

The Political Undertone of The Protestant Reformation: Lessons For The Nigerian Christian Leaders

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Abstract

Martin Luther's famous 95 Theses which were written for an academic disputation had ignited the fire for the Protestant Reformation which several people had longed for. The 95 Theses unraveled several hidden motives of different rulers who were obsessed with the papal supremacy and had longed for avenues to break away. The church ignored him and proceeded with her plans of increasing revenue, thereby going into negotiations of different concordats or treaties with princes. This diverted the attention of the papacy and bishops on matters concerning the church, and gave more powers to princes and kings who controlled the church within their territories, which was easy to break up and form their respective churches. This paper seeks to bring to the fore and analyze the political factors that aided the 16th century Protestant Reformation. The work provides guiding principles for the Nigerian religious leaders. The paper uses the historical research approach to trace the history of the Protestant Reformation. It uses the analytical method to examine the role of political leaders in religion and the extent which they can go. The study also brings to limelight, the extent to which religious leaders should speak on politics, without detriments to their religious functions. This work is of paramount importance because politics in Nigeria seems to be the only viable industry for immediate attainment of wealth, at the detriment of the masses. Perhaps this politics seems to attract everyone, including those who are not professionally equipped for it..

Keywords: Political Undertone, Christian Leaders, Protestant Reformation, Nigeria, Religion

Introduction

The late Middle Ages (1300-1500) was a period of spiritual decline for the church. Alan rightly postulated that, after the vibrant papacy of Boniface VII (1294-1303) was followed by a period of more than seventy years, in which the popes resided in Avignon, France, Clement V (pope from 1305 to 1314), moved to Avignon to escape the political pressures of Italy; including the warring Roman families. King Philip of France promised peace and protection in return for certain measures of influence on the policies of the pope (63). The papacy in Avignon had served as a tool of French interests, the church became very corrupt. The saddest of the events leading to the Protestant Reformation was the “Great Schism” of the popes. The church had received several criticisms and rebellion within. The rebellion against its authority increased in numbers within this period. Secular rulers had powers and were controlling the church within their nationalities. The intention of this paper is to establish how the church leaders left their work of shepherding the flock, in pursuit of materialism and got entangled with political powers, which led to the breaking of the one unity of the Roman Catholic Church, and to abreast Christian leaders in Nigeria in the face of unimaginable political turbulence, to avoid the reoccurrence or consistent breaking of the unity of Christ's people, on political reasons. Thus, the Protestant Reformation is also to be seen as a two-edge sword; it did not only disrupt the unity of the *ecclesia* therefore creating more churches, but also began the work of renewal within the Roman Catholic Church.

The poor articulation and presentation of some of the Christian doctrines were questioned by the reformers. This poor presentation and articulation was as a result of the priestly class entanglement with materialism of the time at the detriment and neglect of their primary responsibility of shepherding the flocks of Christ. Some of the clerics were not critical with their presentation of the Christian faith, thus the reawakening awareness of the people did not spare the former of serious criticisms in order to assert the credulity of their message. (Duke, Osigwe, and Bien 26). This paper examines the church in contemporary Nigerian society with a critical look at their involvement in materialism and political craving alongside their religious activities.

The Protestant Reformation

The 16th century protestant reformation is a story of several major

religious traditions. The irony of the Protestant Reformation is that, much of what Luther believed and taught was authentic Catholic doctrine that had been distorted by abuses and incorrect practices in the church, such as the selling of indulgences. Unfortunately, Luther's criticisms of the real abuses were not heeded. Pope Leo X simply instructed Luther's superior in the Augustinian monastery to correct him as a rebellious monk, who was questioning the church's legitimate authority to grant indulgences (Alan 71).

McBrien asserted that the Reformation is the all-embracing term which describes the fragmentation of Western Christianity in the sixteenth century. Like all other major developments in the history of the church, including even the decision to carry the gospel to the Gentiles, this one did not occur in a single event and through the efforts of a single person, such as Martin Luther. It was instead an extremely complex process in which religious, intellectual, political and social forces converged (632).

