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FAITH AND WITNESS: RECONFIGURING THE
CHURCH'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA WITH
THE SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY OF EDWARD
SCHILLEBEECKX

John Bosco Kamoga

Abstract

Until recently the church in Africa used to protest against corruption and oppression. Lately however, she has become ambivalent or even indifferent to political engagement. This is partly due to political pressure, and partly due to a loss of credibility, given some ambiguous relationships she now tends to espouse with oppressive individuals and systems for her own benefits. Because of that, the church in Africa now seems unsure of how to go forward with her call to prophetic witness. I argue that African liberation theologians must provide the theological rationale that should challenge and re-affirm the church to respond to her prophetic vocation in Africa. This paper is proposing using sacramental theology to reconfigure the church's identity and mission in and to society. Engaging with the sacramental theology of Edward Schillebeeckx with which he responded to the political challenges of his time and context; challenging the church to engage with the realities of the time in a proactive manner that is both faithful to human experience and to God, I want to suggest a theoretical framework for African liberation theology that can be used to explain the political implications of the church's sacramental identity and its subsequent implications for the African situation.

Introduction

In his book *The Fate of Africa*, Martin Meredith claims that many Africans' post-independence hopes for a prosperous continent have long been expurgated and replaced by a sense of desperation, resignation, apathy and anger.¹ David Kaulem blames this on the emblematic stagnation, poverty, violence and disease characteristic of most of the continent. He is equally critical of the oppressive political machinery that rewards friends and orchestrates the near annihilation of opponents; thereby creating a society comprising of a thriving few and a wretched majority.² This prompts Tracy Kuperus to question the Christian churches' contribution to the ongoing process of liberating Africa, and whether, if any, their political engagement helps or hinders the consolidation of this process?³ Conceivably, David Ngong thinks that Christianity's tenacity on the continent will depend largely on how Christian churches will embody and enhance people's vision of a good life, which includes material wellbeing.⁴

In this paper therefore, I discuss what I think is an ambivalent political engagement of the church⁵ in Africa. I begin by

¹ Cf. Martin Meredith, *The Fate of Africa: A History of the Continent since Independence*, (New York: Publicaffairs, 2005), 141ff.

² David Kaulem, "Church Response to the Crisis in Zimbabwe", in *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 8:1, 47-54, Routledge, January 2010, 48.

³ Tracy Kuperus, "The Political Role of and Democratic Contribution of Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa", in *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 53, no. 2, pp 278-306, Oxford University Press, 2011, 281.

⁴ David T. Ngong, "Christianity in Africa", 208-219, in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*, Elias Kifon Bongmba, Ed, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2012), 208-209.

⁵ By church I imply the entire Christian denomination, regardless of creed. While their theologies may differ, all Christian churches supposedly derive their mission from the Christ Event. This is consequential because it makes

concisely profiling the evolution of this engagement from the time of the struggle for independence to date. In order to address this arguably contested political engagement, I will describe the theological foundations of the church's political engagement. My aim is to amplify certain talking points that may benefit the church in Africa and make her distinctive engagement with the political more guided, confident and effective.

The Church's Political Engagement in Africa

By political engagement I denote what Pope Francis calls the church's missionary consciousness which orients and guides not only her outreach to the peripheries, but also her participation in the daily lives of the public, to such levels that she becomes identifiable with the rest of society, taking on as it were, "the smell of the sheep."⁶

Consistent with such an understanding, history shows that her earliest exploits notwithstanding⁷, the church in Africa was for

the Christ Event the hermeneutical standard against which all Christian churches should interpret their particular identities and mission. It is the reason we can confidently agree with the Exhortation *Africae Munus* 11, 15 that the collaboration of all those who believe in Christ to witness against the "anthropological crisis" is necessary. While this paper references predominantly Catholic documents and employs a language that may be more accessible to the Catholic folk, many of the theologians cited are drawn from all over the theological spectrum of the Christian divide in Africa and beyond.

⁶ Pope, Francis. "Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World." *Vatican Press*, November 24, 2013. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/pa-francesco_esortazioneap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed October 17, 2016), §24.

