

Instituting Developmental Work Ethics among African Christians in The Light of Genesis 26:1-22

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Abstract

The level of underdevelopment in the post-Independence Africa is often attributed to the Euro-Christian religious orientation which tends to escalate the euphoric glories of the world to come, to the detriment of developmental efforts in the present life. Drawing from this, therefore, critics have derided the Euro-Christian faith as a mere instrument for the perpetual enslavement of the African mind for the purpose of stagnating Africa in a permanent state of underdevelopment. A new pan-African awareness is actually arising now, calling for the total abolition of Christianity as part of the vestiges of Western colonialism, and advocating a return to traditional African norms and faith, as a way of moving the continent forward. However, a lucid look at the Christian document of faith, especially Genesis 26:1-22, shows that the present evasive, escapist work orientation of the present-day African Christians is not an intrinsic characteristic of the Christian faith, but the product of a hermeneutical error that has endured. This paper seeks to exegetically and hermeneutically analyse Genesis 26:1-22, and to draw attention to its inherent advocacy for a pragmatic developmental work ethics, within the context of the tenets of the Christian faith, as a necessary step for breaking the perennial barriers to African development, and moving the continent forward in its developmental aspirations.

Keywords: Work, Development, Ethics, Productivity, Value, Responsibility.

Introduction

The problem of the perennial condition of underdevelopment in Africa, particularly in relation to Africa's encounter with Europe, has been approached from diverse perspectives. For Meredith (2005), the crisis created by the European scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, led to a state of latent hostility which is responsible for the irrepressible escalation of armed conflicts in Africa in the period prior to and long after the so-called Independence. The scramble led to the lumping together of diverse, distinct, irreconcilable religio-ethnic entities, grossly incapable of forging any semblance of homogeneous nationhood. These hostilities, in some cases, full blown wars, have constituted great distractions to developmental ideals, and have led to a colossal drain of resources that would have been deployed in national development. For Rodney

(1972), the perennial underdevelopment of Africa was the major objective of the European programme in Africa, arising from the exploitation of Africa's rich mineral resources, and the deliberate plan to de-industrialize Africa in order to create a perpetual dependence on European products. It took Africa several decades to realize that even so-called foreign aids and loans were all baits aimed at winning the confidence of African leaders to surrender their economies at the feet of the imperialist agencies, notably, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, for greater African impoverishment. For Achebe (1983), the failure in Africa, with particular reference to Nigeria, the African focal point, is basically a leadership failure. The post-Independent leadership in the African nations delivered unto the imperialist West what the colonialist were even too decent to deliver to themselves. Puppets mounted the saddles of power, and, taking direct orders from their neo-colonial masters, impoverished their nations in favour of Europe. Corrupt African leaders were made to believe that the only way their loot would be safe was to bank it in European banks in coded accounts that could not be traced to the account holders. Of course, it did not take long to realise that European banks had created classified accounts as resource pool for European development, from loots surreptitiously taken out of African nations; the same nations that were adjudged to be poor and in need of aids and loans from the imperialist financial institutions, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, IMF. By the onset of the 1990's, it had been estimated that a whopping sum, well in excess of one hundred and fifty billion United States dollars had been carted away from African nations and deposited in the various banks in Europe. Rather astonishing is the fact that this whopping sum far exceeded all the loans owed the lending agencies by these African countries, and yet the African countries are still wreathing in pains of indebtedness to the lending agencies of the capitalist West.

But by far the most fatal of the afflictions bedevilling Africa and impeding development is the Euro-Christian faith perspective which tends to emphasize the other-worldly orientation to the detriment of the betterment of the present life. This is a perspective of life which seeks answer to all life's issues in the other-worldly domain. Thus, to prosper and improve life, everyone has to go up the solitary mountain for a sixty-day drastic intercession. When there is an election to be held to select credible leaders that will move the nation forward, the best way to achieve this is to take all the faithful to the retreat ground for a twenty-one-day intercessory onslaught. Of course, they would return to behold the usual discredited hoodlums in positions of power, looting the nation to decrepit malady. This religious perspective which is completely apolitical, anti-social, and lacking

in the correct socio-economic interpretation of life's parameters, thinks nothing of the present life, and is filled with romantic alluring admirations of the world to come. This is a religious orientation which makes people so conscious of the euphoric world they are looking forward to, such that they amount to no functional relevance regarding the present life. It is in fact this religious orientation that is attracting the greatest disdain in the terrains of life and development. It is basically for this type of orientation that a new awareness is arising in Africa, seeking to deliver Africans from the Eurocentric affliction of euphoria and mental mesmerism which Christianity has come to represent.

