

THE DIALECTICS OF THE CITY OF GOD AND THE EARTHLY CITY IN NIGERIA: TOWARDS A CRITICAL AND CONSTRUCTIVE AFRICAN POLITICAL THEOLOGY

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Introduction

This essay argues for a critical and constructive prophetic Christian social imaginary in Africa. I will use Nigeria as a test case to show why the absence of a political theology is undermining the witness and mission of the Church, harming the common good of society and the realization in our history of the eschatological fruits of the reign of God. Given the limited scope of this essay, what I offer here are some preliminary thoughts and principles, which will be further elaborated in future writings. My hope is that readers may find here some helpful starting point which could inspire them to raise critical questions about the validity of some of the current narratives about African societies with regard to religious faith, the nation-state, and the movement of history in Africa. I will proceed by stating five key principles and five methodological starting points for doing African political theology. Secondly, using Augustine's political theology as guide, I will develop some theological hermeneutic for analyzing the dialectics of the two cities in history. I will finally apply this analysis to critiquing Nigeria's political situation today. I will conclude by showing the wisdom of Pope Francis to show the urgency of a strong engagement of the Christian Gospel with contemporary African politics and its centrality for the Christian mission in Africa today.

Building Blocks for an African Political Theology: Some Preliminary Thoughts

Ugandan political theologian, Emmanuel Katongole, has noted the absence of a sustained scholarly engagement with political theology in Africa. He raises the question about the relationship between 'the distressing political and economic realities of Africa and its dynamic Christian expression.' He identifies the task of African political theology as finding how African Christianity can make a difference in Africa's political history and how it can become a positive force for social transformation. This is particularly urgent because the nation-states of Africa as 'successor institutions' to the colonial states continue to defeat, exploit and plunder

the common good of African peoples. This plunder has proceeded under the guise of liberating and saving Africa because of Africa's post-colonial corrupt and extractive leadership. Katongole identifies three broad paradigms of reform, embrace and reinvention as forms through which the Christian churches in Africa have engaged the 'dysfunctional politics' in Africa today.¹

Theological engagement with politics in Africa is developing differently from what happened in Western Christianity. This is because of Africa's unique history of slavery, missionary Christianity, colonialism, and globalization. All these sad historical realities have entrenched a Western epistemological hegemony in both the Church and State in Africa which hamper creative sub-alternation capable of generating new knowledge and counter-narratives to challenge and dismantle the current *status quo* in Africa. Furthermore, the neat separation of Church and State which putatively exists in many Western states is not something that might be realized in Africa. In Africa, there is no such dualism between the sacred and the secular hence discourse on politics and religion are in many settings in Africa tightly woven together sometimes as theological conversation and sometimes as political discourse. The language of God and faith pervade African politics making it hard in most cases for any conceptual clarity and systematic reflection. However, African theologians have reflected on the social context within the broader purvey of the social condition in Africa and the search for salvation within it (Benezet Bujo, Engelvert Mveng, Elias Bongmba, Jean-Mac Ela, Tinyinko Maluleke, Mercy Oduyoye, Emmanuel Katongole, Stan Chu Ilo, Musa Dube, Nathanael Soede, Agbonkhanmehie Orobator, Laureen Maseno among many others).

What we find in these writers are a strong embrace of critical social theory, some traces of liberation theology paradigm, especially inspired by the works of African-American liberation theologians James Cone and Katie Canon; and a strong biblical and cultural analysis. These writers operate from a strong historical consciousness which questions the modernization-progressive-development paradigm. They also employ the tools of post-colonial analysis of the African social context with the intention of unmasking the unequal relations of power in Africa and in the globe. The ultimate goal of these scholars is to construct new paradigms for social transformation and for ecclesial life through a commitment to the ideals of the salvific mission of the Lord now continued in history through the followers of Christ. These authors have engaged with questions of human and cosmic flourishing, poverty and social justice, inculturation and liberation, mission

¹ E. KATONGOLE, "Political Theologies of Africa" in William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott, ed. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, second edition. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2019, 347-348.

and dialogue. They have raised questions about what is the meaning of redemption, the Cross, the Resurrection and hope for African peoples and societies. While we may not have a clearly articulated and systematic political theology in Africa today, I can point at some of the directions of scholarship in African political theology:

Firstly, it is a quest to determine how the movement of history in Africa is bringing about in the life and reality of Africans, the fruits of the salvific reign of God in their societies as well as in their religious and secular institutions. This requires that African political theology develops tools for understanding how history unfolds in Africa vis-à-vis what Christians understand as salvation history.