⁷ Many scholars agree that modern Christianity colluded with the imperialists to usher in the era of colonial domination and racist projects that diminished

long credibly reputed as that distinctive strand within the civil society which dependably signified an unwavering opposition to authoritarianism, abuse of power and oppression.⁸ Inspired by her social teaching, the church focused on human promotion through integral education, health, and advocacy for good governance on the continent.⁹ In fact Ikenna Okafor describes with nuance, how even the birth of African theology was in part a Christian response to the crippling socio-economic and political conditions being endured by the African folk in the era of colonialism and the struggle for independence. He says that the pioneers of African theology wanted to break away from those theologies indifferent toward the African predicament.¹⁰

From an Active to a Contested Engagement

In recent years scholars have started questioning the Christian churches' commitment and motives driving their engagement with the political. Selfish motives seem to be at play and are thought to be determinant of the manner and extent of each Christian group's manner and level of engagement.¹¹ It is fair to say that in contemporary Africa, the church's political engagement has come under scrutiny, and unsurprisingly it is generally contested;¹² contested from at least two angles, internally and externally.

African peoples and their cultures, the effects of which continue to haunt contemporary Africa (David T. Ngong, "Christianity in Africa 2012, 213).

⁸ Kuperus, *Journal of Church and State*, 53, 2, 2011, 281.

⁹ Henry Okullu, *Church and Politics in East Africa*, (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1982), 2

¹⁰ Ikenna Okafor, *Toward an African Theology of Fraternal Solidarity*, (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 16-17.

¹¹ Kuperus, *Journal of Church and State*, 53, 2, 2011, 281-300.

¹² *Ibid*, 302-306.

Internally, the contestation is partly captured in the exhortation *Africae Munus*¹³ (AM) 17. In recent decades, although there is a minority within the African church that actively takes political engagement as a theological and social responsibility¹⁴; the more dominant stance is one of indifference to political engagement.

This stance is as concerning as it is understandable. There is no doubt that the church in Africa is caught up in a complicated situation. She is a poor church in need of money to support her clergy and to finance her outreach to the periphery. The bulk of her monetary support comes from those who are the most powerful in society, presiding over most of the oppressive and unjust systems. Many in church leadership have convinced themselves that their options are limited to accepting the handouts and survive, or reject them and die.¹⁵ Careful not to antagonize their donors, many a church leader have gradually softened their prophetic voice because as Ngong observes, today in most of Africa, the church is being appropriated by the powerful to serve their purposes.¹⁶

There is every possibility that the church is no longer confident to promote with vigour her social teaching, or that she is confused about what she must do with it in the current political environment. At once she is convinced that “authentic hearing is

¹³ A 2011 post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness Benedict XVI commemorating the conclusion of the synod on the Church in Africa in the service of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. It was adopted as the guiding document for the conference organized by the Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations, working with the theme of “Catholic Social Teaching and Common Good in Africa”.

¹⁴ Wilson Muoha Maina, “An African Christian Ethic as a Liberation Ethic in the Theology of Bénézet Bujo”, 5-28, in *African Christian Studies*, Vol 22, No. 3, Patrick Ryan, Ed., (Nairobi: CUEA Publications, 2006), 7-10.

¹⁵ Kaulem, “Church Response to the Crisis in Zimbabwe”, 50

¹⁶ Ibid, 212-213.

obeying and acting...it is offering in life and in society, a witness like that call of the prophets, which continuously united the word of God and life, faith and rectitude, worship and social commitment"¹⁷. Yet, she also denies that it is at all her competence to build a just and social order. She suggests curiously that her own task is one of building consciences. The exhortation further declares that the church does not claim to interfere in anyway in the politics of the states. She is even keen to draw a clear line between the role of the pastors and that of the laity (AM 22, 23), as if the church is divided and operating on two different spheres. For instance, Benedict XVI cautioned the church against attempting to replace the state. He suggested that the church's political engagement should only be indirect, defined by conscience formation and awakening people to align with their spiritual energy in order to correct a blind love for power which tends to blur reason and sensibility to the human vocation to live justly.¹⁸

Externally, this self-imposed censure of the church's prophetic role has emboldened others in the political world to contest her right and competence to engage in matters beyond the spiritual. Her history of collusion with the colonialists and her own struggle with scandals have been used as blackmail to further silence her.¹⁹ There are even leaders on the continent who now threaten those churches whose leaders will not desist from engaging in politics, with the suspension of their freedom to

¹⁷ *Africae Munus*, 16.

¹⁸ Brian J. Benestad, "The Catholic (Synthetic) View", in *Five Views on Church and Politics*, 177-204, Stanley N. Gundry, Amy E. Black, Eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015), 192.

