

PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVES ON JUSTICE: SHAPING THE NIGERIAN CHURCH

Ifeanyi A. Chukwudebelu*, Dr Wilson Ejiofor Anowia**, Nganwuchu Geoffrey Chiazor PhD***,
Ven. Dr. Geoffrey Chidebem Molokwu**** & Daniel O. Chukwudebelu*****

Abstract

This study explores the Calvinist perspective on justice and its impact on the Nigerian Church's engagement with societal issues and pursuit of cultural renewal. Methodologically, a combination of primary and secondary sources was employed, and qualitative data analysis was conducted. The Protestant tradition, particularly Calvinism, emphasizes the authority of scripture and the sovereignty of God, influencing societal engagement and understanding of justice. In Nigeria, the Church's role in promoting justice is crucial, yet it faces challenges of perceived inactivity and alignment with political elites. Calvinist perspectives on justice emphasize equality, restoration, and reconciliation, aligning with the Church's potential transformative role in Nigerian society. Embracing these perspectives can position the Nigerian Church as a catalyst for positive societal change, cultural renewal, and justice pursuit.

Introduction

The frequent evocation of tradition and traditional values plays a crucial role in shaping political and religious narratives, providing a basis for the legitimacy of specific sets of values. Tradition, defined as beliefs or behaviors with symbolic meaning and historical significance, is transmitted within societies and groups, often expressed as folk customs. This perspective encompasses not only cultural practices but also historical teachings advocated by recognized church authorities, including figures such as the Pope, Patriarch of Constantinople, Archbishop of Canterbury, Church Fathers, Protestant Reformers, and founders of denominations. Additionally, traditions of various religious bodies include doctrinal formulations like creeds, confessions of faith, and catechisms generated by these entities and influential individuals.

On the other hand, apostolic tradition, as articulated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2011), refers to teachings handed down by the Apostles through oral communication, personal example, and the institutions they established. This living transmission, facilitated by the Holy Spirit, emphasizes the apostolic succession of bishops as a crucial component, collectively known as Tradition. This distinction highlights the authoritative continuity in Church teachings, especially within Orthodox churches, and underscores the significance of historical continuity within its framework. Thus, both tradition and apostolic tradition play pivotal roles in shaping religious identities and practices, with tradition encompassing a broader societal and cultural context and apostolic tradition specifically rooted in the teachings of the Apostles within the Catholic Church.

Hence, in this study, the methodology encompasses the specific procedures and techniques utilized to identify, select, process, and analyze data throughout the research process. For data collection, a combination of primary and secondary sources was utilized. Primary sources included personal observations and oral interviews, selected to address the intricate nature of the study. Secondary sources consisted of a diverse array of published and unpublished written materials, such as journals, textbooks, online resources, articles, dictionaries, and various library materials. This comprehensive data collection approach aimed to provide the researcher with a profound understanding of the subject matter.

The qualitative method of data analysis was implemented, employing cosmological, theological, historical, and sociological approaches to interpret the collected data. This analytical approach facilitated a contextual understanding of the extent to which the Calvinist perspective on justice, particularly within the context of the Protestant tradition, impacts the Nigerian church.

Calvinism Protestant Tradition and Reformation Movement

The Protestant tradition, also known as the Reformation tradition, is intricately interwoven with the foundational principles of the Reformed creeds, theology, worship, and teachings that were bequeathed by the key figures of the Reformation era. These theological and doctrinal elements are held in high esteem, believed to represent the purest forms of apostolic Christianity. However, this tradition is not a static relic of the past; rather, it actively propelled the Reformation movement forward.

This tradition serves as more than just a historical backdrop; it functions as a dynamic and influential stream that carried the Reformation's momentum. Within this tradition, there is a cultivation of specific viewpoints that are not only cherished but also actively fostered and promoted. It plays a pivotal role in shaping and molding Protestant thought and practices, providing a framework that continues to guide and orient the beliefs and behaviors of Protestant communities.

In essence, the Reformation tradition is not a passive heritage but a living and evolving force that influences how Protestants perceive their faith, interpret their sacred texts, engage in worship, and navigate their theological landscapes. It is this dynamic nature that makes the tradition an integral part of the ongoing narrative of Protestantism, offering a rich tapestry of beliefs and practices that have endured through time. In line with this view, The Presbyterian Guardian, (1947) posited that;

A Protestant tradition is the viewpoint of the Protestant church as over against the perversions and apostasies of the Romish communion. This tradition is enshrined in the great Protestant creeds and in the theology of the Protestant reformers. It is also embodied in the worship and practice that prevailed in the Protestant churches of the 16th and 17th centuries. (p.9)

The protestant tradition is anchored on the three (3) *Solas* of the Protestant Reformation which are foundational 'set of Christian theological principles' held by Protestant Reformation theologians. Each *sola* represents a key belief in the Protestant traditions in contradistinction to the theological doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church against which they protested (Wisse and Maarten, 2017). These *Solas* include;

1. *Sola scriptura* (Scripture alone); this posits the Bible as the sole infallible source of authority for Christian faith and practice.
2. *Sola fide*: (Faith alone); this emphasizes the fact that the Christian believer is justified by God in faith alone rather than by a combination of faith with good works.
3. *Sola gratia*: (Grace alone); this is the teaching that salvation comes by divine grace only.

