

THE THEOLOGIAN AND THE QUESTION OF SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Peter Adeyemi

The social relevance of professionals such as medical doctors, lawyers, engineers, economists and political scientists etc, is usually taken for granted. But can the same be said of professional theologians in the contemporary world with its hedonistic, utilitarian and humanistic tendencies?

The question of the social relevance of theologians is not as simple as it appears. We need to identify who the theologian is and what constitutes social relevance in the contemporary world. It is interesting for us to note that there was a time in human history when theological knowledge was the arbiter of epistemological inquiry. Such is no longer the case.

Theologians and the Scope of Theology

The theologian, within the context of this paper, includes all those who have acquired a body of knowledge in the sacred sciences and are duly certified by competent ecclesiastical institutions. They may be priests or trained lay people. The term will also include those who have custody of the *magisterium* of the church. Our understanding of social relevance refers to the usefulness of theology, as a body of knowledge that deals with the ultimate truth about the phenomenon of man, in answering questions pertaining to human existence, and providing solutions to problems facing mankind in its own peculiar way. Edward Coleson describes the question of social relevance of theology succinctly:

Long ago theology was the queen of the sciences, the starting point for any serious investigation in every field of learning. Now it is just another subject, a specialized area that is ingrown and makes



little effort to answer all those difficult questions that plague the human family today.¹

From the foregoing social relevance within the context of our discourse covers all facets of human endeavor. There is the tendency to reduce "social relevance" to justice and peace activities alone, that view is too narrow in scope. Contrary to the claim Edward Coleson stated above we shall argue for the position that the social relevance of theology even in the contemporary world with its scientific discoveries and ideologies should never be in doubt. Theology has never been on the sideline in the quest to find solutions to human problems and difficult questions.

Despite their wonderful contributions, a vast area of human endeavor is yet to be explored by Nigerian theologians. The social relevance of theology has no bounds, it interacts with human sciences like, psychology, sociology and anthropology, physical sciences like physics, astrophysics, quantum physics, astronomy, cosmology, biological sciences such as genetic engineering and molecular biology, health sciences such as medicine and nursing, and even humanities courses like law, counseling, history, all in the attempt to find meaning to human existence. Indeed, some theologians in Nigeria have demonstrated and written extensively to justify the social relevance of theologians within the scope of socio-political and economic perspectives. For example, Dokun Oyesola, Dominican priest and Senior Lecturer in the Dept. of International Relations, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife has been championing the social relevance of theologians on issues that bother on environmental degradation, preservation and maintenance.²

While our theologizing must concretely address existential problems in our society, it should not end there. Theologians possess a corpus of knowledge that is not restricted to Nigeria/African problems alone but is of universal spectrum. Our problem in Nigeria/Africa today may bother on hunger, injustice, political instability and the hydra headed

¹ Edward Coleson, "The Relevance of Theology" in *Creation, Social Science and*

Humanities Society, Quarterly Journal, <http://www.creationism.org/esshs/>

² See his *Essentials of Environmental Issues* (Daily Graphics Publications, Ibadan 1995).

monster called corruption. But to think that cloning is none of our business, that nuclear disarmament is not our cup of tea, that the intrusion of information technological inventions into human privacy is a western headache, or to dismiss new discoveries in quantum physics that have redefined human understanding of time and space as the figment of the imagination of the more comfortable people in the developed countries, is to be ignorant of the primacy and the universality of theology as a corpus of knowledge which is the basis and summit of all human quest for knowledge.

Challenging the Social Relevance of Theologians

The popular maxim that "philosophy does not bake bread", equally applies to theology at its face value. What has the theologian to contribute to the national economy concretely? If man were to live on bread alone, we would have thrown theology overboard easily as a useless enterprise. But Jesus Christ the master theologian provided the answer succinctly in Mt. 4:4; "Human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." This same word of God was the creative force behind creation, bread inclusive.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) classified the evolution of knowledge into three stages moving in succession from theological stage, to metaphysical stage and finally the scientific stage which is the contemporary level of human inquiry. According to his classification, theology is an old body of knowledge that has outlived its usefulness. If this were to be true, the theologian would have no relevance, whether social or other wise, in the contemporary computer age. Karl Marx (1818-1883) dismissed religion as the "opium of the people". This would make of theologians fraudulent people capitalizing on other people's ignorance to make a living. David Hume condemned theological knowledge to be nothing but "sophistry and illusion".³ Friedrich Nietzsche

³ See Joseph Omiregbe, *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy* Vol. II (Oja Press Ltd, Lagos, 1991).