¹⁹ Kuperus, "The Political Role of, and Democratic Contribution of Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa", 2011, 285-286

worship.²⁰ Out of prudence, many argue, the church has to find a way of surviving within a harsh environment and quietly do the little she can to effect some change.²⁰ Indeed Kuperus laments, that in the face of the annihilation of Africa, many churches have retreated into survival mode, convinced that their main duty is to pray and preach rather than to meddle into politics.²¹

In the end all this serves to indicate to us that there is need to re-evaluate the Christian commitment to political engagement in Africa. It is not enough to be in the know of the church's social teaching without understanding the theological and social implications of being church in the world. Undeniably political issues tend to enlist varied opinions from creedal/doctrinal perspectives²¹, as well as on the individual level between persons, even those sharing the same faith.²² Lived contexts and particular concerns generally dictate to a large extent, how faith communities and individuals theologically approach political engagement.²³ Therefore, it would be naïve to pretend that all Christian believers can speak with one political voice on any political issues.²⁴ While consensus on these issues may be difficult to achieve, it is possible to discern common principles that can guide and orient a Christian approach to political engagement. Suggestions have been made by people like James

²⁰ Ibid, 298-299; Okullu, *Church and State in East Africa*, 1982, 5, 16 ²⁰ Kaulem, "Church Response to the Crisis in Zimbabwe", 49 ²¹ Kuperus, *Journal of Church and State*, 53, 2, 2011, 281.

²¹ Amy E. Black, "Christian Witness in the Public Square", in *Five Views on Church and Politics*, 217-230, Stanley N. Gundry, Amy E. Black, Eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015), 222.

²² Ibid, 217

²³ Bruce L. Fields, "A Black Church (Prophetic) Response", in *Five Views on Church and Politics*, 50-52, Stanley N. Gundry, Amy E. Black, Eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2015), 50-52.

²⁴ Black, "Christian Witness in the Public Square", 2015, 217

K. Smith that the Christian community needs to know that only through collaboration can the church contribute positively to the healing of a broken world with its unique contribution as a Christian body.²⁵²⁶ For this to happen however, a new imagination is needed to help guide the church in Africa to rediscover her identity and mission in and to society. I suggest that this new imagination can be triggered by reflecting on Schillebeeckx's sacramental theology.

The Christological Foundations of the Church's Political Engagement

Kuperus' inquiry cited above, regarding the Christian churches' contribution to ongoing efforts to liberate Africa is based on the theological ramifications arising out of Christianity's selfunderstanding. In describing the Christian religion, Edward Schillebeeckx, underscores the centrality of the personal dimension of the relationship between the human person and God in Christianity. He suggests that this relationship rests on a double interaction between God and the human person, an interaction in which God takes the initiative. Schillebeeckx says that God addresses every person inviting them into communion with God 'self'.²⁶ The call creates in the human person an unrelenting longing for a personal relationship with the ultimate meaning of his/her life. However, only God's gratuitous self-donation in revelation, rather than human merit, can quench this longing. Therefore, Schillebeeckx argues that religion, which is only made possible by God's grace, is above all a saving dialogue between the human person and the living God. It is also

²⁵ Ibid, 229-230

²⁶ Schillebeeckx, Edward. *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*. Edited by Ted Mark Schoof and Carl Sterkens. Vol. I. XI vols. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 5.

a personal relation of the human person to God; a personal communing with God.²⁷

Consequently, Schillebeeckx concludes that God's self-revelation and humanity's response (religion) combine to 'produce history'. The revelation and religion combine to impress upon the course of history as evident facts inseparable with history itself. This is because, God through his revelation personally intervenes on behalf of mankind not only as an interested creator, but especially as one who is equally involved actively in the unfolding drama of human history, forever participating in it, on our side. Hence, Schillebeeckx suggests that religion becomes both, historical and sacramental, precisely because, everything that God wills for the human person, God undertakes it in the course of human history, and God realizes this in such a way that God's saving actions become visible exactly as divine. In the end, "God's saving activity 'makes history' by revealing itself, and it reveals itself by becoming history."²⁸

Now for Schillebeeckx, in the historical Christ Event, God principally revealed Godself as humanity's salvation. He is keen to emphasise that it was through Jesus' humanity that God's saving action reached the men and women of his time. Consequentially, "because the saving acts of the man Jesus are performed by a divine person, they have a divine power to save, but because this divine power to save appears to us in visible form, the saving activity of Jesus is *sacramental*. For a sacrament is a divine bestowal of salvation in an outwardly perceptible form...in historical visibility. Schillebeeckx adds, "...The man Jesus, as a personal visible realization of the divine grace of