On 31st October 1417, Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* or disputation at the University of Wittenberg in Germany. What he intended was to spark a theological disputation on the power of indulgence. The theses spread like a wild fire and were encouraged in different countries in the Western Christendom. Dimont opined that,

Though Protestantism had begun as a strictly religious reform movement, the people behind the new economic forces seized the Reformation and bent it to their own economic needs. As the modes of production changed, the people responsible for these changes searched for a state that would legalize what they were doing and for a religion that would sanctify it. They adopted the Protestant religion and made it embrace the capitalist state. The two went hand in hand like bride and groom. (57).

This paper discusses the Reformation as it was carried out in different nations, and this will be discussed with their leading figures beginning with Martin Luther in Germany to King Henry the VIII. Hans J Hillerbrand asserted that,

The various streams of the Protestant Reformation arose from specific theological affirmations, which were expressed in differing ecclesiastical organizations—churches with pastors, people, and a definite polity and way of life. All the Protestant reformers were

determined to translate their theological theories into ecclesiastical practice, and all were concerned that theirs should be the legally established religion of their respective commonwealths. Some were more successful than others. In England, as we have noted, the settlement decreed by Queen Elizabeth gave lasting success to Protestantism, and in similar fashion other countries such as Scotland, Scandinavia, and Holland saw the permanent establishment of the Protestant faith. In Germany, the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 brought legal recognition of Lutheranism for those territories whose ruler decided to accept it. The radical expressions of Protestantism never secured such legal recognition, except in isolated instances and on a modest scale. And at some places, such as France or Poland, the struggle for the recognition of the Protestant faith occupied the larger part of the century. Thus, success was varied. At the end of the century, however, the map of Europe was pre-dominantly Protestant; Catholicism seemed to be at its nadir (xix).

Martin Luther (1480-1546).

Martin Luther was a German of peasant stock whose *95 Theses* led to the Protestant Reformation of the people of Europe. He was an Augustinian monk of a strict order, and had studied hard to become a Professor of scriptures at the University of Wittenberg in Germany. As a monk he had found no peace in trying to clear his conscience through penance and self-denial, but experienced freedom when he realized that man is justified by faith alone, as Saint Paul explained in his letter to the Romans. This was the key that led Luther to post his *Ninety Five Theses* on the sales of indulgence, on the chapel door at Wittenberg in 1517. He questioned the Catholic dependence on good works of any sort, including indulgences to gain salvation or the remission of sins.

McBrien postulated that Luther, like most medieval Christians, took the “last things”, death judgment, heaven, and hell purgatory very seriously. He was tormented by the thoughts of God's judgment as he reflected on his creatureliness and unworthiness. Traditional modes of mortification and penance did not work for him. All other devices of mediation, including (the remission of a temporal punishment in purgatory) still due to sins which have already been forgiven are contrary to the simple unadorned message of the gospel. The charging of the fees for indulgence brought the matter to a head on.

Humaira asserted that Luther believed that the faith of a Christian had nothing to do with politics. The duty of a Christian was simply to obey constituted authority (74). Luther was not a political thinker and his limited experiments in this field were best regarded as an attempt to accommodate the political realities of his time. For consolidation of the Reformation movement, the full support of German princes and magistrates was essential, and his confirmation in the righteousness of princes in their powers enabled him to get that support (Alister 57). Humaria classified the following as Luther's confused political theology: All Christians have a civic and social responsibility to perform. Some Christians may discharge these responsibilities by holding public offices. The state has been divinely ordained to achieve certain purposes, which the church cannot and should not attempt to achieve. In other words, their spheres of influence and authority are different and must not be confused. God rules the church through Gospel, but is obliged to rule the sinful world through law, wisdom, natural law and coercion (75).

Lutheran Reformation resulted in an alliance of state and church, in which the former was subservient to the latter. In effect therefore, Lutheranism, made a total surrender of the practical life of the individual to the state control. (Bronowski 90).

At first, Luther had no intention of leaving the Roman Catholic Church, but he also refused to retract his statements until he was given a hearing. In 1519, he went to Leipzig to meet with a fellow theologian, Johnannes Eck. Eck encouraged Luther to deny the authority of the popes and of the ecumenical council, and to maintain the Bible alone as his sole authority. At this point, Luther realized that he could no longer remain a Roman Catholic, so he wrote three treaties denouncing the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and the popes, rejecting the sacraments of the church except baptism, the Eucharist and penance, and calling the princes of Germany to rise up and start their national church. Alan succinctly added that:

Most of the German princes were eager to escape the authority and the taxation of Rome, so they supported Luther and nominated their own bishops of the new Lutheran church. At the Diet of the Worms in 1521, Luther was formally ex communicated from the Catholic Church by the bull *Exsurge Domine* and he proceeded to burn the bull with some of his Catholic books (71-72).

Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531)

Zwingli was born in Switzerland. He became a Roman Catholic priest in 1519, while he was the vicar of cathedral at Zurich; he started preaching about the need for reforms in the church. On many points, the ideas of Zwingli and Luther were the same. Zwingli did not say he had taken ideas from Luther, but he put much effort into spreading Luther's writings. He also refused the authority of the pope. He concluded that the scriptures were enough; and that there is no need for the church's guidance in understanding the Bible. Like Luther, he insisted that faith in itself is sufficient for salvation; and there is no need for sacraments and veneration of saints. (McGrath and Nicole 178).

Zwingli's preaching and devotion won the hearts of his people in Zurich. McBrain opined that he abolished fasting, removed images in the church and banned all church music. That Zwingli's system of the church polity, not surprisingly, was well situated to the city of Zurich, which had a representative government. His ecclesiology was also considerably more democratic, anticlerical, and anti-institutional than Luther's, who was satisfied with introducing the vernacular into the liturgy and eliminate religious vows and celibacy (635). Zwingli later got married and broke his vow of celibacy, to him, the church and the government is to collectively lead the people to the path of justice and righteousness, he is accused of using the state army to propagate this doctrine (McGrath and Nicole 178).

Alan asserted that; before Zwingli's death in battle in 1531, he ordered the drowning of a group of men in Zurich who insisted on re-baptizing adults, and they taught that it was only an adult or a believer's baptism that is valid. These people called Anabaptists (i.e. the re-baptizers) had gone too far for Zwingli. They fled from Zurich to establish small communities in isolated regions of Moravia to the east (74).

John Calvin (1509-1564)

John Calvin is of French origin. He studied theology and law in Paris. He was influenced by Luther on the principles of the Protestant Reformation. John was famous by his doctrine of predestination. McBrien quoted him thus “we can do nothing at all about our salvation. God has already determined our destiny. Since the fall of Adam, all of us deserved to be damned. And God indeed allows many to be damned to manifest divine justice” (635).

John Calvin moved and settled in Geneva, Switzerland. He ruled the authority of the city and the church concurrently; however with primacy given to the church. In his theocracy, he formed a mode of strict and austere Christian life. Alan asserted that Calvin's great written work is his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the basis of the theology of the reformed tradition. He rejected all that is not found in the Bible and focused on faith on the word of God alone. His church buildings were plain and white, without alters statues, images, organ music, or stained glasses (73). All vestiges of the Catholic Church, except the Bible were taken away. His most widely debated and controversial teaching is the doctrine of predestination. That it is destined by God who will be saved, and who will not be saved, and this has no room for human efforts.

The Reformation in England

The reformation in England did not encounter a reformer such as Luther, Zwingli or Calvin. The reformation in England was not doctrinal; it was as a result of fusion of nationalism and religious upheaval. This reformation brought to lime light the Church of England, The Anglican Church, which was established by King Henry VIII of England for certain political reasons. McBrien opined that the quarrel in England was not doctrinal, moral or financial/monetary, but was about a royal wedding. Pope Clement VII refused to allow King Henry VIII to divorce his first wife and take a second wife. What followed was a moral cause of action in search of theological justification (636). What made king Henry to put before the church such an unthinkable request could possibly be the title he received from the previous pope "the defender of the faith." When Henry failed to get his marriage invalidated, he dismissed Cardinal Wolsey Archbishop of Canterbury, and appointed a trusted friend, the Catholic lawyer, Sir Thomas More as the Chancellor of England.

Thomas More has been a faithful Catholic, and his being very loyal to the pope made it clear that he can only assume the position, if he was not to be involved with King Henry's divorce. Henry then proclaimed himself the supreme Head of the Church of England. Thomas More refused to swear the oath of allegiance to the king under this title and also refused to give reasons. More was later beheaded in 1535 (Alan 75).

From the above discussed streams of the Protestant Reformation,

Lutheranism, Anabaptists, Calvinism and Anglicanism, all broke out from the Roman Catholic Church. These reformers raised major doctrinal issues; however, some had certain political undertone. This was done by certain monarchs who made it easier for the reformation activities to be carried out because of their selfish political and economic interests. This distracted the priestly class from their primary role of propagating the gospel of Christ.