declared the death of God, which brought about human freedom. With the death of God and human Freedom in Nietzsche's view the theologian obviously becomes irrelevant. But if Nietzsche belonged to the past, his ideas refused to die with him. The Millennium edition of *The Economist* published in December 1999 published an obituary of God. The obituary carried an artist's image of God with a caption under it which reads as follows: "After a lengthy career, the Almighty recently passed into history, or did he?" K.C. Anyanwu argued that the death of God is a commentary on the predicament of the western man's situation in the world, that he has become self-alienated, lost his world and thereby lost God. In other words he has destroyed the proper context within which God is a meaningful reality.⁴

The point of this excursus into the past is to unearth dissident voices against the relevance of theologians in the contemporary world and to demonstrate that our topic of discourse has not been left unquestioned in the past. Moreover, a scholarly work must recognize opposing views while not necessarily accepting them. One fact emerges from the critical views mentioned above: that man is gradually losing the context within which God is a meaningful reality. Added to this is the utilitarian approach to Christian faith as demonstrated by the wave of Pentecostalism sweeping through the world over. It is within the dismal scenario described above that the theologian will have to demonstrate his social relevance and shine out as a lone star in the dark sky.

Despite the plethora of opposition, there are convincing evidences that the theologian is no less relevant in the contemporary world than the economist, engineer, doctor, lawyer, political scientist, psychologist or astronomer etc. The theologian stands as the guardian of the source knowledge establishing the purpose for which man was created. I make bold to claim that all human endeavors are meant to find meaning to the question of human existence and no human discipline answers the question better than theology. Theology stands out as the moderator of other disciplines, being the oldest body of knowledge from which others evolved. Theology deals with the relationship between God and creation

⁴ K. C. Anyanwu, K. C. "The Death of God: A Coroner's Inquest" published in *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy* ()

and to do away with theology is to attempt to rule the world created by God without God.

At this juncture we can now proceed to enumerate and justify some points on social relevance of the theologian.

The Theologian and the Struggle for Liberation

All over the world, from so called advanced countries to "third world" countries of Africa, theologians have always been at the fore front of the struggle for political and economic liberation, fighting the cause of the poor and the down trodden. Theologians do not fight for human liberation for the fun of it. The basis of such struggle is seen as a divine mandate. The focus is on God who freely created the world out of his love for man. Each human person created in the image and likeness of God is therefore under the custody of theology to be cared for and his rights defended vigorously. Their fight is always linked with their view on God and his interest in the world he created.

Donald Door observed that: "Church leaders and local churches in various parts of the world have already demonstrated what a remarkable contribution they can make once they commit themselves to promoting integral human liberation."⁵ Among outstanding theologians to be mentioned are Desmond Tutu, activists theologians like Frank Chikane and Albert Nolan all in South Africa where they fought the apartheid regime to a stand still. In Latin America Church leaders like Helder Camara, Oscar Romero and theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez and John Sobrino fought for the liberation of the poor masses. In the Philippines, the Catholic Church, led by Cardinal Jaime Sin of Manila, allied with other relevant institutions to bring the oppressive and corrupt government of Ferdinand Marcos to its knees.⁶

⁵ Donald Door, *The Social Justice Agenda* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1991), pp. 120-121.

⁶ Matthew Kukah, ed, *Nigeria Towards a Just and Democratic Society* (Lagos: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, pp. 36-37).

Back home in Nigeria, the efforts of Cardinal Anthony Okogie (Catholic), Bishop Bolanle Gbonigi (Anglican) and Sunday Mbang (Methodist Prelate) coupled with the untiring activities of some Catholic theologians contributed in no small measure to the eventual collapse and the disgraceful exit of the military from Nigerian politics. During the dark era of military dictatorship in Nigeria George Ehusani wrote to encourage Nigerians, keeping their hope alive thus:

It is important for us Christians to know that we are not helpless. There is a lot we can do. In the face of social injustice, of oppression, of military dictatorship and arbitrary rule, the followers of Christ are not helpless. Amidst the great disparity between the wealthy and the poor, the Church of Christ is not helpless.⁷

From the foregoing it is crystal clear that theologians have been playing major roles in the struggle for human liberation by providing justification and impetus for the struggle. Donald Dorr confirmed the point that theologians perform the duty of liberation by "putting people in touch with the authentic message of the scriptures and the challenge and hope which it brings."⁸

It is pertinent for us to point out that the involvement of Catholic theologians in liberation activities is never an isolated or personal agenda but a struggle within the universal mission of the Church as the light of the world and strictly in conformity with the teachings of the Church.