Secondly, it interprets the complex and complicated social conditions of Africans, which have defined the so-called African predicament in the light of the liberating message of the Gospel and the African moral traditions of abundant life. This interpretation is guided by the search for how the saving, teaching, healing and liberating message and ministry of Jesus Christ is being enacted in African history so that the promises of the later days inaugurated by Jesus Christ can be realized in the lives of Africans. In doing this, African theology will unmask and disrupt the false narratives of modernity in Africa. This can be achieved through a total picture analysis of how structural violence and social sins both locally and internationally have all conspired in past and present African history in bringing about in Africa an unacceptable social context, which is undermining the common good and human security in the land.

Thirdly, African political theology must critically confront the idols and false narratives in some of our religious and political settings in Africa, especially development discourse, institutional religion and the present shape of the nation-states in Africa. This critical function looks at how these institutions are contributing in many ways in promoting injustice, poverty, suffering, rank and social distance between the poor and the rich, the weak and the powerful, ethnocentrism, racism, clannishness, exploitation, and extractive leadership among other social evils. This robust critique of sinful systems and structures in both religious and political settings must show how they undermine the movement of history through the destructive forces of money, power and violence. The presence of these negative social evils in our secular and religious institutions has suffused the social climate with political ideals, false political hopes and religious claims of better days in Africa without showing how they can be realized through the agencies of the people and these institutions.

Fourthly, African political theology gives an account of the assets of Africa – human and natural resources, cultural traditions, religious traditions, local knowledge and intellectual traditions among others – and develops a Gospel-driven praxis grounded in sound social ethics, communal consciousness and solidarity. This approach to theology works towards strengthening people's agency and removing those obstacles against the integral and fruitful exercise of human freedom. This way, Africans can

gradually be enabled through a new social and communal consciousness to become protagonists in bringing about the actualization of their boundless resources, gifts and latent energies for the greater good of all in the continent and beyond.

Fifthly, an African political theology must offer Africa a prophetic social imaginary through a robust analysis of power relations which helps Africans especially those on the margins to see clearly how few Africans – politicians, religious leaders, powerful families and business interests – are benefiting from the systems that are currently in play and why and how the majority of Africans are suffering because of unequal and exploitative exercise of dominant power. As a result, African political theology will go beyond wishes, hopes, anger, and dreams to constructing a praxis for a new Africa. It is also a theology of identification because it seeks to find out where and how God is present in the local processes and institutional priorities and practices which are bringing about new life and new social realities in different parts of Africa. This requires going beyond affirmation and assertions of what the future would look like to actually developing a road map of how that future is coming about in present history. The ultimate task of African political theology is identifying in concrete history how the kingdom of God is coming about now in the context of the people. As a result, African political theology is like the finger of John pointing towards the salvific ferment in history or the dangers against its emergence. It shows how societies of Africa are moving towards the realization of the fruits of God's kingdom through daily individual and communal social and virtue ethics.

African political theology should be rooted in the double narratives of local processes which reveal on one hand the footprints of God for a just and transforming society, and on the other hand the narratives of God's great deeds in scripture. This will offer a complimentary direction and vision for understanding how Africans through their culture and faith see the will or reign of God being realized in their history. What is important is that a theology of politics is mediated and moderated through the agency of the people; embedded in the people's plausibility structure in order to truly be a theology of the people. This approach is opposed to a top-down traditionalist mindset, which often reinforces and consolidates the same power structures and systems, which have all conspired in maintaining the unacceptable socio-economic and political condition in Africa. In a word, African political theologies are by their very nature prophetic social imaginary constructed after the example of the prophetic and liberating work of the Lord. It will be designed in a way that it contests and offers contrasting vision of history which is different from the present modernization approach to history in Africa which have crushed the deepest desires and aspirations of Africans which continues to hold Africa captive to a false history and unrealistic ideals. This kind of theology will challenge Church leaders and officials to reject compromises and alliances with the idols of power and privilege and to pitch their

tents with the poor and live with and like the poor in Africa. It will contest the various forms in which the narratives of history are being constructed in preaching, in neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic prosperity Gospel, healing ministries, capital campaigns in our churches, church structures, clericalism and many other ecclesial styles and practices which reinforce a false sense of history and false religious practices in what have been referred to as ‘an antiseptic Christianity.’

The credibility of the Church in Africa will be largely measured on how it helps bring about such a political theology, which shows Christians, and churches how they can become mirrors of what the wider society would look like – a redeemed and healed society where everyone is realizing their potentials, optimizing their assets and having access to the common good. It is obvious that such a theology will be interested in social and popular movements and give a name and content to the ‘empty signifiers’, which often drive such movements. It will be concerned with the narratives which are being fed to people in African societies about why human and cosmic flourishing in Africa is constantly imperiled by political and social crisis and why our continent continues to be the scene of the most heart-wrenching social evils and crises – wars, refugee crisis, epidemic, political crisis, immigration crisis, ecological crisis, brain drain, and persistent economic problems and rising poverty in the midst of bounteous and rich natural resources. It will be a theology of martyrs who are willing to die in order that a new life and social reality can be seeded in Africa.

