

# **THE CONTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIANITY TO POLITICS IN NIGERIA A HISTORICO-THEOLOGICAL OVERVIEW**

**Rev. Fr. Anthony O. Erhueh**

## **Introduction**

The word "politics" in this paper refers to the public welfare or the common good of a nation as opposed to that of the private or individual domain. "Christianity" is taken to indicate *all* believers in Christ in the different denominations. The aim of this paper is to give a bird's eye view of the contribution of Christianity to the well-being of Nigeria as a nation. The benefits of the advent of Christianity to Nigeria in the fields of health, education and social developments cannot be exaggerated. These are reasonably obvious. What is not clear are areas for further contribution of Christianity in our present-day changing circumstances. This paper will, *inter alia*, attempt to throw light on some of those aspects which could help Nigeria, and perhaps, other African nations for ways of grappling with the present problems that plague the nation and continent.

## **Historical Background**

When Christianity first came to Africa, it brought with it some of the divisions it already incurred in Europe. Thus in Uganda, for instance, there was open hostility between Christians converted by French-speaking missionaries and those converted by English-speaking ones. The wars between Protestants and Catholics in Uganda and other less violent confrontations between Christians of various denominations in different parts of the continent did not promote the ideal Christian love and unity that are the core of the Christian message. The facts about the tension between different denominations is well known: not only among Catholics and Protestants but also divisions among Protestants themselves.

The advent of Christianity to Europe much earlier was very different from the African experience. Christianity more than any other factor united European countries individually and collectively. It was

not until the time of the Protestant reformation that divisions ensued — "*cuius regio, eius religio*". In Europe, Christianity helped to create a homogeneous christian culture. Despite Protestantism, wars and factors that militate against Christianity (such as secularism, atheism), the christian culture has remained in Europe. Despite un-Christian attitudes in various sectors of the social and religious life in different parts of Europe<sup>1</sup> it is true to say that the spirit of dedication to work, truth, honesty, etc. which are an inheritance of monastic ideals, are found among people in Europe who do not uphold the Christian religion, and who are even atheistic<sup>2</sup>. Even in communist Russia where atheism is officially regarded as the way of life for the people, Christian values inherited from the past are sometimes very operative.<sup>3</sup> There is hardly any need to multiply such examples.

Christianity came to Nigeria under the aegis of colonialism. In the Northern part of Nigeria, Christianity met Islam. In return for acceptance of colonial rule, the British were to respect the traditional values upheld in the emirates, and thus minimized interference with already existing conditions. The British helped to keep Christianity away from the North by restricting missionaries and thereby slowed down the process of education through mission schools. The Southern part of Nigeria had a different experience. Missionaries and colonial masters worked hand in hand. Christianity confronted existing traditional conditions and in some cases disrupted African traditional customs, religious beliefs, and culture. The various christian groups also clashed among themselves. More seriously, colonialism already created a tension between the North and the South. Oftentimes, even after the creation of states in Nigeria, North and South are inadvertently referred to as if they are two separate countries.

## Consequences of Historical Background

Christianity rejected traditional African culture whole and entire,<sup>4</sup> when it first came to Nigeria. This resulted in a tension between Christian culture and indigenous culture.<sup>5</sup> Since converts were not able to practice their traditional customs (such as second burials and initiation rites), some resorted to double-dealing. In the public, some carried out their christian obligations; in private, however, they returned to practices not allowed by Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

In the South, there arose a lack of common Christian perspective. Different denominations went their different ways and lacked a common christian viewpoint. To a simple or single problem there could

be many answers as there are denominations. Thus a common Christian front is not readily available in the South in the face of national religious crisis. In the North, on the other hand, the resentment of Christianity by Islam has made a common Christian perspective possible. From the more recent occurrences in the country, it is clear that there is greater unity among Christians in the North than in the South. This is not due principally to the bitter confrontations between adherents of the two world religions. It is enough to presuppose the fact of more Christian awareness in the midst of difficulties: the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity. Whatever the reasons, the Christians in the North possess a more Christian perspective than those in the South of Nigeria.

### **Contributions of Christianity**

**Education:** Missionaries opened up the South through gigantic education schemes. The numerous primary schools, secondary schools, colleges, etc. contributed in a great measure to the political life of Nigeria. Missionaries also offered opportunities to study at the post-graduate level in Ireland and other overseas countries. The education of Christians fomented Nationalist movements in the South. This paved the way for independence. In the South, also, women were educated from the beginning. It is not surprising that women enjoyed the right to vote during the 1959 elections.

**Health:** The numerous Christian hospitals in Nigeria have contributed to the well-being of the nation. A healthy citizenry is a strong factor in the development of any country.