Calvinism in Protestant Theology

Calvinism, a movement initiated by the French Reformer John Calvin, stands as a major branch within Protestantism, upholding the theological tenets and Christian practices formulated by Calvin and his contemporaries during the Reformation era. In alignment with various other reformatory movements, Calvinism places a robust emphasis on acknowledging the sovereignty of God and upholding the authority of the Bible as foundational to Christian belief. (Bouwisma, 2023)

Central to Calvinist theology is the conviction that God imparts knowledge of Himself to individuals exclusively through the Word of God. Calvinist theologians argue that genuine understanding of God is attainable solely through this self-revelation, emphasizing a cautious approach to speculating about aspects of the divine not explicitly revealed in the Scriptures. This theological stance stems from the belief that human knowledge of God fundamentally differs from comprehension of any other subject, given the infinite nature of God, which finite human understanding cannot fully grasp. Thus Calvinism's core principles encompass not only theological doctrines but also practical implications for Christian living, societal engagement, and the understanding of justice. These aspects collectively contribute to the distinctive identity of Calvinism within the broader landscape of Protestant traditions. (Mackim, 2001)

The Role of the Church in Promoting Justice in Nigeria

To explore the Church's role in promoting justice in Nigeria, it is essential to begin by elucidating the notion of justice that underlies the expectations of a just society in Nigeria. Since the focus is on the church's role in promoting such a society, there is no better place to derive the meaning of justice than from the Bible. The word and concept of justice find abundant reference in the Bible, carrying varied meanings comprehensively understood as "full religious and moral rectitude." It is synonymous, even interchangeably used with "righteousness." (Ukpe and Gbinde, 2022)

In articulating a comprehensive understanding, justice is viewed as integrity or moral excellence, corresponding to its common meaning in the Old Testament. In its narrowest sense, justice is mere conformity with the law, which is evidently inadequate given the existence of an "unjust law." In its proper sense, justice is "the harmonious functioning of the constituent parts (individual or societal)". One form of justice needing explicit mention is what another author has termed "general or social justice." It is the general good in all its aspects and implications, with no other limits than the due proportion between one's own needs and those of others. (Thomas, 2016)

For this general or social justice, it can take the form of obligations of justice towards certain persons in need of aid, as observed in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. Social justice can transcendentially be ordained to each person's common good, emphasizing the mutual relationships of men, fulfilling their fundamental imperative to respect the dignity and rights of others. (Akpa, 2022)

In the Nigerian context, the Church's role in promoting justice becomes crucial, considering historical perceptions of the Church as docile and irrelevant. The church, by engaging in the interpretation and dissemination of justice rooted in these biblical principles, can contribute significantly to transforming society's perception of justice, advocating for integrity, moral excellence, and social harmony.

However, in contrast, the Nigerian Church has frequently been depicted as inactive, indifferent, and distant from the pivotal events shaping the country's justice landscape. It is noteworthy that specific influential religious figures have been accused of forming close alliances with the political elite, thereby jeopardizing the sacred essence of their vocations (Eke, 2020).

This perception of the Church in Nigeria has long persisted, with critics highlighting its perceived lack of proactive engagement in societal matters. Accusations of cozying up to political figures and compromising the sacred integrity of their roles have further fueled the narrative of the Church being detached and ineffectual in the face of pressing national issues. The challenge, therefore, lies in reshaping this image and fostering a more active and socially relevant role for the Church within the Nigerian context.

The Influence of Calvinist Perspectives on Justice

The intricate interplay between Christian perspectives on justice and their intellectual, social, ecclesial, and political contexts remains a relevant discourse today. A primary and evident distinction between Protestant and Roman Catholic views on social justice emerges at this juncture (Forrester, 2001). It is therefore a truism, that the Roman Catholic thought is rooted in classical Aristotelian philosophy, as filtered through the lens of St Thomas Aquinas. On the other hand, Protestants exhibit a degree of skepticism toward secular reasoning and strive to anchor their justice-oriented thinking in the revelations found in scripture (Forrester, 2001, p.196). While many Protestants harbor reservations about the role of 'reason,' particularly in the context of 'natural-law reasoning,' they tend to align with Reformation ideals, emphasizing allegiance to God alone as revealed through Jesus Christ in the Scriptures (Tienou, 2001).