What I have proposed here are fairly broad principles for doing theology in Africa which calls for the following methodological operations: (i) An immersion in history through a theology which speaks from the heart of African history and the pathos of God’s people in Africa. Any theology without a sense of history will alienate the people. Unfortunately, historical consciousness is often lacking in our theological imagination. This lack continues to create a wedge between the lived reality of our people, the teachings of the churches and the theological productions of our experts. There is no future for any disembodied theology or an ahistorical theology. Such a theology speaks in generality, is careful to toe the party line and scared to perform any critical function, especially in settings where religious groups are sympathetic to the ruling elites. African theologies must move away from a manualist theologizing, driven often by the intention to protect certain interests, power and privilege within the Church and society. Such a theology does not have any long-lasting transformative impact in the life of the people or in the life of the Church and works against the mission of God in history.

(ii) A theology grounded in the experience of the people and which leverages that experience as the locus of enunciation for theological analysis, reflection and praxis. We must do a theology, which meets our people where they are. Theologians in Africa must embody the experience of the people and become part of that experience in order

to speak credibly about what we have seen and heard. African theologians must see their vocation as that of being eye witnesses to the suffering and hope especially of many of our people who are still hanging on the Cross, waiting for a resurrection. Without this grounding and without a theology, which has the 'smell of the sheep', our theologies in Africa will be alien, bourgeois, oppressive, and exploitative and lacking in any convictions and credibility. It cannot stir the course of history in the direction of the eschatological fruits of God's kingdom nor steer the consciousness of the people to prophetic engagement with the contradictions of history in Africa. On the other hand, a grounded theology must hew the narratives of redemption and recovery from the deadening stones of hard and harsh social conditions of God's people in Africa and from their actual faith and socio-cultural experience. It is a theology which tells compelling stories of God's people because the theologian is narrating his or her lived story from a place of deep encounter with God and God's people.

(iii) A Critical theology which is bold enough to name what is wrong with the present status quo – in both the life, ministry and public witnessing of churches and Christians and in African society in general. It is a theology of courage driven by a clear perception of how God's dreams emerge in history and how it is being defeated by sinful structures, unjust institutions, and weak social ethics and false religious hopes which all conspire among other factors in stymieing the movement of the Spirit in history. An essential part of this critical function is an appreciative hermeneutics of the faith and culture of our people. This will lead to identifying those alternate points of light and hope in many marginal settings in Africa while showing how they represent even in ways not sufficiently clear to us the footprints of God in the reversal of unacceptable history in Africa.

(iv) A prophetic theology which must reject a consumerist theology or uncritical assumption of the narratives of modernity and development in Africa. A political theology proceeds from a notion of salvation history which while not being totalizing also accepts that God is the king of the earth and that the narrative for the future is not simply a gift to be given to people, but a task or vocation which they must undertake every new day with faith in a God who leads us to a better future. The consumerist mindset is the bane of theology and politics in Africa. It is a mindset which simply assimilates and regurgitates everything which is offered from outside Africa as political and religious ideals without testing them and seeing how they can lead us to the kingdom of God or how they are leading us away from the kingdom of God. This consumerist mindset often proceeds with certain presupposition that there are things which cannot change, for example, the national boundaries of countries in Africa, which were drawn without any input from Africans. Another example is the shape and structure of our churches and the approach to Church and politics developed with the experience in Europe. The experience of Europe – the

Church's endorsement of the divine rights of those kings who aligned their political and economic interests to that of the Catholic Church; (cf. Mk. 12:13-17; Romans 13), caesaropapism, the Investiture Controversy, the French Revolution, the Italian nationalist movement in the latter half of the 19th century which effectively put an end the papal states, and other developments led the Catholic Church to impose neutrality in politics at the end of the 19th century. This neutrality was made to help the Church to move away from the yoke of Christendom and the Church's unfortunate involvement in European politics beginning from Constantine.

However, this neutrality in politics caused the Catholic Church so much pain and public condemnation in the U.S in the Catholic Church's neutrality during the fight for the abolition of the slave trade in the US. The Catholic bishops in the U.S understood slavery and the slave trade as a political issue and not a moral evil and as a result the Catholic Church stayed neutral until the publication of *In Supremo Apostolatus* (1839) by Pope Gregory XVI which clearly asked Catholics and church leaders all over the world to condemn the slave trade and work towards its abolition. However, by the time this papal document came out, the harm to the Catholic Church had already been done and that loss of credibility still haunts the Catholic Church in her relation with African-Americans today.