In the traditional African society, issues of faith have never occupied the centre stage for everyone, except for the few practitioners who are consulted at the instance of a problem. Today's practice of faith in which everyone is caught up in scores of solitary intercession, this time for twenty-one days, and at another time for forty days, obviously constitutes a severe economic drain on the continent.

Work Ethics Theories

Prominent among the work ethics theories for our consideration in this paper is Max Weber's Theory of Work Ethics, also known as the Protestant Work Ethics. This theory, propounded by Max Weber in 1905, proposes that Protestant values and beliefs significantly influenced the development of Modern Capitalism. The key components of that theory include:

1. **Hard Work and Diligence:** This theory sees work as moral obligation, and a means to serve God and humanity. Those who subscribe to the escapist, other-worldly orientation to life, which tends to relish the glories of the world to come, over and above the need to contribute to the betterment of the present life, are actually not aware of the fact that in working to improve the lots of mankind on earth, one is actually visibly serving God.
2. **Work as Divine Call:** In this theory, Weber affirms that the work which people do on this side of eternity is a vital aspect of God's call over their lives, and that in endeavouring to do that work, they are manifesting the grace and favour of God.
3. **Asceticism:** Weber here opines that avoiding luxury and indulgence, and embracing simplicity and sacrifice are very important parts of God's call to works of service.

4. Self-Discipline: By this, Weber implies the endeavour to regulate one's life, time and resources to maximize productivity.
5. Responsibility: Weber asserts here that individuals are accountable for their actions and economic decisions. This clearly implies that the idea of literally abdicating unto God the responsibility of generating the initiative to manage the tiny details of life, and handing over to him the ultimate steps in implementing such initiatives, is at best an act in utter irresponsibility.
6. Thriftiness: This implies that by a careful management of resources, through savings and investment, wealth can be created for economic growth. By implication, it is humans that create economic conditions and situations, including the societal stratifications.
7. Rationalization: This has to do with a systematic organization of efficiency in work and business.

Similarly, Benjamin Franklin's Work Ethics Theory emphasizes practical virtues and habits that promote success, prosperity and personal growth. These theories are reflected in his writings, particularly in Poor Richard's Almanack (1732-1758) and Autobiography (1771-1788). The key principles of the theory are:

1. Industriousness: This places premium on hard work, diligence and perseverance as a way of improving one's economic conditions.
2. Frugality: This component emphasizes thriftiness, simplicity and avoidance of unnecessary expenses, as a way of building capital for investment and resource growth.
3. Prudence: This has to do with careful planning and informed decision-making, with a view to effective resource management.
4. Responsibility: This implies accountability, reliability and a conscious effort to meet target obligations. It implies taking bold initiatives that have heavy repercussions.
5. Honesty: This emphasizes the virtue of a personal, conscious effort to evoke trust, through a consistent record of proven reliability. It deals with the virtue of integrity, truthfulness and transparency.
6. Self-discipline: This is the virtue of self-control, moderation and regulation of one's life.
7. Resilience: This is the virtue of perseverance, sticking on to the tenets of duty and work plan, even in the midst of unfavourable situations and unpalatable results.

In essence, therefore, while the faith orientation of the present-day African Christians tends towards euphoric rituals, abdicating responsibility to the unseen being, and living in complete denial of the realities of the present life, the work ethics theories considered above recommend a sense of personal responsibility and orientation that participatorily endeavours to effect change in society, through a set of personal initiatives and commitment to duty.

Gen 26: 1-22: An Exegetical Survey

וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ

And there was famine in the land.

This describes a situation of want, of scarcity, and by extension, a situation of deprivation, possible outcome of an extortion. The Hebrew word translated “famine” is the word רָעָב. According to Holladay (1988), the noun רָעָב actually derived from the qal perfect verb, רָעַב which means to be hungry. It describes a situation of utter deprivation of basic needs and amenities. There cannot be a better description of the African situation than this: a continent thoroughly deprived of the basic amenities of life, not through the force of nature, but through a callously orchestrated human system of greed and self-aggrandizement. For the avoidance of doubt, nature has blessed Africa with all the amenities of life in form of natural minerals. Rodney (1972) has thoroughly explained that the primary attraction of the Europeans to Africa was the natural resources, mineral resources which the Europeans then fraudulently appropriated to themselves to the detriment of the natural owners of the resources. For instance, the French colonialists that colonized Niger Republic had discovered uranium in the land of Niger and had carted away large quantities of the mineral to France. It has been estimated that one out of every three electric bulbs in France is kept aglow with uranium from Niger. And yet, sadly, Niger has nothing to show for its vast deposits of the natural resources. The roads are not tarred, and basic amenities are lacking in Niger. Only by the common agreement between Niger and its closest neighbour, Nigeria, Niger is privileged to get power supply from the Nigerian hydroelectric project, otherwise it would be in total darkness. That is how bad the situation is.