The Theologian as Advocate of Justice and Peace

If there is anything relevant to the human social milieu it is justice and peace. And if there is anyone who is interested in these societal values the theologian ranks next to none.

From prophets like Moses who

⁷ George Ehusani, *A Prophetic Church* (Ede: Provincial Pastoral Institute Publication, 1996), p. 104.

⁸ See Donald Dorr, *Option for the poor: Catholic Social Teaching* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992).

confronted the all powerful King Pharaoh in Egypt with "let my people go", to prophet Nathan who confronted King David over Uriah's wife and the unjust murder of Uriah, to prophet Elijah who confronted king Ahab over Naboth's vineyard, to prophet Amos who confronted the rich people of Samaria who were selling the poor for a pair of sandals. The culmination is the declaration of Jesus Christ in the synagogue at Nazareth: "the spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me, to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to let the oppressed go free" (Lk 4:18). There were the apostles who confronted headlong the unjust structure of the apostolic age, up to the Popes whose Encyclicals sensitized the world to the prevalent injustice of their time. In these prophets, we have a common pattern of the unmistakable social relevance of theologians.

Pope Leo XIII, in his Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, protested strongly against the harsh conditions which industrial workers had to endure. Pius XI, in 1931 challenged the capitalist model of society and advocated that, "wealth must be distributed in such a way as to satisfy the needs of all". In 1963, Pope John XXIII, in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, called for peace that should be "founded on truth, built according to justice, vivified and integrated by charity, and put into practice in freedom". He condemned the situation whereby too much of the world's resources is squandered on prestige projects and armaments, while the whole populace is condemned to conditions of near destitution.

Martin Luther King Jr a black American and an outstanding theologian took the whole of America by storm in the 1950s when he assumed the position of Socratic gadfly and nonviolently cleaned the murky stable of accumulated racial injustice. Luther led the thoroughly oppressed, humiliated and pauperized black Americans in peaceful protest, boycotts and Civil disobedience to freedom he never lived to enjoy. Writing from Birmingham City jail in April 1963 where he was held incommunicado in solitary confinement he demonstrated the courage that befits a soldier of Christ when he declared:

I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension...just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to

the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having non violent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.⁹

From the foregoing it is obvious that the struggle for social justice is not restricted to human right activists and other secular pressure groups alone, but Church leaders and theologians also take the front line to challenge and dismantle unjust social structures and policies in a non violent manner.

The Theologian and Environmental/Ecological Issues

Our collective survival as a species in a fragile world that has been and still being abused through toxic wastes, deforestation, industrial waste, oil spillage, air pollution etc is both a scientific and social malaise. It is interesting to note that theologians are not silent on the need for the world to practice a holistic spirituality, which promotes partnership with nature rather than exploitation of its resources to the detriment of the survival of mankind. Dokun Oyesola explained the Christian theological basis for getting involved in working actively and positively in combating environmental degradation. According to him, creation is a continuous dialogue between God and his creatures. We are therefore confronted by the challenge to preserve the creation by not abusing it. Gen. 2:15, the divine injunction "to till the earth" means to manage both for pleasure and sustenance. To keep means to protect it as can be deduced from Is. 3 and also Lev. 25:11 failure to let the land rest and rejuvenate itself will lead to banishment (Lev. 26:35; 2 Chron. 36:21). The land was to be kept undefiled and unpolluted. (Num 35:33-34).¹⁰

⁹ Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" Mimeographed from computer CD on Martin Luther.

¹⁰ Dokun Oyesola, *Essentials of Environmental Issues* (Ibadan: Daily Graphics Publications, 1995), p. 69.

Underlying creation is communication between God and creature and the theologian is the mouthpiece for both. In this regard Arthur R. Peacocke, a biologist and theologian, proposes a sacramental understanding of creation with nature depicted as worthy of humanity's reverence. He also depicts theologians/Christians as "prophets" charged to call others to recognize the meaning of God's action in the world.¹¹

Dokun Oyesola aptly demonstrated the social relevance of the theologian with regards to environmental protection thus:

It must be affirmed that environmental degradation is about life and death, it is personal, emotional, psychological and spiritual. It points to the fact that the planet may be destroyed if no positive and collective action is taken to arrest it. But, can the present humanity justify such a destruction that will jeopardize the life of future generations? This is intolerable!¹²

In all these we see the theologian struggling for the survival of mankind from self annihilation through environmental degradation.