In many settings in Africa, given the scale of the social evil and the extractive and exploitative tendencies of entrenched bad state actors, political parties and economic classes, the Church cannot be neutral. The political order is not neutral in Africa today; it is often a threat to the common good and opposed to the human security of the poor and the vulnerable. In many settings in Africa, the political order has imposed a heavy cross on God's people. In many cases, ordinary Africans do not see any exit route from the corrupt and oppressive deep states – Sudan, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Burundi, Congo Democratic Republic, Nigeria, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroun, Congo Brazzaville among many other African countries. In such settings, the neutrality of the churches may actually be a sinful abdication of the social implications of the Gospel. God's people in Africa need tools and formation to enable them to protest, resist, contest, reform, and defeat these sinful systems. The political systems and structures often exploit the poverty, ethnicity, and other polarizing tendencies in modern Africa to entrench bad leaders and sinful institutions and social hierarchies. The Church in Africa must be on the side of the poor people and not on the side of the mighty who like pharaoh are opposed to God's liberation of God's people.

(v) A Theology of hope for social transformation in Africa. African political theology bring about a design of how Africa can emerge from the present unacceptable social condition. The theological task is not simply about documenting what others have thought and how they have lived, or simply appropriating, or imposing them on any context. Rather, the task of political theology in Africa is to create a new

social imaginary. This demands a conscious effort with a deep sense of history, a grounding in theological foundations especially privileging some biblical narratives of reversal and enabled by grace and the Holy Spirit to co-create with God a new heaven and new earth in Africa. This new society can always emerge when we let ourselves explore the more which is present in our brokenness and in our cries, as well as in our hopes and dreams. A new social imaginary in Africa is simply not a product. Rather, it is a process of reflection, believing, identification, working, healing, imagining and daily effort of bringing our social context today with all its challenges and opportunities closer to the fruits of God's reign, which in African religious tradition translates, into human and cosmic flourishing.

The Dialectics of the Two Cities: Building Blocks of an African Political Theology

Augustine wrote *The City of God* after the collapse of Rome on 24 August 410 as a response to pagans who blamed Christianity for the collapse of the empire. The concern was about how God orders and governs our lives in the state according to divine providence. Augustine wanted to demonstrate that it was not that the old gods of Rome protected the empire and then when the city embraced Christianity, the Christian God failed to protect the empire. Virtue is the best defense for any state. Augustine argues that every state stands or falls by the values or love, which the citizens embrace.² Augustine was not simply seeking for a 'Christian empire' or 'a Christian world', but rather was concerned about the emergence of a just society.³ Reflecting on Augustine's motivation for writing *The City of God*, Henry Chadwick, writes: "People cursed the times they lived in; 'but whether times are good or bad depends on the moral quality of individual and social life, and is up to us' (S 80.8). Each generation, he remarked, thinks its own times uniquely awful (S 25); morality and religion have never been at so low an ebb as in their generation, and civilized values have never been more threatened. He thought it his duty to attack fatalism and to arouse people to a sense of being responsible if things went wrong. They could have a say in what was going to happen next." I propose that Augustine's reading of the two cities is an analogy of how people's values and love shape what goes on in history and offers a key to understanding how to interpret what goes on in the *polis* in the light of faith and the ordination of all things to God.⁴

Let me quote extensively from Augustine's analysis of the two cities in *The City of God* and outline three points on differences between the two cities: "Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to

² H. CHADWICK, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 103.

³ H. CHADWICK, 106.

⁴ I have relied on Basil Studer's study of the *City of God*, 115-118.

the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head." In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love, the latter obeying, while the former take thought for all. The one delights in its own strength, represented in the persons of its rulers; the other says to its God, "I will love Thee, O Lord, my strength."⁵

Three points are important here:

First, there is wisdom in both cities, but the wisdom of the city of God leads to life, love, peace and human fulfilment; while the wisdom of the earthly city leads to unending conflicts, quest for power and comfort, pleasure, injustice, hatred, death, and violence.

Second, these two wisdoms are related in the sense that the 'wisdom' of the earthly city is oriented towards the 'wisdom' of the heavenly city. However, properly speaking, the wisdom of the earthly city is not really true wisdom because it is founded on a false notion of reality. The wisdom of the city of God is true wisdom because it is built on the proper knowledge of the truth of things and the firm grasp of the order and ordination of all things to God's reign. Government is meant to control the chaos of sin and disorder following 'providential principle' by bringing about justice. The legitimacy of any government is the morality of the rulers and the presence or absence of true justice.⁶

Third, the 'wisdom' of the earthly city is to be encountered, discerned, judged and appropriated in order to see its limitations in bringing about the ultimate salvation of all things in Christ. This 'wisdom' ought to be understood in its instrumental nature and how it helps to convey the narration of God's great deeds. The goal of all education in faith as Augustine pointed out in the introduction to his *De Catechizandis Rudibus* is the narration of God's great deeds in history. Thus, the theologian or Christian scholar must devote time to searching for this goal/wisdom through rigorous immersion in historical analysis. He or she must penetrate the false pretensions of wisdom in the earthly city which often can appear as good or profitable because it offers some immediate gratification, but does not lead to ultimate happiness and a just and harmonious society.

