

**THE CHURCH'S INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS IN AFRICA: PASSIVE OR
EVALUATIVE?
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Abstract

In its involvement in politics, the Church in Africa should know that politics is not its first calling. However, as the conscience of society, the Church must address moral issues and measure public actions in society by biblical standards of justice and righteousness. When it addresses political issues, the church must not do it at the risk of weakening its primary mission. Otherwise, it simply becomes another political interest group. The real issue for the Church in Africa therefore is not whether it should be involved in politics or contend for laws that affect the moral behavior of the citizens. Rather the question is how?

Introduction

I am profoundly grateful for the privilege extended to me to address the Annual School of Theology, 2007 on the theme: **Church and Politics in Africa Today**. In the light of this year's theme, it is my honour and joy to present a paper on a topic that greatly affects our being as Christians in the present day Africa namely, **The Church's Involvement in Politics in Africa: Passive or Evaluative?**

I would like to make three preliminary comments:

- i. I speak as a theologian and ordained minister in the Church of the Province of Uganda even though my paper is on the church's involvement in politics in Africa.
- ii. In this paper “church” means both individual believers and the corporate body (institution).
- iii. By politics I mean all activities that are related to the governing and to the building of the civil society. This definition somehow departs from Frederick Chiluba's understanding of politics.

He says:

Politics is about power. Its business is to manage and try to resolve conflict, not just over access to scarce resources, although that is a particularly notable feature in developing countries, especially in Africa, but also conflict of opinion about how society should be organized and about matters of life in general. The manner in which power is acquired is bound to influence the way in which it is exercised.¹

This paper makes a major contribution in our understanding of the church's involvement in politics in Africa by raising three interrelated questions:

- a. What role should the church play in society?

1 Frederick Chiluba, Democracy: The Challenge of Change (Lusaka: Multimedia Publications, 1995), 6.

b. How politically involved should Christians be?

c. Is political involvement the same for the church as for the individual Christian?

Traditionally, there have been two approaches to the church's involvement in politics in Africa. First, passive (non-involvement). This is an approach that regards politics as a worldly business. The second is evaluative (critical engagement). This is an approach that regards politics as a spiritual affair.

In his book, "Christianity and Politics in Africa," John Taylor says:

If the Church in Africa...gives the impression that God is not concerned with man's social and political affairs, then men will not be very much concerned with such a God. And this is not because men wish to use God for their own ends and demand that his thoughts shall be their thoughts; but if they feel that God cares nothing for the things, which vitally affect their daily lives and stir their deepest emotions, they will not easily be persuaded that such a God loves them in any real sense at all.²

Henry Okullu in his book, "Church and State in Nation Building and Human Development," makes this point clearer when he says:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a private religion, just tolerated by certain citizens. It must press its presence in the centre of societal life.³

In search of an appropriate method of the church's involvement in politics in Africa two important questions that situate the Christian Church in Africa need to be raised at this point in time. First, what is the essence of the Christian Church in Africa? Is there something definitively "African in the church's involvement in politics"?

Situating the Christian Church in Africa

Christianity was brought to Africa in the Apostolic age and produced two very important centre of theological learning namely, Alexandria and Carthage. It spread very fast and the church grew strong until the seventh century when the Arabs invaded Africa. In the middle ages the Portuguese and French missionaries planted the Christian Church from the West to the East African coast. However, their efforts were frustrated by their method of evangelism.

Modern Christianity entered Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries through various missionary societies. These missionary societies made reasonable and considerable impact on society. But their approach to evangelism was largely negative. The missionaries had no respect for the peoples' way of life, their religion or culture. This was also the time when the European countries were competing for territories in Africa. The Berlin West African Conference of 1884-85 allowed the partition of Africa among the rival European colonial world powers. To the nineteenth century missionaries, Africa was now a new kingdom to be won for Christ as well as for their respective countries. In many ways, it was the missionaries that encouraged their respective governments to colonize Africa. As Erasto Muga points out, the eighteenth and nineteenth-century missionaries were

2 John Taylor, Christianity and Politics in Africa (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 9.

3 Henry Okullu, Church and State in Nation Building and Human Development (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1984), 3.

anxious:

To make native peoples German, British, Italian, Belgian, as the case may be; and expansionists of all countries let no opportunity slip to employ missionaries, dead or alive, to advance the Kingdom, not only of God, but of nationalism and the economic power overseas.⁴

The superpowers of the time could choose where they wanted to go without consulting the Africans. They divided Africa in any way they wanted without taking into consideration the future interests of the Africans. They also had a program of alienation, discrimination, social exclusion, and manipulation of language group identity where one language group would be deliberately favored against the other. All this was intended to ensure domination and control over Africans.