²⁷ Ibid, 1-2

²⁸ Ibid, 2-3.

redemption, is the sacrament, the primordial sacrament ... Human encounter with Jesus is therefore the sacrament of the encounter with God.”²⁹ It is vital to remember that the church is born of this encounter, lives by it and must lead back to it. According to Schillebeeckx, “Churches are the places where salvation from God is thematised...confessed explicitly, proclaimed prophetically and celebrated liturgically.”³⁰ Therefore, when political theologians like Todd Walatka suggest that *Lumen Gentium*’s declaration in (§48) that the Church is the “universal sacrament of salvation,” was the most fundamental ecclesiological affirmation at Vatican II,³¹ they are pointing to the profound implications such a declaration has for the church’s identity and mission in the world. In other words, Schillebeeckx argues, the church is not only a means of salvation, “It is Christ’s salvation itself, this salvation as visibly realized in this world. Thus, it is, by a kind of identity, the body of the Lord.”³²

Implications of the Church’s Sacramentality

Because the Church’s identity and mission cannot be defined apart from the Christ Event, it is impossible for the church in Africa to remain an authentic sacrament of God’s salvation for humanity, if she avoids political engagement. It follows then that if Jesus’ life and ministry came across to his contemporaries as the human embodiment of the redeeming love of God,³³ the church’s authenticity can only be guaranteed by her consistent

²⁹ Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works*, Vol. I, 2014, 10-11.

³⁰ Schillebeeckx, Edward. *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*. Edited by Ted Mark Schoof and Carl Sterkens. Vol. X. XI vols. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 13.

³¹ Walatka Todd, “Church as Sacrament: Gutierrez and Sobrino as Interpreters of *Lumen Gentium*” in *Horizons* volume 42, issue 01, pp 70-95, June 2015, 71.

³² Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works*, Vol. I, 2014, 35

³³ *Ibid*, 10

witness to humanity in Africa, of her faith experience that: "Jesus' life-journey is the fulfilment and realization of divine care for man, albeit in and through the free and responsible, human and religious initiative of Jesus himself, in conflict and resistance at the same time through the historical occasion for his appearance as a pioneer in the fight for man's cause as God's cause".³⁴

The African church must realise that there is no room for indifference to any situation of oppression whatever it may be, because, according to Schillebeeckx, the Church does not exist except for God and humanity; and cannot mediate salvation outside the world; given that human and salvation history are inseparable. Indeed, Schillebeeckx convincingly argues that the Church is that historical medium through which the Christ Event is continually re-actualized and reinterpreted in history, relative to contextual lived experiences of a people, primarily because she continually lives out of the impress which Jesus himself makes on her.³⁵ In this vein, the implication is that Christology must be the foundation and the hermeneutical principle for all ecclesiology and pastoral engagement.³⁶

This is why retrieving the Church's sacramentality is absolutely crucial for the church in Africa. Gustavo Gutiérrez is adamant that to be truly sacramental the church cannot actively avoid the cost of discipleship. He believes that the very possibility of

³⁴ Schillebeeckx, Edward. *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*. Edited by Ted Mark Schoof and Carl Sterkens. Vol. VII. XI vols. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 629.

³⁵ Schillebeeckx, Edward. *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*. Edited by Ted Mark Schoof and Carl Sterkens. Vol. VI. XI vols. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 37-38.

³⁶ Thompson, Daniel Speed. *The Language of Dissent: Edward Schillebeeckx on the Crisis of Authority in the Catholic Church*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003, 73.

sometimes having to confront the hostility coming the church's way because she is witnessing is part of her calling. For him, while martyrdom may not be sought after, it may not equally be actively and purposely avoided or feared when the church's prophetic role is being tested. He agrees with Bonhoeffer that it is scandalous if a Christian church should remain indifferent or even worse complicit to acts of oppression. This is because the oppressed are nothing less than the reflection of the image of God that is being obliterated. He therefore thinks that the experience of oppression and suffering must enlist the church's relentless sense of solidarity and pro-action to save without counting the cost. This commitment and refusal to back down even in the face of trouble according to Gutiérrez, is the sacramental mediation of the gracious and unconditional saving love of God aimed at affirming and safeguarding the inalienable dignity of the human person. Gutiérrez believes that establishing a just and peaceful society is the gist of the reign of God for the human person. Political engagement is not only about articulating, it is also about effecting the redemptive dimension of the gospel; disallowing all oppression and suffering.³⁷

