

The Church in Conversation for Social Transformation: From Christology to Christo-Praxis¹

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Abstract

The pivotal roles of the church and theology in public space continue to dominate the thoughts of many churchmen and theologians from the global south as they grapple with the fact of the increase in the number of Christian communities in those parts of the world. It becomes particularly disheartening as one realises that the poorest people on earth; the most economically disadvantaged, religiously ostracised, and politically marginal people are all located there despite the acclaimed growth of Christianity. One would naturally expect that the church in the global south would be apt at bringing in the knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ to the fore in advocating the urgent need for social transformation. The paper proceeds by arguing that if properly articulated by theologians and church leadership, Christological notions can make useful contributions to lasting solutions to the quest for a social, political, economic and religious emancipation. This paper takes the West Africa sub-region as a representative of the focus of this discussion. It further suggests a collaboration of ecclesiastical, religious and government approaches which can be directed through Christo-praxis as a new way of living to ameliorate the socio-economic and political challenges.

Keywords: Christology, Christo-praxis, Social Transformation, Conversation, West African Church, Social Engagement.

1.0 Introduction

I should like to begin this paper with some basic assumptions. Firstly, Christianity is an engaging and a communitarian faith. Right from its inception, it began by engaging with the Greco-Roman world, culture, philosophy, social and religious worldviews. This engagement was productive as a two way transformation, for Christianity on the one hand and the context of its emergence on the other. Secondly, theological reflection is both at the centre of the life of the church and the academy. Various individuals engage in theological reflection consciously and unconsciously. The church partakes in the theological reflection at different levels and there can be an intersection between the theological reflection in the academic world and the life of the church. Thirdly, Christology occupies a central place in Christian theological reflection either as a general theological exercise or for a contextual analysis.

Through a passable Christological thinking, there can be a proviso for mirroring the events in human society and devise possible ways of intervention. Fourthly, there can be a synergy between the theological formulations in the academia and the church life to bring about a new way of living in the society where the church exists as a community of light and salt. Having proposed these assumptions, it is equally essential to clarify some concepts in this paper.

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Christology has been defined by Leader E. Keck as “a comprehensive term for the statement of the identity and significance of Jesus” (Keck, 1986:362). An understanding of the identity of Jesus allows for a reflection on the meaning of Jesus for today and how such an interpretation can aid a contextual application.

Christo-praxis is defined by Ray S. Anderson as “the continuing power of Jesus Christ, as his ministry works with followers through the Holy Spirit” (Anderson 2001:29). It implies an extension of the mission of the resurrected Christ through the practical action of his followers today, which may impact in concrete terms on the situations in which the followers of Jesus Christ live.

Conversations is a chat or a dialogue that is initiated and engaged in with others for a specifically determined purpose

The Church is here assumed as the body of believers in Christ. It is what the New Testament described as the *ekklesia*, the called out ones.

Methodology of this paper is a hermeneutical analysis and dialogical interaction with literature on African Christian theology and African church.³ I will limit my discussion to the West African subregion whilst focusing on the ideal contributions of the church to nation building especially in socio-economic and political space using the Christological epistemology. This paper proceeds in three stages after the introduction. In the first stage, I will highlight the socio-economic, political and religious situations of West African states. The Christological emphasis in African Christianity both in the academy and church levels will be considered in the second part. My discussion on *Christo-praxis* will be the core of this paper. I shall propose that the path to a new way of living among the Christian churches in West Africa lies in *Christo-praxis*. In the concluding part, I will return to the assumptions laid out at the beginning to examine how they are currently engaging with the West African states and what is left to be done.

2.0 The Situation of the West African States

The conditions of many of the West African nations remain worrisome and aggravating despite the fact that many of these nations have been freed from colonialism. With Ghana, the first African nation to gain independence in 1957, the hopes and aspirations of African people had been raised to the possible transformations that could accompany independence. However, the aspirations and expectations of Africans have been dashed as the degrading health conditions, challenges of HIV/AIDS, poor working conditions, inequalities in allocation and distribution of the nation's wealth, clientelism and corruption in political and economic lines have generated further calamitous implications for the church conditions and these nations. Kä Mana, a theologian from Benin Republic has described the African fundamental problems more succinctly:

Moral helplessness in confronting illness, deep distress in the face of supernatural forces, and the irrepressible need for healing and deliverance from the forces of darkness; the powerlessness of our societies in the face of the 'geopolitics of chaos' which make up our world today, and the disconcerting policies imposed by international financial institutions; the implosion of our creative forces in the unspeakable anarchy experienced by many of our countries where the quest for survival generates violence and an instinct that is destructive of life itself;

The multiplication of hotbeds of social unrest and areas of armed conflicts in a continent where the basic needs of life are far from satisfactory, and where the countries with the most appalling (sic) cases of poverty in the world are found (Mana 2004:2).