Viewed in the light of these three perspectives, the political theologian must not shy away from history or in engaging in socio-cultural studies and embracing

⁵ *The City of God*, Book XIV Chap. 28.

⁶ Cf. H. CHADWICK, 110-111.

the tools of political discourse. Augustine makes a distinction between *uti* and *frui*. There is the need to understand the real value of a thing, a social reality, or an institution which are irreducible and essential; and how that value is mediated through structures and systems which are dispensable and changeable. We must hold on to what is of ultimate value which are those things in society which reveal to us the fruits of God's reign. Augustine's distinction between *uti* and *frui* is helpful here in discerning the wisdom of the two cities. This is so because it will enable the Christian scholar, 'to discern the thread of what God is really up to' in order that he or she can develop a 'thick description' of God's work in human history.⁷

In discovering what God is really up to in our present political history in Africa, for instance, the accent should be placed on harvesting what Augustine calls 'the eternal and unchangeable things' (*De Doc.* 1.8.39) in our social context to the extent to which they show us in our cultural and human fulfilment that we are living under the reign of God. According to Augustine, the only true object of enjoyment is the Holy Trinity. All other realities are instruments and signs which God has given to humanity for attaining the 'enjoyment' of that which human beings cannot obtain for themselves and which are unchangeable. For Augustine, 'enjoyment' here is not sensate or pleasurable satisfaction of human emotions rather "to enjoy something is to cling to it in love" (*De Doc.* 1,1,3).

By contrast, there are other things which humans pursue, other than in the mode of enjoyment, that is, all relative and instrumental goods (*uti*) are willed ultimately for the sake of those things willed for themselves alone.⁸ Augustine argues this way in *De Doctrina Christiana*. 1, 34,39: "The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of things is to make it understood that that the fulfillment and end of the law (cf. Rom. 13:10; 1Tim 1: 5) and all divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing... To enlighten us and enable us, the whole temporal disposition was set up by divine providence for our salvation. We must make use of this, not with a permanent love and enjoyment of it, but with a transient love and enjoyment of our journey, or of our conveyances, so to speak, or any other expedients whatsoever so that we love the means of transport only because of our destination."

Therein lies the need to discover within history what is temporal and what is eternal; what is valuable and what is of less value, what leads to true worship of God and to the Lord Jesus Christ and what leads people away to idols of the self,

⁷ R.A. MARCUS, *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity*, 2nd Edition. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011, 4.

⁸ D.C. SCHINDLER, "Freedom Beyond our Choosing: Augustine on the Will and its Objects" in *Communion International Catholic Review*, XXIX, 4 (Winter 2002), 362.

institutions, systems, structures, or false religion; what is to be loved eternally and what is to be loved for the sake of the eternal. Here again Augustine writes with so much conviction: “There is this important difference between temporal things and eternal things: something temporal is loved more before it is possessed, but will lose its appeal when attained, for it does not satisfy the soul, whose true and certain abode is eternity. The eternal, on the other hand, is loved more passionately when obtained than when desired” (*De Doc.* 1,37,41).

This discovery of what is important and what is instrumental is not a purely disinterested abstraction of metaphysical principles. It requires direct contact with daily realities of the people and critical hermeneutics of culture and social life. African theologians must immerse themselves into the social context of God’s people and enter into the dumps of history – going to the shrines, the prayer houses, visiting the refugee camps, disaster areas, the hospitals, prisons, market places, highways of deaths and many other sites of tears in our land.

Using Augustine as guide, we can identify some of the reasons for the persistent of the social evils ravaging our land.

First, is our dysfunctional value syndrome which is driven by pride, selfishness, and greed. What needs to change in any society in order for social transformation to occur is the value system. In many African countries today and in many churches, we have often absolutized power, wealth, ethnicity, and religion. All these belong to the realm of *uti* in Augustine’s thought meaning that they are relative instruments which should lead people to finding God, wisdom, love and fulfilment in society and in their lives.

Second, the rupture of value and meaning is the result of the lack of wisdom or true knowledge about the truth in our earthly city with regard to the reason for the existence of our common life in states and communities. This has led many people in Africa to glorify falsehood and false knowledge and half-truths – about ethnicity, politics, state – all of which sow the seed of hatred, suspicion, perpetuate conspiracy theories and create divisions and conflicts which lead our people away from the ultimate end of social life.

Third, what needs to change in any society is the inner selves of citizens from self-love and pride of self to selflessness, love of God and neighbor and humble following of God. The *polis* as a natural institution is always in need of being redeemed from distortions and falsehoods which lead people away from the destiny willed by God for societies. In order for this to happen, both the center of value and meaning of citizens in the state, and the heart of the culture and worldview operative in social, religious and political institutions must change. This will create a community of love and friendship where the common good can be promoted, preserved and protected so that all will draw from it as from a well pool. This is the

kind of society and individuals who will undertake social action, advocacy, priorities and practices driven by sound values and life-affirming and socially transformative acts which will bring about the reign of God.