As the European powers divided the continent among themselves, they necessarily changed the nature of the Christian Church in Africa. During the colonial era, the Christian Church in Africa became more closely related to the various European powers and was identified with the colonizing European powers. The colonial rulers in turn did not hesitate to use the church to help them subdue and control the colonies. It did not take many Africans time to see the Christian Church as being in close alliance with the colonial structures that had enslaved them.

From the 1960s the image of the modern African Church began to change. This is the time when the Churches in Africa, along with the nations that had housed them, moved from a colonial world to independence. Many African nationalists openly attacked the church and called Christianity a religion of the colonizers. There was an assumption in some post-colonial thinking that the Church in Africa would die once colonial powers were gone. This, of course, has not been the case. On the contrary the growth of the Church in Africa has been extraordinary by any standards. Taking Uganda as an example, Philip Jenkins in his book entitled "*The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*" puts the number of Christians at twenty-four million in 2025. He says:

In religious terms, Uganda represents one of the triumphs of the missionary movement, in a country where Christianity was newly planted in the mid-nineteenth century. Today, about 40 percent of the population is Protestant, 35 percent Catholic . . . If we assume no further expansion by means of conversion, then the Ugandan Christian population should grow from 17 million today, to 24 million in 2025, and to 43 million by mid-century.⁵

Unlike the Church in Africa today, the Church in the West has lost power and influence in society it once had. Her Christian message is that there is no such thing as universal truth. The only truth that one might experience is to be found in what society decides works for her in the present day and time. The Church in the West values an over-intellectualized theological tradition that results in a weakened

4 Erasto Muga, African Response to Western Christian Religion (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1975), 30-31.

5 Philip Jenkins, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 91.

influence in society. On the other hand, the Church in Africa is one of the few institutions of civil society, which are not on the decline. It is not only growing in terms of numbers and influence but also in terms of credibility among the people. Referring to a similar point, Angela Stultze-Crawlle says:

The churches have a lot of credibility among the people. They are practically the only institutions people trust. They are still willing to hear the recommendations of the pastors and priests. People demand church intervention when there is violence.⁶

Since the majority of the people outside the Church in Africa are believed to act in “bad faith,” everybody in cities, towns, trading centers and villages turns to the church to provide the moral guidance.⁷

The political experience of the Church in Africa is unique and different from that of other churches in the world by virtue of its history. With the exception of one or two countries, Christianity has not been declared a state religion in Africa due to the idea of separation of Church and State. Many African countries are secular (not Christian), with exception of Zambia which was declared a Christian country on December 29, 1991. The then president, Frederick Chiluba said:

The Bible, which is the word of God, abounds with proof that a nation is blessed, whenever it enters into a covenant with God and obeys the word of God....On behalf of the people of Zambia, I repent of our wicked ways of idolatry, witchcraft, the occult, immorality, injustice and corruption. I pray for the healing, restoration, revival, blessing and prosperity for Zambia. On behalf of the nation, I have now entered into a covenant with the living God....I submit the Government and the entire nation of Zambia to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I further declare that Zambia is a Christian Nation that will seek to be governed by the righteous principles of the Word of God.⁸

Many Christians, however, are agreed that separation of Church and State in Africa should not entails neglect of national affairs, especially when both the spiritual and physical existence of people, is endangered. They agree with Pope John Paul II who said:

In the pursuit of progress, total progress, anything must be rejected that is unworthy of the freedom and the human rights of the individual and the people as a whole. Thus are rejected such elements as corruption, bribery, embezzlement of public funds, domination over the weak, callousness toward the poor and handicapped.⁹

On an individual level, political involvement for an African Christian entails not only carrying out basic responsibilities of citizenship, but also dealing directly with political issues that put justice and human dignity at stake.

6 Quoted in Dafne Plon, Peace in Troubled Cities: Creative Models of Building Community Amidst Violence (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 2.