The Political Undertone of the Protestant Reformation

The Roman Catholic Church became very corrupt from the years preceding the Middle Ages, towards the reformation period; the popes imposed heavy taxes to meet up their worldly living. Most of them were attracted by political lives to the neglect of their ecclesiastical duties. The papal state grew to be the wealthiest state in Italy. Church appointments were means of getting money especially in Germany. Even the agents of the popes who collected the taxes were dishonest and cheated people. This is also observed by Alan:

“As the financial situation of the popes grew worst, they develop ways to increase papal revenues that had many bad effects in that age; many secular rulers also became bishops or abbots in order to control the church and received its revenue. The popes tried to get back the secular rulers by setting a high papal tax on these ecclesiastical offices. If the princes wanted to control the church, they would at least have to pay for it” (68).

The church was wealthy; it possessed vast lands in every country that Roman Catholicism was established. Many of the lands were given to the church by kings, princes and by other noble and other rich men. This was done not just as a support to the mission, but also as a token of admiration for the work of priests and piety of the monks and nuns. This wealth became very attractive to many people including the secular ruling class. The wealth made the priestly and religious vocation attractive as many saw it as an easy way to wealth and comfort living.

The papacy commanded extreme powers, McGrath and Nicole assert that many of the church's leaders had a thirst for riches and power, they had pride and were stubborn, they became political and more or less spiritual leaders, and in pursuit of these political powers their spirituality sank very low

(168). The poor training of priests which resulted to poor teaching affected the church negatively. This research gathered that, many priests before ordination did not receive adequate training, they got ordained because of certain political connections. McGrath and Nicole noted that, very often, some priests had a poor understanding of what their life and work should be. Because of this, they ministered poorly to the needs of the members and their personal lives were not always exemplary enough for people to emulate (169).

The church leaders had to enter into some agreements with the rulers of nations. That meant at times that they were more or less forced to accept plans and decisions not exactly true to the gospel message. They did so in the hope of gaining some favour from those rulers. The practice of simony crept into the church. This was the selling of spiritual goods and church offices. Some secular rulers purchased the right to hold two or more church offices and then never cared for the people, but hired others to do such works (Alan 67). This brought about the practice of “lay investiture” - the investiture of bishops by civil authorities, together with the corrupt practice attached to it. This weakened the authority and credibility of the church's leadership. All these nurtured the ground for the Protestant Reformation.

Knox asserted that, religious organizations seek the backing of secular political power. Rulers often find in an established religion a valuable partner who can lower the cost of rule by convincing subjects that their regime is divinely ordained (58). However, as states grow stronger, rulers may extract concessions of their own, such as exempting political elites from tithes and other religious obligations and forcing established religions to surrender administrative autonomy (e.g., the right to appoint bishops) or a portion of religious revenues to the state. Upstart religious organizations (such as Protestantism) may offer rulers a tempting alternative – depose the incumbent monopoly, thereby legitimating the state at a lower cost and permitting the expropriation of monopoly assets. In fact, those rulers that abolished the Catholic monopoly soon found themselves confronted with the tendency of Protestants to divide into rival churches and sects. The universal solution was to impose a new territorial church as a local religious monopoly, with the prince as the head or supreme bishop of the newly established church (Davide Cantoni *et al*, 58).

To Okon, the Reformation period was propelled by power politics.

Religion was completely considered 'spiritless', anachronistic and debased. The raise of patriotic spirit and national consciousness had gotten to the zenith with the evolution of nation-states. There was a clarion call for indigenization of religious culture and devolution of ecclesiastical authority. Such radical demands resulted in insurrection against the Holy, See (14). Okon quoted Iwe that during the reformation period “Monarchs were ready to adopt any religious and ecclesiastical measures that could minister to their secular goals, ambition and greed. However, they were not in the mood to accept any external or foreign over-lordship in their territories” (Okon 14).

