

**“THOU SHALL NOT KILL”  
ENHANCING THE CULTURE OF LIFE IN NIGERIA**

By

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Nigeria has become a butcher house. There is too much killing and shedding of blood in the forests, bushes, villages, towns and cities even the sacred places churches and mosques. No place is spared. Countries at war have not lost as many people as are being killed everyday in Nigeria.

What has happened to us? The traditional African respect for life especially human life has gone. People are killed like animals even for flimsiest of reasons. Premeditated killing, violent killing, accidental killings, ritual killing, victims of wars and aggression, killing for business, hawking of human parts and all sorts bizarre reason for murder. Even those charged with protecting lives butcher those they are supposed to protect; parent killing their children for money etc.

Does the law of God thou shall not kill still make sense? Why has our society become a theatre of death? Any redeeming features for our country? Can this trend be reversed? Any appeal to culture religion, ideology? What can help us restore sanity to our society? Can we restore a culture of life?

This essay will address these issues and see how an appeal to tradition or religion and Christian values can help rescue our nation from the brink of destruction. It will end with a call to a return to the sanctity of life, rule of law and a radical respect for life at all stages of life from cradle to old age and death.

**Introduction**

The spate of killings and violence in Nigeria have reached such alarming proportion that one or two persons die everyday through unnatural means. Unfortunately, most of these killings are unreported or under-reported. The society is no longer at ease. Fear has taken over the land. Many are afraid to travel for fear of being a victim of the many bad things that can happen: murder, kidnapping, abduction for ritual killing. There is massive insecurity in the land. The government can no longer guarantee the life and security the people the govern. Armed bandits, armed herdsmen, criminal youth gangs and unknown gunmen have taken over many towns and villages. These operate with such ferocious wickedness that makes one wonder if we have retrogressed into the dark age. Life has no value any more in Nigeria. Human life has lost its sacredness. Our African cultural regard for the sacredness of human life and the Christian doctrine of the sacredness of life seem to make impact on the society.

Many young people are openly rejecting Christianity and going back to neo-pagan ways of living that is both alien to our so-called traditional society and dangerous today. Both our African cultural heritage and Christian tradition teach that life is sacred and should not wantonly be taken. The old prescription: "Thou shall not kill" remains valid. It is our intention in this paper to revisit this ancient commandment and see how it help us enhance the value of human life today in Nigeria.

### **Life as gift from God transmitted through the ancestors**

According to Benezet Bujo the only thing Christianity brought to Africa was not the idea of God but a complete understanding of that God (**Bujo, B., 1992.**) This contrasts with false and derogatory opinions of Europeans as expressed by Dietrich Westerman in his book *Africa and Christianity*.

*While admitting that, as rule, God does not live in practical religion and that the ideas concerning him are nebulous, it cannot be overlooked that he is a reality to the African, who will admit that what he knows about God is the purest expression of his religious thinking, and in individual cases, also of his religious experiences... the African's god is a deus incertus and a deus remotus; there is an atmosphere of indefiniteness about him...the alpha and omega of a pagan's religion is 'my will be done'. (D. Westermann, 1937).*

But we may ask which people have a clear notion of God? If one goes round the cities of Europe and ask people on the streets about God, they will not fare better than Africans, despite 2000 years of Christianity. Back to our main point: God is a realty to the African. He possesses a mysterious and tremendous presence. God is the fullness of life and source of all life. He alone can give and sustain life. Our theophoric names bear ample witness to this fact. For instance among the Igbo *Chinwendu* (God owns life), *Chinenyendu* (God gives life), *Chijindu*(God sustains life) etc.

### **If God is the giver of life, then life is a participation in God.**

Life is therefore sacred. This life is mediated by those who participate most fully in the life of God. These are the ancestors, the founding fathers of the clan. The ancestors acquire their importance from their role of safeguarding, strengthening, nourishing, and transmitting life to their descendants. This mediatory role of the ancestors can be better appreciated in the context of the African universe, which is seen as being hierarchical. All existents share in the life of the Supreme Being according to their nature. Human life is revered, respected, and protected. This gift entrusts the entire community with the noble duty to protect it. Except in war, or in self-defence, no one is allowed to take the life of another or spill innocent blood. For that matter, certain taboos and regulations are to be observed with the view of protecting life starting from its early stages of pregnancy. The unborn child was protected. *Ebelebe nwa shi loo uwa ya hiri.*( *Once a child is conceived it should be allowed to live.* Even if done by accident one is punished by exile and when he returns a ritual to cleanse the land is performed.