A key point of convergence among various Protestant traditions, including Calvinism, is their unwavering commitment to the authority of scripture. In Calvinist social thought, the emphasis on scriptural authority stands out prominently, with the *sola scriptura* principle leading theologians to approach secular viewpoints with caution. Calvinists draw a sharp distinction between the sacred and secular realms, asserting that revelation should govern both spheres. Consequently, their discussions on justice reflect a concerted effort to ground their perspectives in scriptural teachings (Forrester, 2001; Tienou, 2001).

However, the Biblical views and teachings on justice as uphold by Calvinist is such that is first of all requires that every person be treated according to the same standards and with the same respect, regardless of class, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or of any other social category. Leviticus 19:15 says: “You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.” Also, Deuteronomy 16:19 says: “You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. According to keller (2020)

One of the most eloquent biblical appeals to treat all people as absolute equals—in both action and attitude—is found in John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin admits that “the great parts of [the human race] are most unworthy if they be judged by their own merit. But here Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider what men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love”. (P.9)

Calvinist perspectives on biblical justice are anchored in the narratives and depictions of the imminent judgment of God and the restoration of His kingdom in this world. As noted by Mays (1987), there is a profound connection between Calvinist beliefs and the anticipation of divine judgment and the eventual renewal of God's kingdom. This theological framework shapes the understanding of justice within Calvinism, emphasizing the significance of aligning human actions with the forthcoming divine judgment and the ultimate restoration envisioned in the biblical narrative. He thus averred:

Teaching of justice is the announcement and establishment of messianic age or the reign of God. It is not the philosophy of justice, something that can be appropriately be put alongside Aristotle or John Rawls. It cannot be detached from the faith of the people of God, of which it is an integral part. (P. 147)

This narrative of God's justice instills a sense of caution in humanity and articulates the impassioned plea for justice from the oppressed. However, it is infused with confidence in a faithful God, serving as the assurance that divine justice will ultimately prevail. This combination of caution, advocacy for the oppressed, and trust in God's unwavering faithfulness characterizes the essence of Calvinist beliefs in the establishment of divine justice.

Further, Calvinist Protestant thought, the core of divine justice lies in the principles of mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation, serving as a model for human justice on Earth. For Calvinists, justice is fundamentally viewed as the restoration of relationships and the resolution of hostilities. As stated by Forrester (1997), the ultimate objective of justice in Calvinism is reconciliation and the revitalization of the community, ensuring that each individual receives what is rightfully due to them. This perspective underscores the profound emphasis on compassion and the transformative power of forgiveness within the Calvinist understanding of justice.

A compelling illustration of the Calvinist understanding of justice can be observed in the historical context of South Africa. Following the end of the apartheid regime, a significant initiative was undertaken with the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Notably, this commission was presided over by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a Protestant theologian.

This exemplifies the Calvinist perspective in action, as the TRC embodied the principles of mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation at the core of divine and human justice. Archbishop Tutu's role in leading this commission reflects the Calvinist belief that justice involves the healing of relationships, overcoming animosities, and working towards the restoration of the community. The TRC, by providing a platform for truth-telling, forgiveness, and reconciliation, aligns with the Calvinist vision of justice as a transformative force for societal healing and restoration. In his statements, as cited by Forrester (2001), Tutu expressed the following viewpoint:

Here the Issue of guilt and of retribution is not avoided and request for amnesty are not invitations to amnesia: the memories of the past must be faced and healed. The truth must be confronted and the moral responsibility accepted, for reconciliation is the aim (P. 205).

The commission, under the guidance of Desmond Tutu, embraced a distinctive approach to justice, opting for a 'restorative' model rather than a 'retributive' one. This approach regarded forgiveness as a pivotal component of justice, viewing it as indispensable for the healing of South African society. The emphasis on healing, restoration, and a relational understanding of justice is rooted in Christian theological insights, particularly resonating with the traditions of Calvinist Protestantism. Considering Desmond Tutu's leadership in the commission, it becomes evident that this profound Protestant perspective on justice holds significance. Therefore, incorporating such a deeply rooted Protestant view of justice into public policy is advocated as a means to foster an inclusive and peaceful society (Forrester, 1997).

Integrating Calvinist Perspectives on Justice into the Role of the Nigerian Church

The Calvinist perspective on justice, as explored in this study, carries significant implications for the Nigerian church. Understanding and incorporating these implications can contribute to shaping the church's role in society, its engagement with cultural issues, and its pursuit of justice.