Next, the text tells us that Isaac devised an economic strategy to travel to Gerar, to Abimelech the king of the Philistines, for possible economic prospects, whereupon, God discouraged him from the venture with the promise that he (God) would be with him (Isaac) and

bless him. For many African Christians, this is where the story ends. It is a call to desist from making any strategic economic plan, but to depend wholly on God for daily upkeep, whatever that means. This is the explanation behind the fact that Africa is afflicted with such a large population of people who have no means of livelihood except resorting to religion for daily upkeep. And the situation is escalating by the day. No one has sat down to calculate the economic implication of having a large population of people whose only contribution to society is to isolate themselves to solitary places and pray, day after day, week after week, month to month.

But the Isaac's story does not end there. It declares in verse 12; "Isaac sowed in the land, and received in the same year, one hundred fold: and the Lord blessed him". There are a number of ethical principles here that are useful for our discussion.

One, God blesses people as they take initiatives to work. In other words, God's blessings and human efforts are not conflicting or contradictory. They are complementary. Human efforts provide avenues for the fulfilment of God's blessings. It is not an act of disbelief or distrust in the Lord to get involved in an economic venture. This is the ethical orientation which African Christians desperately need to acquire.

Two, Isaac sowed in the land. The Hebrew expression reads:

בְּאֶרֶץ יִזְקֵן יִזְרַע

The word translated "sowed" in the text is actually the third person masculine singular qal imperfect verb, יִזְרַע from the qal perfect root, זָרַע which describes the activity of plant cultivation. A number of principles are further implied here:

1. **Dexterity, Competence and Commitment:** The present day setting of Africa is pitifully ritualistic. Whether on the side of Christian religion or on the side of traditional worshippers, the orientation is the same. It is an orientation of using religious rituals, rather than painstaking effort and initiative, to achieve prosperity. Whether it is done in the church with consecrated olive oil, or in the traditional shrine with ritual concoctions, the orientation is the same, which is, to use ritual to achieve what should ordinarily be achieved with committed effort, competence and commitment. Isaac sowed. He settled down to

acquire the necessary skill and training for it. He put the skills to use in diligent effort and achieved the desired result.

2. Patient Endurance and Perseverance: Here again, in contrast to the situation in Africa, Isaac went through the painstaking stage of patient endurance and perseverance. As yet, there is no technology that can take away the art of patient waiting in agriculture. We may have improved variety, fast-maturing species, but the art of waiting patiently is never discarded altogether. In contrast, Africans, whether in church or shrine, want it to happen in a jiffy, in a twinkling of an eye. The man would rather go up the mountain for sixty days to make it happen in a jiffy, than invest his time in the painstaking procedure of production. This, in deed, has become the greatest undoing of the African continent. The evil aspiration is promoted with equal fervour both in the church and in the traditional worship shrine.
3. Servicing the process: Agricultural activity, unfortunately, is not the kind of investment one hits once and goes away. Neither is there, in fact, any such enterprise. Every enterprise has the vital stage of servicing the process. For agriculture, it would involve watering and weeding. For education, it would involve dutiful study and effective scholarship. For financial investment, it would involve monitoring the economic climate, knowing when to buy or sell shares, for instance, or when it is most appropriate to consider taking credit facilities, and so on. Here again, this is what modern Africans in churches and traditional shrines do not want to hear. They want to hit it once and celebrate. Life hardly permits us that kind of leisure.

The next stage of the narrative discusses the strivings over the wells that were dug by the herdsmen of Isaac, (verses 18-22). This draws out the virtue of persistence and perseverance. From verse 18, the well which Isaac and his herdsmen inherited from his father Abraham, was destroyed by the Philistines, and Isaac dug another well. This attracted strife. They moved from there and dug another well, and yet another strife arose.

This paper is about work ethics necessary for moving Africa forward. The much religionization and spiritualization of life in Africa has perennially shifted people's orientation from the this-worldly to the other-worldly: from active engagement to euphoric escapist orientation; from

contextualizing and generation of initiatives to spiritualizing and employment of rituals; and our contention here is that in terms of perspective positioning for developmental thrusts, Africa has lost it and is losing it more and more. There is so much ritual murder in Africa because young people have been told that they don't need to struggle to make wealth. All they need is to get one human head or more for a ritual, and they are swimming in wealth. The crisis is even that this same orientation is re-echoed in the church in ways that appear a little more decent, but the objective is the same.