These are the initial situations that most African nations were struggling with. These repelling circumstances and effects of globalization, international market economy, religious fundamentalism, and more recently terrorism, have emerged poignantly as notable threats to both the Christian churches and nation-states in different parts of Africa. Nevertheless, it is incongruent to treat all African countries west of the Sahara on an equal status considering the fact that some are currently having a significant economic and political development and population advantage over others.

The commonality remains that there is yet to be a significant conversation between the church and state that could usher in a new way of living in those places. In the midst of the above situation, there arose two major potential sources of hope for reconciliation and rebuilding for African people. The first is politics. The second is religion.

³ For the benefit of the doubt and avoidance of ambiguity I should also state that the idea of Africa in this paper is not properly applicable to the entire African continent. It simply refers to the countries in Africa, south of the Sahara. When most scholars speak of African Christianity today they are only referring to the Christian Africa other than the entire African continent. It is very difficult to establish a common feature to all African countries because of cultural and religious diversities.

Political groupings emerged as a channel for realization and actualization of the African dream on the eve of the independence of many of the African states. The mobilization in political affairs and most importantly electioneering has given multiple promises with little or no fulfilment. More recently, politics has developed as an easiest way to amass wealth and that, at the expense of the nation's development. The situation is so bad that most people cannot rely on any political promise any longer.

Religion, on the other hand, has become the main source of identity formation and a tool for self-actualization. The religious disposition of the citizens became rooted in the appropriation of political interchange and government policies. Most of these nation states are polarized not only on political ideologies but also on religious affiliations within the political circumference. This has seriously engendered religious influence in the political arena. Politics has developed undeniable influence on religion to the extent that almost every political mobilization had a corresponding religious content and everything religious became political in outlook. The manner in which this symbiotic relationship has been manipulated has been traced by some scholars as the source of the emerging fundamentalism in political and religious life in the post-colonial and post-missionary Africa (Adogame 2005:128-139).

The Christian presence was present in the quest for independence in most of the African states.⁴ Christianity had an opportunity to offer insights for the nation building. But despite the space that existed, the opportunity was misused due to the doctrine of separation of church and state (Kalu 2000:85-93). The ideal relation between the church and state was conducted in a way that hampered the church to have an informed decision on how to influence the nation positively. This does not mean that Christianity has not had much influence but such influence can be judged inadequate.

The nature of the current association of the church with the political institution has not given prominence to any meaningful or positive result of church's conversation in public arena. Some of the writings of Paul Gifford (2004; 2009) and Emmanuel Katongole (2011) inquired into the political roles and influence of the church in Africa. These studies and others sufficiently informed that churches are developing political will but the manner of such association yet lacks credibility, resilience, correct piety, and sufficient prophetic stance that is required in the church-state relationship in the 21st century Africa.⁵ The church-state relationship has, in recent times, resulted in scandals as some church leaders have been accused of being partisan in political mobilization. The negative image some have in this respect is that the church has compromised her true position as the community of light and salt. This manner of association is often labelled against the Pentecostal and charismatic wing of Christian faith by the mainline churches (Gifford 2004:191-196).⁶

3.0 Christology in African Christianity

Christology is a major characteristic of the African Christian theology. It has been expressed in two ways; as an academic Christology and as a lived Christology. Whichever format it takes, the consciousness is always on the African experiences and interpretation of who Jesus is and how this can be appropriated in view of African realities in socio-economic, political, spiritual and religious circumstances. The central place of Jesus has become prominent in the thoughts of African theologians. Jesse N. K. Mugambi and Laurenti Magesa state that:

⁴ The collective effort of the church in this regard was the formation of the All African Council of Churches (AACC) in 1966. The body both spoke against the colonialism and advocated the development of African theology.

⁵ Paul Gifford is right in his *Ghana's New Christianity*, that recurrent emphases of most of the churches in Ghana are success, prosperity/financial blessings, deliverance from elemental powers and prophetic function of fore-telling. Although, some are beginning to include political roles of Christians but this is still less than other earlier mentioned issues. These aspects are major commonalities in African Christianity today.