However, we must not idolize African custom in this point, in some traditional African societies before the coming of Christianity there were well known practices of killing. These include the killing of twins and triplets or both the mother and these children, or handicapped children at birth. This was done to cleanse, save and protect the whole family from consequent misfortunes believed to be brought about by such children. Others were human sacrifices to protect the community from severe famine or calamity. The beating of thieves, robbers, witches, sorcerers to death etc. All these killings were acceptable and were carried out with the good intention of protecting the corporate community. (cf. John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 1969, and Benezet Bujo, *African Christian Morality*, St. Pauls Publications 1990, pp 53-54). It seems then that the Fifth commandment does not contain the same universal. and positive implications with regards to respect for life among most African traditional societies. Whether at the level of attitude or of the killing itself, such practices must be severely condemned on moral grounds.

In Judeo/Christian tradition Killing is forbidden. The Fifth word of the Decalogue says: THOU SHALL NOT KILL.<sup>9</sup>( Exodus 20:

## **Brief background to the Judeo/Christian DECALOGUE**

### **The Decalogue in Sacred Scripture**

The entire Bible begins with the mystery at the heart of Existence that we call GOD.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son as a source of forgiveness for our sins... We should love because God loved us first. (1 John 4:10,19).

Any talk of divine commands and human obligation must be seen as a response to God the initiator. The book of Deuteronomy is very clear:

In the future, when your son asks you, “what is the meaning of the instructions, decree and judgements which the Lord your God has prescribed for you,? you will say to your son, “Once we were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with deeds of power. ... And he brought us out from there in order to lead us to the land he had promised on oath to give to our ancestors. And the Lord has commanded us to observe all these decrees and to respect the Lord our God, to be happy in all our days and to have life, as we have today. For us right living will be to observe and to keep all these commands before the Lord our God as he has commanded us”. (Deut. 6: 20-25).

So human observance and activity is posited in the wake of Divine act of liberation The decalogue literally means “*ten words*”. God revealed these words to the people of Israel on the holy mountain. They are the words of God handed on to us and recorded in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy.

The decalogue must be understood in the context of Exodus. The prologue to the Ten Words presents us with a God who is essentially a Liberator, who calls people out of the house of servitude and therefore makes an existence in freedom possible. What does it mean to be free? A reflection on the true meaning of freedom brings us to the heart of the significance of the TEN WORDS, and indeed the whole notion of divine law. For the bible freedom is not self-created. It is not rooted in an autonomous self, rather it a gift that comes from an encounter with the living and true God who calls me out of the house of servitude. It involves discovering myself as part of a people. It is not individualistic but flows from a shared life. Freedom is the consequence of a certain kind of relationship. The TEN WORDS are spoken in the context of a Covenant. They delineate the boundaries of a space of freedom, they mark the road that leads to the fullness of liberty and happiness. They indicate the parameters that make possible a fully human life.

The commandments tell us when we have overstepped the bounds and are longer in the space of freedom. The rationale behind the TEN WORDS is to situate the human being in the network of relationships which makes true life and happiness a real possibility. It is essentially a call to take the **Other's** presence into account, to realize that I am not the source.

The space of freedom which the decalogue delineates requires a clean break with a polymorphous religiosity. "The God of the Bible accepts no rivals for his people's affection. This God is a jealous God" (Brother John of Taizé, 2004).

### **Thou shall not kill**

The Decalogue TEN WORDS were cast into two tablets: one to three and four to ten. The first part deals with our relationship with God while the second deals with our relationship with our neighbour. In the context of the space for freedom, they confront us with a choice. Do we want a society based on violence or one rooted on mutual solidarity? Violence versus Solidarity? To make possible a land of freedom and happiness for all, certain realities must be guaranteed.

The first and most essential reality protected by God is LIFE. Life a gift that comes from God through the mediation of our parents and ancestors. It is not at our disposal. We are therefore enjoined not to destroy it. Life belongs to God. We are called to welcome it, care for it, protect it. Man has no dominion over life. We are entrusted to it and it leads us back to God. The biblical story of the creation of man tells us that we are united with the universe providing the material from which we were made but are lifeless until the breath of God is breathed into us. *Breath*, which is an essential reality of life, means air in motion. This Hebrew word can be translated as breath, wind, or spirit. The origin of man has close affinity with the divine. Human beings have something which directly comes from God and can never be reduced to this worldly dimension. The psalmist points out this fact when he says

When you hide your face, they are terrified, when you take back your breath, they expire and return to dust. When you send forth your breath,

(Spirit) they are created, and you renew the face of the earth. (Psalm 104: 29-30)

The second element that is essential to life is **Blood**. Moses in the book of Leviticus 17: 10-14, forbids the sons of Israel from eating blood, because the life of all living creature is their blood.

### **Why is it forbidden to kill?**

It is forbidden to kill because every human life from conception until death is sacred. The human person has been made for his or her own sake in the image and likeness of God. The murder of a human being is gravely contrary to the rights of the person and holiness of the creator. The law forbidden murder is universally valid: it obliges each one, always and everywhere. (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) 2261). The Catechism of the Church adds to this, the proscription of anger, hatred, vengeance, (CCC2262).