7 For the background information on this point see, Kevin Ward, “Christianity, Rebels and the State in Northern Uganda,” in Journal of Religion in Africa 31/2(2002): 201ff.

8 Quoted in Paul Gifford, African Christianity: Its Public Role (London: Hurst & Company, 1998), 197-198.

9 Quoted in Okullu, Church and State, 3.

Challenges and prospects the Church in Africa faces today

There are at least two major reasons why Christians must be involved in politics in Africa, viz:

i. As citizens of the Kingdom of God, Christians are supposed to bring Christ's standards of righteousness and justice into politics. This is usually seen in their moral witness and in their willingness to stand up for unpopular causes that benefit society. Stephen Monsma puts it this way:

Christian political involvement has the potential to move the political system away from...the brokering of the self-interest of powerful persons and groups into a renewed concern for the public interest.¹⁰

ii. As citizens of their countries, Christians have the same civic duties all citizens have such as voting in political offices persons they think are best qualified. In voting persons in political offices, Christians should remember that just because a politician is a Christian, that does not make him or her the best candidate. Those candidates should be judged by their character and record. Having said that, I would like to argue that an African Christian's understanding of the involvement of the church in politics should be influenced by his or her ultimate convictions. Even those countries whose constitutions are not based on Christian principles, the church should play a major role in the political life of the society.

For a long time, the church has interfered in private as well as in public life although some church leaders in Africa have been accused of interfering in politics. The church involves itself in politics mainly in two ways:

- i. By its members exercising their civil rights in a Christian spirit.
- ii. By denouncing what is wrong in society.

Julius Nyerere, the former President of Tanzania said:

Everything which prevents a person from living in dignity and decency must therefore be under attack from the Church.¹¹

As regards its involvement in politics, the Church in Africa is confronted with a number of challenges and opportunities. However, the pertinent question we need to ask is "what kind of church are African Christians part of? Are they part of a church, which is in a state of serious crisis as far as politics is concerned? Or are they part of a church, which is capable of adequately extending its services to humankind? In its involvement in politics, the Church in Africa is looked at as either in a state of serious crisis or in a better position from which it can effectively extend its services to humankind.

Those African Christians who believe that they are part of a church, which is in a state of serious crisis, argue that the Church in Africa does not have serious commitment to its prophetic voice in politics. Their conclusion is that at best they are part of a resolution-making church. It is true the Church in Africa over the years has found itself entangled in political crisis. Yet one would have hoped that the vibrant Church in Africa would bring increasing control of political crisis. On the contrary the church has to admit how little it has been able to restrain human readiness to resort say to violent methods of

10 Quoted in Charles Colson, Kingdoms in Conflict (New York: William Morrow, 1987), 279.

11 Julius K. Nyerere, Freedom and Development (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1974), 220.

resolving political differences among her subjects. It appears that the Church in Africa does not have the capacity to resolve these political differences as they arise.

Many African Christians have argued that there is something fundamentally wrong in Africa, which is preventing the church from doing its business as usual. The usual business for the Church in Africa, in my opinion is, among others, to educate the population, protect the weak from being exploited by the rich, and above all overcome those conditions that make men and women sub-human. Violent political differences are one of those conditions that make men and women in Africa sub-human.

How should the church be involved in politics from the point of view of African Christians who believe that they are part of a church, which is in a state of serious crisis? Most of them argue that the Church in Africa should aim at heavenly life and ignore what is taking place in society which they term as “worldly, temporary and passing away.” They agree with David Nicholls who says:

The Church is primarily a religious organization and the Christian Gospel caters for the religious needs of men....It is the job of the Church to preach, to pray, to sing hymns and to encourage and develop the pious feelings of its members.¹²

There are several reasons why some of the African Christians think this way. First, the Church in Africa often operates under pressure from within and from without. This comes sometimes from a strategy of survival and the tendency to feel that the burden of carrying the cross is too heavy and costly. Consequently, the church's prophetic voice is not fully understood within the church itself and this forces it to define its involvement in politics in a narrow and limited sense.

Second, there is a strong tendency in some Churches in Africa to encourage heavenly bound spirituality, which does not relate to concrete reality. This is seen when excessive emphasis is placed on pietism, to almost total exclusion of everything that seems to be “worldly.” The task of such churches is to prepare people adequately for the heavenly journey. Christians in those churches are encouraged to refuse to engage in any actions that are aimed at rectifying injustices and oppression that are embedded in political systems that people in Africa experience.