⁶ It is not uncommon to experience varieties of saga during the political mobilization in the process of electioneering. For instance, during the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria, the opposition party accused some principal officers of the ecumenical body, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) of being bribed by the ruling party in the name of mobilizing church members to vote for then incumbent president from the ruling party. However, when the opposition party was asked to reveal the identity of those involved in the bribery scandal, it couldn't name anyone.

Christology is, in the final analysis, the most basic and central issue of Christian theology. The faith, the hope and the praxis of love that Christian theology attempts to explicate, and which Christians endeavour to witness to by their life, must have Christ as their foundation and goal. Without Jesus Christ as the cornerstone and final aim, nothing in Christology counts; nothing in theological thought is any significance from the Christian point of view. In fact, to be precise, theology is not Christian at all when it does not offer Jesus Christ of Nazareth as the answer to the human quest (1998:x).

Africans seek to understand Jesus Christ in view of their daily life and spirituality. The major uniqueness of African theological discourse is the unparalleled disposition of theologians to the identity of Jesus Christ in theological parlance. Obviously, when theologians and even church leaders theologize in most of the Third World countries, their emphasis is frequently on liberation. This emphasis is a result of their situations and experiences. This indicates that human experience cannot be neglected in theological construction. I shall return to these issues later to see how they relate to the current trends in African theological enterprise.

African Christian theologians have mixed reactions to the growing status of Christological study and emphasis. This is confirmed by Charles Nyamiti's observation a few decades ago while assessing the state of Christological study in Africa. He states that Christology related themes are the most developed aspects of African Christian theology (Nyamiti 1994:70). However, Diane Stinton's view is that it is both legitimate and suspect. It is legitimate because of the ways in which Africans have perceived Jesus by drawing on some similar cultural elements since the advent of Christianity. It is suspect because of the struggles involved in appropriating Jesus Christ in an authentic manner (Stinton 2004:4). The progress in Christological study has attracted the attention of some observers outside the African continent.

The climax of that Christological construct today is the prevalent ways of portraying Jesus Christ within certain African cultural moulds and categories. These categories include an endless list such as 'Jesus as King/Elder Brother, Jesus as an Ancestor, The master of initiation, Jesus the Mediator, Jesus the Healer, and others (Manus: 311-330; Schreier 1991; Stinton 2004; Mugambi and Magesa 1998). All these African categories typically fit into the inculturation theology as they are developed primarily for the purpose of arriving at a cultural equivalence. They help to make Africans perceive Jesus through an 'African eye' and to attempt to understand him through their cultural expressions. However, these images have remained largely a series of academic formulations. It appears, in fact, that there is an academy versus church ministry dichotomy at the moment. The unprecedented growth in Christianity in the West African subregion is not directly connected to most of these themes. None of the observers in the history of the growth of Christianity in Africa have linked the growth to these themes. The only unity that seems to exist among these writers is on the inculturation. For instance, Adrian Hastings' historical interpretation of African Christianity (1976), Aylward Shorter and Joseph Njiru (2001)⁷ as well as John S. Pobee and Gabriel Ositelu II (1998)⁸, have all associated this expansion to certain initiatives and contextualization among African Christians.

All of the above authors agreed that African Christians have given themselves to inculturation Christology. They interpret and appropriate the person of Jesus Christ in ways that synthesize their material cultural outlook, cosmology, and spirituality with gospel message. They have succeeded in selecting some themes which are in fact relevant for their daily living and experience. They sometimes establish cultural similarities and continuity between African worldview and Judeo-Christian tradition.

The centrality of Christological assertion is not limited to the academic world today in Africa. Church leaders have equally discovered the need to focus on Christological concepts in various church ministries. This is anchored on the datum that Jesus Christ is the answer to the African situations and these churches on the basis of their Christological appropriation claim to have answers to the questions confronting various individuals. Most of the newer churches focus on healing, deliverance, prosperity gospel and so on. But others equally consider the themes such as stewardship, leadership, social responsibility, political influence and participation as the cardinal emphases of their ministries.

⁷ This book is one of the series of books published by the authors comprising case studies of Nairobi. It focuses on how the new religious movements have impacted on the Catholic and mainline churches.

⁸ The authors dealt extensively with the issues such as prophetic movement, syncretistic movement and other forms of emphases that are seen in the AICs with their challenges for ecumenical collaboration. The book also covers the AICs' simplicity and lack of much attachment to intellectual theological training and hermeneutics.