Lessons for Nigerian Christian Leaders

There is a connecting bound between the church and the state; however, they are not one and the same. Christian leaders must take precautions of their involvement into state and party affairs, which may be detrimental to the discharge of their vocations as Christian leaders. It is a fact that the priestly class have engrossed into politics, and this has caused so much disunity to the body of Christ. A joint pastoral letter of the Catholics Bishops in Benue State, confirmed the above as follows:

As pastors, we admit that we are also partly to be blamed for meddling into politics in the past, by seeking the patronage of politicians either for ourselves or for church or projects. Moreover, we have not always being unanimous in our public utterances concerning political issues. After a period of prayerful discernment, we have resolved to work against the culture of patronage-politics, and hereby prohibit any priest, religious or church related organization to overtly or covertly solicit donations from any politician before, during or after elections (43).

Christian leaders should be mindful of the fact that their primary role as religious leaders is not to engage in partisan politics. Their political opinions are not opinions or ideologies of their congregations, and must be treated as such. Therefore, endorsing political parties or party candidates are not tantamount to the discharge of their pastoral duties. Christian leaders should understand that their role is not to make popular political choices for their followers to join. Pope Francis in his message on World Mission Sunday reminded Christian leaders that, “humanity greatly needs to lay hold of the

salvation brought by Christ. His disciples are those who allow themselves to be seized ever more by the love of Jesus, and marked by the fire of the passion of the kingdom of God and the proclamation of the joy of the gospel". All the Lord's disciples are called to nurture the joy of evangelization. The bishops, as those primarily responsible for this proclamation, have the task of promoting the unity of the local church in her missionary commitment (6).

Christian leaders are custodians of morality in the society. They are obliged to show good examples; it also imposes on them the need to speak forthrightly against the ills in the society. Christian leaders must work hard to bring to an end, the culture of patronage or money politics. Our Christian leaders must resist the temptation to openly or secretly seek financial support for themselves, or for church projects, people who wish to genuinely contribute to church project should be welcome. They should be vigilant and guard against, those who use Christianity to enrich themselves. They must continue to promote truth and justice, honesty and integrity, transparency and accountability with greater determination (Catholic Bishops of Benue State 44-45).

Okon asserted that the "apparent institutional weakness and the leadership vacuum at the Vatican, is the failure of Pope Clement VII to stand up to the greatest challenge in ecclesiastical history". It is the interest of this study that world history could have taken a different and positive turn, if the Vatican leadership was competent, magnanimous and resolute. The lesson of history will continue to elude us, if facts are twisted to satisfy denominational loyalty. It does not make any sense for the causation of the Reformation to be based on denominational logic.

The great mistake has already taken place. The whole world is suffering the pervasive and protracted impact of that mistake. Christianity since then has remained weak and divisive. North Africa which was predominantly Christian but later conquered by Islam who expelled Christianity till today is completely under Islamic and Arab control. Reformation has emasculated Christianity (20).

This paper has considered the Protestant Reformation as a two edge sword: it has not only destroyed the unity that Christ prayed and intended that His body should be one just as Him and God is one (Jn 17: 11), but also opened

ways for the rapid spread of Christendom with different churches. Christians or Christian leaders are not exempted from participating in politics except for some Christian churches that forbids their priestly class from taking part in partisan politics. For those that are engaged in party politics, they should endeavour to be living witnesses to the works of Christ, who lived for the interest of His flocks and not of his own accord.

Conclusion

This research has endeavoured to analyze the Protestant Reformation considering the political waves of the 16th Century which was one of the motives that enabled the Reformation to spread rapidly, and was also considered very appealing to several rulers. Many rulers saw the Reformation as an avenue to gain freedom from the heavy taxation of the papacy. Also with the rise of nationalism, it was an opportunity for many nations to establish their national churches. Secular rulers were illegitimately involved in the running of the affairs of the church, because they also contributed much to the development of the church; this gave them so much powers that some of them took the churches away from the priestly class or had hired people to run the offices for them. This work has discussed the different figures that spearheaded the Reformation at different times and places.

This research is a wakeup call to Nigerian Christian leaders to be mindful of their involvement in partisan politics, which may be very detrimental to the discharge of their priestly functions. Christian leaders who go into politics should know that they are in the world but they are not of the world. Unamba asserted that, “a Christian is one sent into the world to influence the world with the Gospel. It would be a tragedy if the Christian himself becomes the one influenced by the world” (233). Politics is often considered as a dirty game, which should be left for the corrupt, wayward, gullible and greedy people. Christians who are in politics are given a mandate to correct this impression by living lives that are worthy of emulating by those who do not believe in Christ. Serving diligently in their political calling to a very large extent is also a way of evangelizing.

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