At the end of the day, culture and history are not simply accidents, they represent in large measure the sum total of values and choices made by individuals, churches, societies, nations, civilizations and races across time. They emerge as responses to the context of people in their search for a sense of meaning and direction. They can be good or bad based on how they bring healing and transformation of a particular society in the light of the goal of temporal life here on earth. This is particularly decisive when people are faced with crisis or uncertainty as a result of a long history of injustice and suffering which have created in Africa this ever-revolving cycle of poverty and social unrest and dissatisfaction. Creating a new social imaginary will require embracing the wisdom of the city of God which does not look for quick fixes to long-term problems, but rather seeks the development of sound values and character in citizens which will help create sound systems and institutions. The chaos and sadness of an earthly city without the wisdom of the city of God and the value preference which can create a culture of love, selflessness, truth, honesty, humility, justice, friendship, and a sense of community can be demonstrated when we look at the present Nigerian context.

Nigeria: The Crises of Governance and Citizenship

I agree with the late African political thinker, Claude Ake, that the bane of African development is the lack of the necessary structures for democracy and growth. Ake argues that African countries like many other countries that went through colonialism or that were forced into nationhood by strong-arm tactics like former Yugoslavia are never politically integrated. According to him, a political system is integrated to the extent that the minimal units (e.g., political actors, tribal groups, religious groups, etc.) develop in the course of political interaction a pool of commonly accepted norms regarding political behavior and a commitment to the political behaviour patterns legitimized by these norms. A commitment to these norms channels the flow of exchanges – outputs and inputs, actions and reactions, expectations and responses – among interacting political actors. It gives coherence and predictability to political life.⁹ Based on his theory, one could say that most of the African countries were malintegrated or minimally integrated after Independence, because the citizens did not share a common value orientation. They were held together physically without any political culture, political socialization

⁹ Cf. C. AKE, *A Theory of Political Integration*, (Homewood: The Dorsey Press, 1967), 3-5.

and invariably no sense of obligation, duty, or loyalty to the political system and the country. As a result, Ake concludes: “The problems of emancipation of the poor in Africa are compounded by the fact that the very processes by which they participate reinforces their disempowerment. The peasant is not politically mobilized in the market-place of formally equal legal subjects who are negotiating their interests and finding common ground, but through patron-client chains, leveraging parochial identities, bribery and intimidation. In these circumstances, voting becomes a metaphor for powerlessness and exploitation.”¹⁰

Government is big business in Africa. “In post-colonial Africa the premium on power is exceptionally high, and the institutional mechanisms for moderating political competition are lacking. As a result, political competition tends to assume the character of warfare. So absorbing is the struggle for power that everything else, including the quest for development, is marginalized.”¹¹ At the heart of this problem is the nature of the post-colonial state in Africa, how it was constituted and the inchoate bonds of the elements constituting the state. As Adebayo Olukoshi rightly argues, there has been an erosion of the autonomy of the state in Africa and the delegitimization of local development and social policies and practices by Western governments, corporations, financial institutions (like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank), and aid agencies. These have led to a lack of harmonization between economic policies and locally driven instruments and agencies for social renewal.¹²

Africa is burdened by a failed leadership and the absence of a critical historical consciousness. This happens both for elites and ordinary Africans. The failure to understand the bigger context of global imperialistic structures within which Africa is enchained is perhaps the missing link in our political socialization. It has also affected the development of sound civic culture and democratic ideals, patterns and behaviors which should influence the ways in which citizens act towards themselves and to the body politic. The sad reality in Nigeria today is that a corrupt and unpatriotic elite – military, ex-military men, and their civilian and religious acolytes – has run Nigeria’s economy aground by siphoning and mismanaging Nigeria’s oil wealth. They have frustrated the hopes and aspirations of Nigerians through extractive and authoritarian leadership. Nigeria, for example, lost more than 220 billion pounds of

¹⁰ C. AKE, *Democracy and Development in Africa*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1996, Press, 10.

¹¹ C. AKE, *Democracy and Development in Africa*, 16.

¹² Cf. A. OLUKOSHI, “Africa and the Process of ‘Underdevelopment:’ Neo-Liberal Globalization and its Social Consequences,” in *African Voices on Development and Social Justice: Editorials from Pambazuka News*, ed. Firoze Manji and Patrick Burnett (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 2005), 2–4.

her national wealth in the first 40 years after independence through the elite network and gatekeepers who control 90% of Nigeria's GDP. According to the London-based Chatham House, Nigeria loses about 1.5 billion dollars every month to oil theft.