The Theologian as Moral Conscience of the World

In 1994, when Time Magazine chose Pope John Paul II as the Man of the year, it was reported that "one admirer of the Supreme Pontiff congratulated Time for choosing a man, and indirectly his Church, for being the lonely consistent voice among world leaders and peoples of influence for condemning evil and promoting peace and love in a world that has lost its conscience".¹³

¹¹ See Arthur R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 277, cited by Anne M. Clifford, "Creation" in Francis Schussler and John P. Galvin eds. *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Vol. I (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 241.

¹² Dokun Oyesola, *Politics of International Environmental Regulations* (Ibadan: Daily Graphics Publications, 1998), p. xx.

¹³ Nathaniel Ndiokwere, *The Third Millennium Church* (Nebraska: Morris Publishing, 1998), p. 143.

The Church and her theologians have always spoken out against abortion, contraception, homosexuality, euthanasia and suicide etc. Imagine what our world would have been without the moral force and authority of the Church in the contemporary world of new morality of freedom without responsibility.

The Lenten message of the Holy Father Pope John II to the universal Church in 2002 vividly portrayed the social relevance of the theologian as the moral conscience of the world. He warns that:

The achievements of medicine and biotechnology can sometimes lead man to think himself as his own creator, and to succumb to the temptation of tempering with the tree of life Gen. 3:24. It is also worth repeating here that not everything that is technically possible is morally acceptable.¹⁴

This message obviously is a warning against the cloning of human beings and artificial manufacture of human parts through the same method.

Catholic Bishops conference of Nigeria after its first plenary meeting in Abuja on 22 February, 2002 issued a communiqué, entitled "Healing the wounds of the nation", in which they among other things demanded from the Federal Government of Nigeria.

- i. The call for National Conference.
- ii. Government's initiation of frank discussion on the issue of sharia.
- iii. That the report of the Oputa panel be made public.
- iv. Creation of job opportunities for the unemployed.
- v. Creation of more political parties so that more options will be available to the public.
- vi. The need to have a well trained, well equipped and well paid police force.

To all intents these were burning issues in Nigeria then and the Bishops who of course are theologians have adequately addressed the issues.

¹⁴ The Lenten Message of His Holiness John Paul II for 2002.

The Theologian and Mental Health

Catholic theology has always acknowledged a close relationship between religion and psychology, because the mind and soul are closely related. The problem of the mind affects the soul and vice versa. Consequently the psychologist whose social relevance is not contested is doing something similar to what the confessor does in his confessional and the parish priest in his rectory. Each is confronted from time to time with problems of the frontier between psychology and religion. Both the priest at the confessional and its psychotherapist are performing the work of mind surgeons, on two different levels. As George Menalel puts it: "The psychologist finds himself face to face with the religious convictions and moral principles of his client; the priest finds the parishioner's psychodynamics intruding into his spiritual life".¹⁵ It is pertinent for us to note that the psychologist and priests both deal with human behaviors like values, interpersonal relations, attitudes, beliefs, marriage problems, crisis in the family, and mental problems like anxiety, neurotic feelings, guilt, conscience and depression.

While psychologists open clinics and counselors have therapy centers, theologians, through pastoral counseling, offer similar services. In many cases, spiritual/pastoral counseling therapy has often worked even where psychotherapy fails to help a client.

Theologians' response to the challenges of physical sciences

The question of the social relevance of the theologian equally leads to the domain of the physical sciences like physics, astronomy and astrophysics. They constitute the worst threat to the social relevance of theologians because of their phenomena and intimidating discoveries about time and space. William E. Carroll, in his essay "Aquinas and the Big Bang", aptly

¹⁵ George Menalel, *Pastoral Counseling* (Bangalore: St. Pauls, 1999), p.10.

This remark appears pessimistic and hopeless. But I want to point out that theologians like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner, just to mention a few, have responded adequately to those challenges. Discussing their viewpoints here will be too much for a paper of this scope. The most important point we are to note is that all the scientific theories are human inventions that merely follow or corroborate the physical laws of nature and they are not definitive truths. They therefore don't constitute a threat to the social relevance of the theologians.