Third, there have been situations where church leadership in Africa has not acted as one in response to the aspirations and voices of the majority of the Christians. Referring to the declaration of Zambia a Christian nation, Isabel Apawo Phiri says:

The declaration led to conflict among the three Christian bodies and between the churches and the politicians. The Zambian Christians were divided. On one hand, the Roman Catholic Church and the Christian Council of the Churches in Zambia, as well as some evangelical groups who in principle supported the declaration, maintained that there should have been consultations before the declaration was made because of the democratic nature of the state. On the other hand, Pentecostal circles,...were happy about it because they saw the rule of God coming to Zambia through Chiluba....For them the

12 Quoted in Reginald Stackhouse, Christianity and Politics (London: The English University Press, 1966), 5.

procedure of the declaration did not matter. What was important was putting God above everything.¹³

Church divisions contribute nothing to societies like those in Africa that are already volatile. The Church in Africa cannot challenge as a homogeneous body bad politics because the leadership itself embodies the religious and the political divisions of the system.

Fourth, the Church in Africa lacks the strength required to sustain a prophetic voice in politics. For instance, the Church in Africa lacks the analytical capacity for the demanding work of the prophetic ministry. Its institutions for training the next generation of leaders are not only weak, but also the channels for utilization of available Christian talents are lacking.

Those Christians who hold that the Christian faith, does not provide us with the essential grounding needed for political engagement need to recognize that the church does have a role in politics. And the Bible and history clearly support the church's place in the socio-political issues. For instance, the Bible tells us that Amos and other prophets spoke into political and social matters in Israel, Judah and the surrounding nations. Both John the Baptist and Jesus refer to the political concerns of their day. In both the Old and New Testaments God's representatives spoke out against abuse of political power and sought the just use of power. This means that church's involvement in politics does not detract from spirituality; in fact a spirituality that is unrelated to politics is questionable.

There are African Christians who believe that they are part of a church, which is in a better position from which it can effectively extend her services to humankind. These African Christians argue that the Church in Africa is truly a unique phenomenon. It is simultaneously secular and spiritual in quality. It is supposed to confront the problems of Africa in general and yet, mindful of its spiritual heritage, it is obliged to develop some special check points that are aimed at promoting its continued spiritual growth and development. This means that any meaningful search for political solutions in Africa ought to proceed from the ecclesiastical realm. This puts the church's involvement in politics on the spotlight.

On the political scene, there has been a movement for what I would call the “second African revolution” which has been aimed at reviving the aspirations of the 1960s nationalist spirit. The Church in Africa has been a key player in this second African revolution. For instance, it was a common practice in the 1980s for Catholic bishops from the Francophone countries with the support of their fellow Christians from other churches to be appointed to chair the second African revolution seminars. [Referring to former Zaire when President Mobutu had problems with the democratization process in his country, Gerard Prunier says:

When Mobutu wanted to close down what was fast developing into a Constituent Assembly, the members elected Mgr Monsengwo, Bishop of Kisangani, as their

13 Sabel Apawo Phiri, “President Frederick J. T. Chiluba of Zambia: The Christian Nation,” in Journal of Religion in Africa 33/4 (2003): 407-408.

President.¹⁴

In many other African countries National Council of Churches and individual bishops have been actively involved in speaking against oppressive political regimes. For instance, in Kenya the most articulate criticism of President Moi's regime came from Gitari. As the Archbishop of the Anglican Church of the Province of Kenya, Gitari spoke boldly on many issues such as corruption and injustice. He demonstrated deep concern for the well being of all the people of Kenya especially the poor and the oppressed in society. On several occasions he preached against land grabbing from the poor by either the rich or by the government of Kenya. In 1988 he took the lead in opposing the rigging of elections.