“If a gift is precious, indeed the more precious it is, then the more it is well cherished by defending it against anyone who might want to take it away or defile it” (Menichelli E., & Crocetta L, You Shall not Kill, Reflections on the Fifth Commanment)

### **The Significance of "Thou Shalt Not Kill"**

The commandment "Thou shalt not kill" is rooted in the biblical and moral understanding that every human life is sacred and deserving of respect. It underscores the importance of non-violence, justice, and compassion. In Nigeria, this principle aligns with diverse religious teachings —Christianity, Islam, and traditional beliefs— that advocate for peace, forgiveness, and the sanctity of life. Upholding this commandment serves as a moral compass guiding individuals and society towards peaceful coexistence.

### **Current Challenges to the Culture of Life in Nigeria**

Despite these moral and religious imperatives, Nigeria faces numerous challenges that threaten the respect for human life. We enumerate some of them.

1. Violence and Armed Conflicts - Nigeria has experienced insurgency, terrorism (e.g., Boko Haram), communal clashes, and cattle rustling, resulting in loss of lives and widespread insecurity.
2. Political Violence - Electoral violence, political thuggery, and corruption often lead to loss of life and destabilization.
3. Crime and Kidnapping - Rising cases of kidnapping, armed robbery, and cult violence have created an atmosphere of fear, and leading to loss of innocent lives.

4. Ethnic and Religious Divisions - Deep-rooted ethnic and religious tensions sometimes escalate into violence, undermining social cohesion and leaving a trail of deaths.

5. Poor Governance and Socioeconomic Factors - Poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic infrastructure that cause carnage on our roads, lots of lives. Lack of access to education can contribute to violence and moral decay.

### **Legitimate defence not an exception to the rule**

The legitimate defence of persons and societies is not an exception to the prohibition against the murder of the innocent that constitutes intentional killing. “the act of self-defence can have a double effect: the preservation of one own life and the killing of unjust aggressor. (CCC2263)

### **” Thou shall not kill” Enhancing the culture of life**

At its core, this commandment emphasizes the sanctity of human life and calls for the protection of life from harm, murder, or violence.

**Enhancing the Culture of Life** means promoting a society where life is valued, respected, and nurtured at every stage, from conception to natural death. This involves not just refraining from taking life but also fostering environments of love, care, and support for all people. Here are some ways to enhance the culture of life:

#### **1. Promoting Peace and Non-Violence**

- Encouraging peaceful resolutions to conflicts, both on a personal and societal level.
- Supporting non-violent methods of communication and promoting a culture of understanding rather than divisiveness.
- Standing against wars, oppression, and violence that lead to the loss of innocent lives.

#### **2. Respecting Human Dignity**

- Every person has inherent worth, regardless of their background, social status, or abilities. This respect can manifest in acts of kindness, fairness, and equal treatment.
- This also includes defending human rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and freedom from torture and degradation.

#### **3. Supporting Life at All Stages**

- From advocating for the unborn to supporting children, the elderly, and those in need of care, enhancing the culture of life calls for society to nurture all lives.
- Supporting policies and practices that ensure the protection of vulnerable populations, including those with disabilities, those living in poverty, and refugees.

#### **4. Encouraging Compassionate Care**

- Promoting palliative care and hospice services to ensure people have dignity in their final days.
- Expanding access to healthcare and mental health services to improve well-being and prevent the suffering that may lead individuals to feel their lives have no value.

#### **5. Raising Awareness on Life Issues**

- Educating society about the importance of life and the ethical, moral, and practical reasons to protect it. This includes discussing topics like euthanasia, abortion, and capital punishment, always highlighting the sanctity of life.
- Engaging in open, respectful conversations about controversial topics in a way that invites empathy and understanding, while still promoting the value of life.

#### **6. Encouraging Personal Responsibility and Accountability**

- Encouraging individuals to take responsibility for their actions, particularly how they impact the lives of others.
- Building a culture where people are encouraged to help one another, promote kindness, and give back to their communities.

#### **7. Fostering a Love for Creation**

- Recognizing the value not only of human life but all living creatures and the environment. By promoting ecological sustainability and caring for the planet, we enhance the broader culture of life.

#### **8. Rest and Recreation are Everyone's duty**

Vacation or holiday time is both a right and duty. It is a human duty to renew one's energies, so as to continue being an effective presence in the social context in which one lives and works. It is our duty to keep a healthy body in a healthy mind. Stress is often the cause of impatience, and it predisposes a person to violence. The promotion of sports and other forms recreation helps to enhance life. A culture of life is built on the belief that life is precious and should be honoured and defended at every moment. It challenges us to build societies that prioritize the well-being and flourishing of all people, extending compassion, love, and justice to the most vulnerable in our communities.

Building a peaceful society is a complex, multi-faceted endeavour. It involves not only structural changes but also a transformation of the attitudes, behaviour, and values that guide individual and collective actions. By fostering respect, fairness, inclusion, and cooperation, society can work toward greater harmony, stability, prosperity and above respect for human life.

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