Moreover, in spite of the sinfulness and sometimes dark history of the Christian church in Africa,³⁸ and in spite of the political blackmail employed to try and discredit the church's credibility to speak against injustice and corruption, the Christian church must courageously and with conviction affirm and assert her existential mission to engage politically. She may not let herself or others make her to doubt her authority to engage with the

³⁷ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Cost of Discipleship", in *A Grammar of Justice: The Legacy of Ignacio Ellacuría*, 77-85, J. Mathew Ashley, Kevin F. Bourke, Rodolfo Cardenal, Eds, (New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 78-82.

³⁸ Kuperus, "The Political Role of, and Democratic Contribution of Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa", 2011, 286, 298

political because of her past and present failures. The church is not called to be faultless but rather true to her identity and calling to be the sacramental mediation of God's saving grace for the human person in history.

Schillebeeckx explains why even a sinful church must remain engaged politically. He argues that the church relies on God's enduring grace and presence, the grace by which she was born and constituted into a visible communion of persons, both graced and sinful, at once redeeming and being continually redeemed. Indeed, he thinks that attempts at denying the Church's sinfulness in favour of viewing her merely as the invisible communion of the righteous, is a heresy. Such views would be tantamount to denying the church's incarnational nature, taking away not only its weakness and sinfulness but also the visibility of its grace and indeed grace itself, which is mediated by the same graced and disgraced Church, ever on the path of maturing toward perfection. For Schillebeeckx the Church's holiness belongs to her by essence and not even sin can take it away from her. Sin only reveals her estrangement from her Master; a sign that she no longer radiates clearly the reality she signifies. She must forever live continually purging herself of all that, that blurs her light from shining to the world, as she journeys toward her perfection at the end of time.³⁹ The Apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus* rightly underscores the importance of a constant metanoia (AM 32,33).

Indeed, precisely because she is aware of her being provisional, because she is a sacrament and not the kingdom she mediates and witnesses to, Simon Hewitt-Horsman clarifies that the church's political engagement is never meant to be seen as the full realization of human liberation. Instead, describing the church as

³⁹ Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works*, Vol. I, 2014, 147

a sacrament of salvation helps to bring into focus the eschatological orientation of her existence and mediation. He argues that the church must be understood as pointing toward the eschatological kingdom to be fully realized at the end of time when all sacraments will cease. Besides, her witnessing role should in no way lead to an attitude of triumphalism; it should rather lead to humility and awareness that most kingdom-directed political praxis is undertaken by agents beyond the membership of the church.⁴⁰ For the church in Africa, as Hewitt-Horsman suggests, the distinction to her uniquely inspired political engagement must be that she points to the eschatological orientation, termination, and fulfilment of all human institutions, systems and power relations, including all political and liberation efforts aimed at bringing about wholeness for every man and woman in context.⁴¹

Conclusion

In view of the discussion above, one has to agree with Ngong that based on sheer numbers and the resources at her disposal, the church in Africa should be more actively involved and make her influence felt by way of political engagement; helping to contribute to the solution of addressing the African crisis.⁴² From the sacramental nature of the church, it follows of necessity that the church has a singular vocation to be an instrument of God's saving presence to the human person.⁴³ Because by the incarnation God was revealing in the person of Jesus his redeeming presence to earthly humanity within the ambiance of

⁴⁰ Simon Hewitt-Horsman, "Church as Sacrament: A Model for Political Ecclesiology", in *New Blackfriars*, 357-368, Fergus Kerr, Ed, Vol 85, Issue 997, 2004, 363.

⁴¹ Ibid, 363-364.

⁴² Ngong, "Christianity in Africa", 2012, 216

⁴³ Hewitt-Horsman, "Church as Sacrament", 2004, 367

the particularities of human life, social embodiment, relationships, and social structures, to the extent that she thinks of herself as the sacrament of universal salvation in the world, the church in Africa, must politically remain engaged. Salvation history always takes place within human history; in the particularities of time, place and social location.⁴⁴ And because the Church is born of the Christ Event and witnesses to the same in the world, the church in Africa, and the life of her members, must always be a representation of God's saving will for the African person as an integral whole.

Political engagement is thus not an option, but rather one of the very justification of the church's existence in Africa.

⁴⁴ Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works*, Vol. VII, 2014, 725-727