. Because we have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. Our life, which is also a gift, is then nothing but a life of being conformed to Christ, meaning Christ taking form in us.

In effect, our faith is our life and vice versa.¹⁵ The two are not mutually exclusive. The church cannot and will not have one without the other. We cannot draw a sharp distinction between faith and life without doing violence to both. Neither our faith nor our life is merely a personal virtue detached from real-life situations. The faith that is bestowed on us on account of Christ does not inspire us to live a life of indolence and ungodliness but induces us to give what is due to God: to fear God and to love the other. According to Martin Luther, “a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.”¹⁶ Thus, Christians cannot separate faith and life in their public work. Faith that is active in love, seeking to serve the neighbor, is the life of the church, while justice is the public expression of that faith active in love. It is not merely within the church but in the public domain where Christians are mandated in and through Christ to lead a responsible faith and life.

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However, the church in Nigeria spreads the values of the dominant class rather than exposing the injustices of public leaders. As Ahmed Olayinka Sule puts it, “the church has often been silent to the corruption perpetuated by the political class and has accommodated criminal bankers that have impoverished millions of depositors and shareholders. The church has become a radio that broadcasts the ideas and principles of the privileged class to its congregation rather than a television that exposes the injustices of the oppressor.”¹⁷ One does not have to be a champion of social justice to see this as a clear aberration of God’s mission for the world—a mission in which the church has been invited to participate. But if we accept the argument that we are saved by Jesus not merely to go heaven but also to contribute to a flourishing life for all here in the world, then whatever impedes such flourishing life in the public sphere must be addressed by the church. It will,

¹⁵Ontologically, of course, life precedes and transcends faith, for where there is no life, there is no faith. Faith, however, is essential in connecting life with its creator and fellow creatures in this life and hereafter.

¹⁶Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 623.

¹⁷Ahmed Olayinka Sule, “The Nigerian Church Leadership and Social Justice,” *Arise Nigeria*, n.d., at <http://www.arisenigeria.org/people-news/the-nigerian-church-leadership-and-social-justice.php> (accessed April 23, 2013).

therefore, matter to the church whether or not the government ensures that there is availability of gas, free and fair elections, security of life and property, and provision of the legitimate needs of the people in the country. Such a church will not turn a blind eye to corruption, embezzlement, and the illegal accumulation of public funds by the few to the detriment of the majority. Such a church will join other progressive Nigerians who are calling for the arrest and prosecution of those indicted for oil subsidy scams, bribery scandals in the national assembly, police pension scams, and other public crimes.

The gifts of faith and life that are bestowed on the church through word and sacrament invite the church to embody these same gifts in the public and private spheres of human endeavors. The church, like Jesus, must liberate the victims of economic and political injustice and oppression, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned. Even when the church does not have either the “gold” or “silver” to serve the other in this capacity, the church is not exonerated from carrying on this task. The church must bear its prophetic witness of calling and holding accountable the public authorities charged with this social responsibility.

It is disheartening that, instead of challenging Nigerian corrupt politicians to wake up to their social responsibility, “some Prophets,” as Collins Ugwu charges, “today arrange for prayers for these corrupt leaders and kings not to rebuke them of their legion of evils but to ask God to release more blessings to them.”¹⁸ In my opinion, what Nigeria desperately needs at this critical point of its national development is not merely a church where the gospel is rightly preached and sacraments rightly administered inside the church doors, but a church that lives its faith, individually and corporately, in everyday life with a view to bringing about socioeconomic and political transformation while inspiring others to do the same. True “right” preaching would free believers to do just that.

As Jesus, whose faith and life of the church were countercultural, challenged the oppressive and enslaving sociopolitical and political structures of his day and insisted on the applications of the mandates of the kingdom of God, the church needs to be critical of unjust government policies and programs. The church should support and encourage all government policies and programs that promote and protect human life and enable it to flourish, while resisting publicly those who deny and impoverish the Nigerian masses. In a society devastated by pain and suffering of religious violence and reeling under massive corruption, violent crime, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, poverty, unemployment, and gender discrimination, the church’s faith challenges it to be nothing other than a community with and for the other. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “The church is the church only when it exists for others.... The church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human