With over 70% of Nigerians suffering from grinding poverty, there is a real frustration and anger in Nigeria today. Nigeria recently overtook India as the country with the highest number of people living in extreme poverty in the world. In the Commitment to Reducing Inequality (CRI) report of the Development Finance International (DFI) Nigeria placed bottom in a ranking of 157 nations. How Nigeria, the 6th largest oil-producing country in the world should now become the poverty capital of the world requires greater probing. Beyond poor planning and management of the economy; and lack of strategic visioning for projects and the use of ethnocentric and religious motivation for citing of projects over needs and economies of scale, Nigeria suffers from persistent failure to reorder her priorities according to her assets, capability and needs. This is why health, agriculture, education, social security and safety net receive less budgetary allocation, than running the ever-ballooning cost of bureaucracy and 'settlement' of long chains of redundant government and state officials. The report shows that Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school dropouts, has one of the lowest levels of labor rights and is placed 152 out of 157 in the world's measurement of human capital index (CPI), a predictor of the level of human security based on five indicators – chances of a child reaching age five, healthy growth, expected years of schooling, quality learning available and the adult survival rate (life expectancy).¹³ Most Nigerians, especially the poor, are suffering and dying in droves from malnutrition, violence, and hopelessness. The future outlook of the nation is grim because rather than create wealth and produce capital, Nigerian politicians are obsessed with wealth distribution or the sharing of the national cake.

Analyzing the Nigerian Socio-Political Context

Many scholars have often pointed out at the difficulty in analyzing Nigeria's complex socio-political context. However, one can identify four significant aspects of this complex among many which need to be understood in order to grapple with their consequences.

First is the lack of generally accepted knowledge and belief among Nigerians about the reason for the existence of the country. Nigeria is not a nation and has never been. Those who preach the gospel of one Nigeria are often those who benefit from this false contraption and its destructive and monstrous prehensile tentacles.

¹³ <https://qz.com/africa/1421543/nigerias-poverty-crisis-is-worsening-oxfam-world-bank-data/>

They are the ones who stash our national wealth abroad, who do their check-ups abroad and whose children are studying outside Nigeria.

Second, Nigeria is not a nation because she has no common identity and common national interest around which we can build a common national agenda and a clear path for national integration, development, peace, and prosperity in a healthy and pluralistic environment. This is the kind of structure which guarantees a generally accepted and actionable citizen's rights. This way, all Nigerians can have equal access to social mobility and the good things of life in any part of Nigeria.

The sad reality, however, is that everything in Nigeria is seen through tribal, religious, regional and class lenses. Thus, analyzing the dynamics of power relations along these lines is an important task so that people can clearly see the winners and losers in these power games – and we know that the poor and ordinary Nigerians are the ones who are losing out while a thin top layer of the populace are reaping the benefit of this lack of national agenda and national cohesion. Nigerians need to understand that the balkanization of our nation into these small cultural, political and religious silos is destroying the common good especially that of the majority of our citizens who are suffering from these artificial social constructs and camps. The present political structure cannot sustain a better and brighter future for Nigerians.

Third, Nigeria has no regnant national value, which transcends these miniaturized conceptions of identity – ethnic, religious, class and regional. Like Augustine teaches the earthly city is defined by the kind of values which it promotes – love of self to the forgetfulness of God and neighbors. The ideal pursued by most Nigerians are driven by selfishness, greed, pride and what Augustine calls '*libido dominando*' (the desire to dominate and occupy spaces by hook or crook and also increasing by violence – Nigeria has seen the one of the most deadly wars in modern African history, and bloody ethnic conflicts, civil unrest, religious persecution, kidnapping and other forms of violence perpetrated by Boko Haram, Fulani herdsmen and tribal militias).

A common national value is the only engine which can drive a national renaissance for national growth and development and the flourishing of the talents of our richly endowed citizens. What we have in Nigeria is a dysfunctional value system which celebrates mediocrity as long as it benefits me or my reference group; and which celebrates hypocrisy and deceit as long as it promotes the culture of extraction of the resources of the land to be parceled out to one's prebendal peons. A national character can only be built on a sound values template. There is the need for a commonly agreed moral compass about what is right and wrong. This can help us navigate the tempestuous terrain which we must traverse as a nation if we will ever get to the beautiful shores of abundance and the good life for the majority of our people. The unfortunate thing is that in our national and local politics as well

as in our social interaction even in religious organizations, we have come to idolize money and materialism over character and wisdom. We have come to celebrate the building of physical structures even with sordid money over the building of character, competence, and a good name. This is why academicians, teachers, healthcare workers, innovators, artists and many other professionals who are the architects of tomorrow are wallowing in inexcusable poverty in Nigeria. This is why our hard-working women are reduced to destitution and to praise-singing for corrupt and inefficient politicians in order for them to get a bag of rice and a tin of oil to feed their hungry children and spouses. This is also why some powerful religious, business and political leaders would seek sexual favors from our young girls and women before they could get a job or any access to the ladder of social mobility.