Conclusion

Theology is "faith seeking understanding". The theologian is therefore, "First and foremost, a believer a man of-faith. But he is a believer who asks himself questions about his own faith". The quest for motivated understanding is a concern shared by scientists and theologians alike. Anyone who thinks that religion is based on unquestioning dogmas alone without taking into account its social and essential relevance probably does not have an adequate understanding of theological inquiry. I found Polkinghorne's categorization of the dual role of theology highly fascinating. According to him:

I see theology as having a dual role: firstly as the specialist investigation of particular types of experience and insight which we label religious (systematic theology); and secondly as the great integrating discipline which incorporates the results of all specialist investigations (including science's and its own) in a profoundly comprehensive matrix of understanding (philosophical theology). In its first role theology can be said to be one of the sciences; in its second role it is the metascience.²⁰

²⁰ Ibidem.

described the crippling dread of the physical sciences in relation to theology. He writes:

The advances of modern science threaten to render traditional doctrines of creation and its creator as intellectual artifacts from a less enlightened age. Perhaps the God of traditional theology is but a hypothesis now shown to be unnecessary.¹⁶

Paul Davies claims that "from radioactivity studies the earth can be dated to about billion years".¹⁷ Carl Sagan postulated that there are some hundred billion (10) galaxies, each on the average, hundred billion stars, there are perhaps as many planets as stars, $10^{11} \times 10^{11} = 10^{22}$ ten billion trillion. In the face of such overpowering numbers, he queried, what is the likelihood that only our solar system contains an inhabited planet?¹⁸ If evolution is a continuous process, the present state of *Homo sapiens* is not the end product of evolution, we are just stone age people of a future generation that will make our generation look archaic and irrelevant. *Homo sapiens* of this age will be *homohamablis* of the age to come in the next 1 million years of terrestrial existence, they speculate.

One may ask: why all these? of what use is this to the social relevance of theologians in our society? If Biblical history dates back to just about 6 000 years ago one can then imagine the social relevance of the proponents (theologians) within the framework of 4½ billion years of earth's existence. And if evolution is a continuous process, what will happen to theology in 50,000 years to come? Will it still retain its relevance in human endeavor social and otherwise?

John Polkinghorne a physicist and theologian expressed his exasperation about the fact that "...modern theological thinking appears narrowly parochial, concentrating solely on humanity and taking a view of history which effectively covers the span of a few thousand years rather than the billions of years of the universe's past and future evolution."¹⁹

¹⁶ William Carroll, "Aquinas and the Big Bang" *First Things*, No. 97 (1999) p. 19.

¹⁷ Cf. Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1983).

¹⁸ Carl Sagan, *Cosmos* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), p. 3.

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²⁰ Ibidem.

The reader would pardon me if I appear to have put the cart before the horse, but I prefer to touch the meaning of the theology in the conclusion of the paper rather than in its introduction because of its peculiar system as a science, it proceeds from the unknown to the known. Being a systematic inquiry, theology has its own body of knowledge and never under the control of any other discipline.

This science of God made man is our means of liberating men from all forms of domination and of bringing the findings of the other human sciences into the service of that liberation. The relevance of the theologian therefore is not uni-dimensional nor for one sector of human life; it permeates all facets of human life. To maintain the social relevance of theologians in the modern world, to avoid the danger of becoming obsolete and irrelevant in the same world, theologians must be willing to listen and learn from other disciplines.

THE QUEST FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY AND THE CASE FOR THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Anthony A. Akinwale, O. P.

The ecumenical initiatives of the Roman Catholic Church in matters of doctrine have, until now, taken the form of a tri-directional dialogue: dialogue with the Greek Orthodox Churches, dialogue with Anglicans, and dialogue with Protestants. On the international scene, a lot has been accomplished in this regard, as the second part of this paper shall attempt to demonstrate. But the case is different when we look at Nigeria.

It is my contention in this paper that the emergence of a new expression of Protestantism in the form of Pentecostalism, as well as its manifestation by certain members of the Charismatic Renewal within Catholicism, apart from being a set back for the initiative for Christian unity, compel Nigerian theologians in general, and Nigerian Catholic theologians in particular, to include a reinvigorated ecumenical initiative on the agenda for theology in the 21st century. This ecumenical initiative can only be undertaken when Nigerian Catholic theologians avoid the reduction of theological discourse to socio-political commentary, ethnology, or cultural anthropology and return to what Bernard Lonergan would describe in his discussion of functional specialties as theology's dialectical, doctrinal and systematic functions.¹ The battle for the mind of the Nigerian Christian, which Pentecostalism has provoked, will be fought, won, and lost, not in the theatre of singing, clapping and dancing, nor at the rostrum of political discourse, nor in a museographic complex, but in the arena of dialectic, doctrines and systematics.

The discussion in this paper goes on in four moments: the first moment recalls the doctrinal bases of Christian disunity, the second

¹My emphasis on dialectic, doctrines and systematics presupposes the dynamic unity and interdependence of the eight functional specialties as enunciated by Lonergan. See his *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) ch. 5, especially pages 138-144.