Emerging Pan-African Reawakening

In the last couple of years, a stream of military *coup-d'états* in some African countries, notably, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, have seen Africans chanting a new song of liberation from the neo-colonialist oppressions of Western Europe. The common phenomenon in this stream of coups is the pro-Russian moves in those countries. The countries have openly broken links with the Western European countries that had colonized them, and have formed new links with Russia. In fact, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had threatened to take action against the military governments of those countries if they did not immediately restore the democratically elected governments. Rather than heed the threats, the military governments in those nations consolidated their alliance with Russia. So, there is a subtle surge of anti-capitalist West initiatives in Africa.

The unfolding undertone to this emerging Pan-African awakening in Africa is the feeling that the Church is the colonial instrument of the imperialist West in Africa. So, any time the anti-capitalist West initiative is escalated, the Church is bound to be inculpated, and so will not escape harm. Meanwhile, the Church is even further criminalized in the impoverishment of African people. The Church has collected huge sums of money as tithes and offerings from the poor masses of African worshippers, and these huge resources have not been ploughed back into solving the African developmental challenges. The failure of the government in Africa would not have left such visible vacuum if the Church had stepped in to use the huge resources it has accumulated to meet developmental needs of the Africans. These huge resources have turned African pastors to such astonishingly scandalous levels of wealth, while the people languish in poverty. The churches

have maintained the escapist posture to problem solving, rather than adopting the collective engagement posture in deploying its huge resources to solving the astounding developmental challenges of Africa. African pastors pride themselves in their ability to construct huge places of worship running into tens of billions of dollars, in the midst of escalating poverty. The price which the Church will pay for not addressing itself to the real developmental challenges of Africa will be very fatal, unless there is a drastic change in posture before too long.

Conclusion

The primary objective of every human organization or endeavour is the betterment of the lots of human beings in this sphere of existence. Indeed, the conditions of human living on the earth have been grossly improved by the collective efforts and endeavours of the various professional groups working on different aspects of human needs and aspirations. Faith organisations may however argue that their primary concern is the salvation of human souls, (whatever that means) and they may therefore, by so doing, justify their utter disinterestedness in the affairs of mortal life and their escapist approach to dealing with life's challenges. While this posture may be arguably justified in relation to the *raison d'être* of those faith organizations, it must be firmly acknowledged here that the major criticism arising against Christianity in our time is the fact that Christianity completely turns deaf ears to the humongous developmental challenges facing our continent, Africa, a posture which easily passes for mere callousness. Added to this crisis is the fact that the Church makes huge sums of money collected as tithes and offerings, from the impoverished masses of Africa. These huge sums of money have turned the pastors and heads of these Christian organizations into conditions of scandalizing affluence, in the midst of devastating poverty, deprivation and hunger in the continent. That the Church makes huge sums of money from the poor masses of the continent and turns deaf ears to the developmental challenges facing the continent, constitutes two-pronged crimes against humanity.

The evasive philosophy of African Christians has also translated to poor work ethics in which the Christians, rather than adopt a work attitude of pragmatic engagement, resort to a euphoric appeal to powers beyond the skies, hoping by that to prosper and have economic well-being. This position has reduced the African Christians to the same level as the uneducated and un-enlightened

traditional worshippers who fall into the same error of turning to all forms of fetish ritualistic endeavours, rather than constructive, pragmatic initiatives, to prosper and have economic well-being. Thus, the major undoing of the African continent, as far as developmental challenges are concerned, is attitude to work; the perennial resort to rituals, whether in church or in traditional shrines, rather than to pragmatic effort. As long as this ritualistic orientation is gaining grounds in Africa in both Christian churches and shrines of traditional worshippers, so long will Africa sink deeper and deeper into the abyss of colossal underdevelopment. For the avoidance of doubt, the posture of resorting helplessly and ineffectually to unseen powers alone for prosperity is not supported by the Christian document of faith. The text under review, Genesis 26: 1-22, shows that the forebears of the Christian faith were armed with characteristic pragmatic initiative and an adroit disposition to work, generating huge prosperity through assiduous aggressive planting and reaping from the field. This generation of African Christians who hope to prosper only by withdrawing to solitary mountains of intercession, just like their counterparts in traditional worship who prosper through rituals done with human heads, have clearly missed the point. It is this kind of work orientation that is inimical to African development, and must be thoroughly jettisoned without any trace remaining.

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