The emphasis on *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) underscores the importance of grounding beliefs and practices in biblical teachings. For the Nigerian church, this implies a commitment to scriptural authority in addressing cultural issues, societal challenges, and questions of justice. By acknowledging the authority of scripture, the Nigerian church can contribute to shaping a society that reflects Calvinist values of justice, mercy, and reconciliation. (Nma, 2016)

The Calvinist understanding of justice goes beyond punitive measures and emphasizes restoration and reconciliation. The Nigerian church can adopt this perspective in addressing social issues, conflicts, and injustices within the community. Initiatives promoting forgiveness, truth-telling, and reconciliation, similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, can be implemented to address historical and contemporary issues within Nigerian society. (Ahiokhai, 2019)

Calvinism envisions the church as actively involved in cultural renewal, social justice, and poverty elimination. The Nigerian church can take up the mantle of addressing social inequalities, advocating for the vulnerable, and actively engaging in poverty alleviation programs. Encouraging a holistic approach to justice that encompasses economic, social, and political dimensions can contribute to the overall well-being and transformation of Nigerian communities. (Onah et'al, 2018)

The Calvinist tradition sees the church as a transformative force in cultural renewal. In Nigeria, where cultural dynamics play a significant role, the church can actively contribute to shaping a culture that aligns with Christian values. By fostering a distinct Christian identity rooted in biblical principles, the Nigerian church can impact societal norms, ethical practices, and cultural expressions. (Akanbi et'al, 2017)

The Calvinist perspective on justice, as seen in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission model, can inspire the Nigerian church to engage in public policy discussions. Advocacy for just policies, truth-telling

mechanisms, and initiatives that promote reconciliation can be key areas of focus. The church can actively participate in dialogues and collaborations with government and non-governmental entities to influence policies that align with Calvinist principles of justice. (Gilley, 2015)

Calvinism places importance on the knowledge of God through scripture. The Nigerian church can invest in educational initiatives that promote biblical literacy, theological understanding, and ethical reasoning. By empowering the congregation with a deep understanding of Calvinist theological principles, the church can foster a community that actively engages with societal issues and contributes to the pursuit of justice.

In summary, embracing the Calvinist perspective on justice can position the Nigerian church as a catalyst for positive societal change, cultural renewal, and the pursuit of justice. By actively living out these principles, the church can impact the broader Nigerian society, contributing to a more just, compassionate, and reconciled community.

Conclusion.

Aligned with Calvinist teachings, the Church transcends its traditional role as a mere congregation of believers, emerging as a herald of God's reign and embodying divine justice—a tangible manifestation of this justice (Hauerwas, 1984). Within the Calvinist framework, justice is not merely a theoretical concept but a tangible expression of God's grace, evident in an inclusive community that prioritizes care for the vulnerable—the weak, poor, strangers, orphans, and widows (Barth, 1939). This comprehensive understanding positions the Church as a transformative force, actively reflecting and enacting justice principles deeply rooted in Calvinist theology.

In accordance with Calvinist principles, the mission of the Church extends beyond individual salvation to embrace a broader social dimension. Firmly rooted in the Calvinist tradition, the Church assumes a central role in catalyzing cultural renewal, advocating for social justice, and actively working to alleviate poverty on a global scale (Gilley, 2015). This holistic perspective on justice, deeply embedded in Calvinist theology, underscores the profound significance of the Church as a catalytic force for positive societal transformation. Therefore, the Calvinist perspective calls upon the contemporary Nigerian Church to engage proactively in societal issues, championing justice, compassion, and inclusivity. Becoming an agent of change, the Church should address social inequalities, advocate for the vulnerable, and contribute to poverty alleviation initiatives within the Nigerian context. By embracing this comprehensive view of justice, deeply rooted in Calvinist principles, the Nigerian Church can play a pivotal role in fostering positive societal transformation, cultural renewal, and the pursuit of justice in the nation.

***Ifeanyi A. Chukwudebelu**

Department of Religion and Human Relations,
Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam
chukwudebeluifeanyia88@gmail.com, +2347062861261

&

****Ven. Dr. Geoffrey Chidebem Molokwu,**

Institute of Theology, Paul University Awka.
Geoffrey.10.molokwu@pauluniversity.edu.ng, +2348033272903

&

*****Ajakor, Emmanuel PhD. ei.ajakor@unizik.edu.ng**

Department of Religion & Human Relations
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

&

******Dr Wilson Ejiofor Anowia**

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

wilson.anowia@unn.edu.ng.

&

*****Nganwuchu Geoffrey Chiazio PhD

Department of Religion and Cultural studies

University of Nigeria Nsukka

geoffrey.nganwuchu@unn.edu.ng

08033103468

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