¹⁸Collins Ugwu, “Prophecy and State Leadership in Nigeria: The Nathan–David Experience,” *Society for Research and Academic Excellence*, n.d., at http://www.academicexcellencesociety.com/prophecy_and_state_leadership_in_nigeria.html (accessed April 23, 2013).

life, not dominating, but helping and serving....In particular,...[the church] will have to take the field against the vices of *hubris*, power worship, envy, and humbug, as the roots of all evil.”¹⁹ The church is thus not called to reign over its members, but to serve them by actively participating in their suffering in the fashion of the crucified triune God. The church is not called to fight for self-preservation but rather to pour itself out as a libation in service to the “insignificant” ones, both within and outside the church, and for all of God’s creation.

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The church that is committed to promoting the just cause of the poor and the marginalized will hardly view public protest against injustice and corrupt practices as a breach of public peace. Such a church will insist that public peace without justice and liberation is an unjust peace, a type of peace that is sustained at the expense of the poor and the marginalized. Sunday Ola Makinde, the Prelate of the Methodist Church in Nigeria, alleges that participation of clergy in civil demonstration against unjust policy of the government amounts to fusing politics with religion and inciting people against the government,²⁰ but true public peace is not the absence of public protest and demonstration against structural evils; it is the presence of justice, equity, and respect for rule of law. The public peace that provides an atmosphere conducive for public leaders to loot public resources meant for the common good without resistance from the people is ungodly peace. The church, therefore, owes it to God and humanity not only to disturb such an ungodly peace, but also to inspire its disturbance until just peace is restored.

Christian faith in the triune God is a public faith. As the church confesses its faith in public, so the church must live out that faith in public. The church whose life is informed by faith will not be obsessed with its own power and authority, but with service to the other—to humanity and the world. The church will be an instrument not just of spiritual redemption, but of socioeconomic and political transformation. Such a church will be proactive in public life by holding political leaders accountable for corruption, injustice, insecurity, and marginalization of the poor.

As Anglican Bishop Michael Olusina Fape has argued, “the Church has lost that prophetic voice in Nigeria today. It’s a pity. And until we go back to the basics and ask God to make us repossess the original vision of the Church as the light of

¹⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Letter to Eberhard Bethge, August 1944,” in *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson (New York: HarperOne, 1990) 512.

²⁰Mayowaak, “Methodist Prelate-Ola Makinde Accuses Bakare over Protest/Rally,” January 22, 2012, <http://www.nairaland.com/852106/methodist-prelate-ola-makinde-accuses-bakare> (accessed April 23, 2013).

the world....We have compromised the Christian faith.”²¹ The intimate alliance of many church leaders with those in the corridors of power has prevented them from reproaching political leaders as Nathan did when he rebuked King David. They need to say, “You are the man” who has murdered and dispossessed the poor and powerless! The salvation that the triune God gives the church is wholistic, embracing both soul and body. The lack of public involvement of the church is a denial not only of the goodness of creation and incarnation, but also of Christ himself, whom the church confesses as the nerve center of its faith.

The triune God is active through the Spirit in all facets of human lives, including public life, sustaining not only the whole creation, but bringing about true peace and justice on earth as in heaven. It is not this God who is absent from public life in Nigeria. Missing, rather, is the fear of God and the love of neighbor. This is what must be recovered for our dear country to experience the cutting edge of socioeconomic and political development. This will require the deliberate and harmonious expression of faith and life in every sector of national public life. The church cannot accomplish this task in isolation. It will have to work in collaboration with groups in civil society that have a stake in resisting injustice and promoting godly peace and justice in the country. The church that disconnects faith from public life disconnects itself from the source of faith and life: the triune God, who ordained public institutions for public good. Such a church is therefore “dead” even if it appears sacramentally vibrant, for the triune God who encounters us in word and sacraments is always equally active in the public arena. 

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²¹Chris Irekamba, “How to Regain Church’s Lost Prophetic Voice by Fape,” *Guardian*, at <http://www.nguardiannews.com/index.php?option=comcontent&view=article&id=107065:how-to-regain-churhcs-lost-prophetic-voice-by-fape-&catid=102:ibru-ecumenical-centre&Itemid=596> (accessed December 17, 2012).