**Social Development:** Both during and after the Nigerian civil war, gigantic relief services were carried out by various Church bodies in Nigeria. Perhaps the suffering of many was alleviated by such social services in the areas of food, clothing and other rehabilitation services<sup>7</sup>.

One must ask, if Christianity has not taken roots in Nigeria, could we have pressed for Independence when we did? What would Nigeria have been without the contributions of the Church in the area of education and health? In 1992 Nigeria will return to civilian rule. In the midst of growing evils in the nation (poverty, corruption, violence, etc), what could the Church offer the nation as the most needed help?

**The African Crisis:** The African crisis is well known. All over Africa, there are military coup d'états, economic depression, violence, unstable governments, corruption, poverty, and a lack of integral independence. It is hard to pinpoint any single cause of such tragedies. Some of the problems can be traced to our colonial past. Professor P.P. Ekeh points out that military rule is natural extension of alien colonial rulership:

.... it is important that we recognize that the fluctuations between military rule and civilian politics have become standard ware in our political history ....

If we examine the nature of colonialism carefully, we would be compelled to admit further that military rule is a natural extension of alien colonial rulership of Nigeria. As the late Professor Billy Dudley so frequently contended, colonial rule was dictatorial and colonial administrators were essentially practors who combined in their offices military, police, judicial as well as administrative and legislative functions.

Another reason for some of the present evils in Africa is cultural alienation.<sup>9</sup> Thus the African crisis is a cultural crisis, arising partly from the failure of Christianity to provide a cultural basis for our existence. (This point has been discussed extensively by the author elsewhere.)<sup>10</sup> What can Christianity do to correct some of the problems associated with the African crisis? Can the Church offer us the benefits of the Christian message for stability, peace, justice, and freedom from corruption in the political life of Nigeria? The present condition of the christian churches in Nigeria points to a promising future. Christianity can heal some of the wounds that plague politics in Nigeria.

**Solutions:** Perhaps the one factor that is very volatile and noticeable in Nigeria is division brought about by tribalism, nepotism, and greed. Unbridled corruption noticed in several sectors of the nation is the result of unpatriotism. Our colonial education and Christianity did not stress the value of patriotism in their educational systems. The time has come for the church to inculcate into her message an unrelenting emphasis on the fact that love of God and love of one's nation go hand in hand. Europeans fought wars "*pro Deo et patria*" ("For God and the nation"). The Christian is at the same time a citizen. Therefore, since the nation is no longer under foreign domination and the administration of the Church is largely in the hands of Nigerians, the Church in Nigeria should strain every muscle to see that Christians love their nation. It should also strive to see that Christians in Government posts carry out the ideal of christian love, justice, peace etc. Christians must be involved in politics. Chris-

tianity is a religion based on love. This aspect of our religion needs stressing today more than ever before. All human beings are equal in the sight of God. Tribalism, division, and hatred are against the spirit of the Church which is a sacrament of God's union with men and of the unity of men with one another. Where there is love, ethnic differences are transcended, religious intolerance is eschewed and fair-play thrives. Christianity must, like her Master Jesus Christ, incarnate herself into Africa. It must become African as Christ became human. Until the African functions as a true African informed by the benefitting riches of Christianity and other religions, he cannot solve his present problems of instability, corruption, poverty and nepotism. The Church in Africa must be Christian and African at the same time.

## NOTES

1. For instance, materialism, homosexuality, abortion, divorce, etc. can hardly be called Christian.
2. In Europe and other parts of Western world, poverty is appreciated; so also is celibacy for non-religious natives. Directly or indirectly, these are offsprings of monastic piety. See Prof. P.P. Ekeh, "Culture and Wealth and Poverty", 1987.
3. Some of the movies from the West that are pornographic or highly erotic are banned from Russia, e.g. the American block buster, "Saturday Night Fever".
4. See A.O. Erhueh, *Vatican II: Image of God in Man*, Rome 1987 Pp. 276-282
5. Christian culture here must be distinguished from European or Western culture.
6. For instance burial rites, it is said that in one part of Bendel State, as the priest (Rev. Father) left the scene, traditional rites were performed on corpses.
7. See A.O. Makozie and G.L.A. Ojo, eds. *A history of the Catholic Church in Nigeria*, Lagos: Macmillan, 1982.
8. Ekeh, P.P., "Priests and Politics: Towards 1990". Symposium, July 2nd, 1987, Ss Peter and Paul Major Seminary, Ibadan.
9. See Erhueh, op. cit. p. 281f *et passim*.
10. Idem, op. cit., 276ff.