The above-mentioned examples are signs of hope but there is more to be done and the Church in Africa needs to prepare herself thoroughly so as to respond adequately to political issues. If the church is to take up the prophetic voice ministry in politics in Africa, I suggest that it gets committed to the quest for meaningful change, justice and peace. Referring to the involvement of the Christian Church in Rwanda in the 1994 genocide, Timothy Longman says:

Not only did church buildings become the sites of massacres, but most of the killers were Christians, and even some pastors and priests participated in the slaughter.¹⁵

Alison De Forges has put Longman's observation differently. He says:

Church authorities left the way clear for officials, politicians, and propagandists to assert that the slaughter actually met with God's favor.¹⁶

The Church in Africa can give the African people hope only if it identifies itself with the cries and struggles of the ordinary people in concrete and tangible ways in their day-to-day concerns. In most cases priority is given to dealing with the immediate consequences of political crisis by providing support to victims. While such a response is important and should be strengthened wherever possible, my view is that there needs to be much more than that. The church should make people aware that political crisis is predictable and preventable. In a continent like Africa that yearns for meaningful change and progress, the church should not sit back and be content with nice and lively Sunday worship services. It must subject that reality to the demands of political stability.

The Church in Africa has the task of showing people what is good and what is bad. Therefore, the church should also be concerned with public policies. Bishop Manning, the Chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council says:

The Church has a legitimate role in public policy debate. It has a right and a duty to call attention to the moral and religious dimensions of secular issues, to measure policies against gospel values, and to speak out on issues involving social justice, human dignity, and the common good... Politics must be about the search for the common good, a commitment to the dignity of every person and reconciling diverse interest for the

14 Gerard Prunier, "The Catholic Church and the Kivu Conflict," in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31/2(2001): 144.

15 Timothy Longman, "Church Politics and the Genocide in Rwanda," in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31/2(2001): 164.

16 Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 246

wellbeing of the whole of society. Otherwise, there is only cynicism, power for power's sake and disillusionment with the political process.¹⁷

It is therefore the responsibility of every country in Africa to provide the necessary framework in which Christians can strive to perfect their humanity.

Suggested guidelines for political involvement

The church's involvement in politics should be rooted in Scripture. Belief in the Incarnation of God and the focus on the perfection of Christ's human nature requires the effective presence of the church in society and calls for its positive concern for society's problems. Although Christ's Church is beyond time and space, He called it to go out into the world and, like Him, be an active participant in the history of man/woman. However, for the church not to become identified as just another political interest group, it should never allow its pulpit to be usurped by any political agenda. If it does it endangers its role as the voice of God in society.

The church should be informed and involved in the issues of the day, and encourage its members to exercise their right to vote and hold political offices. Those who hold political offices should seek to be the best citizens possible, as a witness to the integrity of Christ and His gospel. St. Augustine, in his book "City of God" called God-fearing rulers "blessings bestowed...upon mankind."¹⁸

The role of a Christian as an individual citizen and the role of the church as a corporate entity need to be distinguished. Although church leaders are to use their rights of citizenship when needed they should not become party political leaders, nor should they use their pulpits for political purposes. Instead they should pray for those in leadership to bring peace to the church and to the country as a whole. Any church leader who feels called to occupy a party political post should, be free to do so provided he/she resigns all ecclesiastical functions.

When considering the church's involvement in politics, a distinction between the role of the church and the role of individual believers should be made. Christians must involve themselves in the political issues of their society because it is their right and responsibility as citizens. But the church as an institution has a higher calling than individual Christians. The church is not to be drawn into the pettiness of candidates and issues unless a clear, compelling moral principle is at stake. It is one thing for an individual Christian to address whatever issue his or her conscience dictates, but the church as a body, which claims to speak God's truth, should speak only to those matters in which fidelity to Holy Scripture and reason make it necessary to speak out.

Godly nations come from godly citizens, who come from godly families, led by godly parents. Here is where the church can do its greatest work - focusing upon the redemption of individuals and their families. Godly laws are important. They set an external standard by which people can measure morality. However, godly laws and godly leaders are only a part of the answer. If citizens are unwilling to submit to godly laws or to follow godly leaders, the nation's moral foundations will deteriorate. What is needed is godly hearts. Only God can give a man or woman a godly heart.

17 Bishop K. Manning, "Church and Politics," Church Listing Media Release (Australia, 1996).

18 St. Augustine, City of God (Garden City, New York: Image/Doubleday, 1958), 88.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the two approaches in the church's involvement in politics in Africa. The question one needs to ask is “has the Church in Africa made great impact on the way the African countries are governed” Possibly not. There is therefore need for the kind of approach I have indirectly hinted on in the suggested guidelines namely, responsive approach. This is the situation in which the church understands herself as part and partial of society and then responds constructively to each and every circumstance in which church and society go through.

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