Nations, like individuals, stand and fall on the basis of the values which govern choices and decisions of citizens and leaders across the board. In that light, the ugly face of Nigeria can only be seen clearly by looking at our failed value system across the board. This goes beyond any single individual because we all as Nigerians have been tainted by or socialized into this prurient ethical climate. This explains our bribery and corruption, constant fighting and contestation in small and larger units of association; our toxic social interaction and unethical business practices. It also explains why we often do not trust each other and thus treat each other with suspicion. It is the cause of the dishonesty and inauthenticity which govern a lot of our social interactions; and the laziness and ineptitude of our public and private officials among other sad realities which reflect our destructive value system. Until there are consequences for bad behaviors in this country, and until we call the demon by its name rather than excuse or rationalize it away, there will be no exit route

Fourthly, are false religious claims and false religious consciousness. Nigeria is said to be a religious nation but what values, moral and spiritual traditions have developed from our so-called religiosity in Nigeria? Many religious leaders in Nigeria abuse their religious authority and blaspheme the name of God through their greed and false religious claims. They are feeding the people with religious poison rather than food for the soul or hope to strengthen them to become agents in their own history and champions of change in the land. Some of our religious leaders have become compromisers in many instances and a few of them have become openly partisan, taking side with one party or another based on the highest bidder. One wonders why a bishop with all the members of his diocesan curia (24 priests) would leave his work of shepherding his flock to spend precious time in the state house with the sole mission of coming to congratulate a governor for winning an election! One wonders why our priests, bishops, religious and religious institutions are flocking to state houses caps in hand begging for money from government officials and why they think it is consistent with the Gospel for them to receive monetary

gifts and SUVs from government officials. Most poor people in our country see the Church as part of the system of power and privilege which is holding them in an unbreakable yoke of poverty and suffering. These are just a few of the examples of the glaring failure in our Church today to stand on the side of the poor, powerless and marginalized of our society who are still hanging on the Cross.

It is not surprising that the two institutions which are flourishing in Nigeria today are politics and religion; they are the two games in town. The interests of religious leaders and politicians should never intersect except when they work together for the common good, especially to protect the rights and welfare of the most vulnerable members of society. The lesson of history should remind us all as church leaders, clerics and religious that the lowest point of the Church's history has always been when she compromised the Gospel in the search for power or wealth – the Great Schism, the Reformation, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the Italian Revolution, the kulturkampf in Germany, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade among many others instances. A better future for our country can only be realized when there is a healthy distance between religious and political leaders. This way, the religious leaders can call Nigerian politicians forth from darkness into the light. Religious leaders in Nigeria must swim against this dangerous current of corruption and materialism and become sentinels of justice, while fighting for the poor, for good government, and for the common men and women in our country who are hurting in this harsh wind of poverty and exploitation by the political class.

Concluding Theological Reflection

I would like to conclude with some thoughts from Pope Francis. First, African theologians must live on the frontiers. Pope Francis has called for a renewal of Catholic theology by locating the center of Catholic theology at the frontiers that is in the pastoral life and public square which is the laboratory of theology rather than in libraries. Writing in a letter to the Chancellor of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina in 2015, Pope Francis said that to do theology is 'to live on a frontier', and that 'every good theologian, like good shepherds, has the odor of the people and of the street.' As a result, he proposed that theologians by their reflection, can develop reflective practices which 'pour oil and wine onto the wounds of humanity.'¹⁴

Second, political theology in Africa must see the role of theology within the overall mission of the Church which Pope Francis calls a field hospital. According to Pope Francis, "Theology is an expression of a Church which is a 'field hospital

¹⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *A Letter to the Theological Faculty of The Pontifical University of Argentina*, March 3, 2015.

which lives her mission of salvation and healing in the world.” He rejects any form of reflection which he calls ‘desktop theology’ which is comfortable with settled answers, and afraid to meet headlong the big questions and new complexities of our times. Being in the field, means that theologians of Africa must be prepared to be wounded themselves and must be open to touching the wounds of their brothers and sisters and to die with and for the people for the sake of God. In the speech referred to above, he points out that theology should be done by “people immersed in the broadest theological community possible, of which they feel they are truly part, connected by bonds of solidarity and also of authentic friendship.”

Finally, the most effective way through which political theology in Africa could become effective in the wider African society of today is to the extent to which it emerges from, reflects and models the face of truly transformative African Christian communities. Such communities are not simply advocating for a better world and a new Africa, but are examples of such a new community in the way they celebrate diversity, reach out to the poor, and bring healing to the sick. It is a community which displays authentic Christian witnessing through sound social ethics, whose members are reconciled among themselves and are at peace with each other and with God. We need to see in our churches today a people who yield to one another in a spirit of service, love, respect, and humility and who mutually honor and advance the good of everyone. In such a community of solidarity, and sharing, people are driven by true faith which does good works in gladly bearing with the burdens of one another. African political theologians should not only look for such alternate sites of faith and action, but must help create such faith communities where the healing balm of Gilead will salve the festering wounds of this beautiful continent.