In most cases, these preachers and church leaders select biblical figures such as Daniel, David, Joseph and Jesus Christ to provide a hermeneutical frame for their exposition. In fact, some share the sentiment that only Christians should be allowed to occupy leadership positions in the nation since they could make use of the lessons from the life of Jesus Christ and his teachings to guide their political conduct and actions (Gifford 2004:188-190). The awareness of the Christian responsibility and participation in the nation's affairs on Christological basis is becoming evident.

Jean-Marc Éla, an African liberation theologian, is right in proposing that instead of concentrating on some assumed cultural symbols to aid Christological interpretation in the present-day African Christian theology, it is apposite to ensure that the "urgent problems of contemporary Africa become the obligatory locus of theological research" (Éla 1994:140). The problems which Éla referred to are those relating to the socio-economic and political conditions of the African nations. These situations require urgent liberation and such liberation can be realised when the church assumes her proper place and role. This will be a necessary condition for bridging the perceived academic versus church ministry dichotomy. Highlighting the critical needs for liberation in African theological discourse, Mugambi and Magesa have beautifully described it in a series of thought provoking rhetoric:

Can the title Liberator be applied to Christ today? Is it justifiable in terms of the contemporary situation of the African continent? In other words, is Jesus seen as the 'One Who makes people free?' is He preached as such? Indeed, what is the 'image' of Christ? What 'image' of God are the suffering people of Africa presented with? Particularly, from the perspective of the African women's painful existential experience, what is liberation as applied to the power and authority of Christ in the African world? (Mugambi and Magesa 1998: xiv)

The notion of liberation Christology is appropriate for reflecting on the African situation today. This felt need is the main reason that the notion of liberation permeates African thought as well as theological expression. Indeed, any theological expression that will resonate with the trends in African Christology and the African situation must essentially subscribe to the notion of effecting a change and social transformation. To express Jesus in this way is to see Him as one who comes to identify with the Africans in view of their existential worries and needs. This is precisely where the conversation between the church and the state should centre on.

4.0 The Church in Conversation from Christology to Christo-Praxis

David Lamb once remarked that "Today...the Christian church is probably the most powerful institution in sub-Saharan Africa" (Lamb 1985:141). Although, Lamb did not engage in an extensive discussion on what that statement meant for him, but years after his publication, his statement has become a truism in the sub-Saharan Africa. It is possible to observe that the 'power' of the church consists in the church's involvements in educational, economic, cultural, religious, and partly political paradigm shifts. Of all these aspects, it is only the political role of the church that is less projected. All of the forms of transformation connected to the church so far have been on an interpretation and appropriation of Christological components. There are indications at this moment that Christological study is receiving an ample emphasis both at the academic and church levels. These emphases have brought about undeniable growth in recent history of the church in the West Africa. These have been receiving deserved attention in recent scholarship (Clarke 2011; Ezigbo 2008; Aigbadumah 2011). My central argument is that in spite of the dilapidation currently witnessed in the religious and political arenas, Christianity and its political influence remain two major potential tools of hope for reconstruction and transformation of the African society. The church is required to re-discover its mission to the nation and make use of the appropriate apparatuses so as to make its ministry of presence relevant to the socio-political, economic, and religious challenges currently facing African nations. A new way of living must essentially emerge.

However, if a new way of living would emerge for the church in the West African Christianity, it is an imperative to recognize theology as primarily a multilayer conversation. It is a conversation that begins with the life of the church on the basis of the identity of Jesus Christ. It furthers in the church's moves into the social and public space. Such a conversation must be focused on the immediate and emerging situations of the African countries. Some aspects of Christology as both the central focus of Christian theology and the locus of Christian faith must be appropriated to have a corresponding social influence. It involves urging Christians to take the opportunity to participate in the public domain in modern secular democracies and converse with other citizens on issues wider than religious matters.

There is an urgent need for Christian theology to be actively engaged in conversation on public issues with the understanding that it can offer complementary or supplementary approaches, and even alternative solutions, to the very complex issues facing society today. The key word for public theology is conversation, contributing to the formation of personal decisions and collective policy-making in economic, political, religious and social realms (Kim 2011:3).

If the emphasis of the church in the Christian Africa has been centered on certain aspects of Christology, which has led to a tremendous growth of the church in these areas, such Christological themes may also offer strong insights into how the church can live to its full mission of social transformation. It must be a conversation that enables the church to widen its horizon from Christology to Christo-praxis. The German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, has identified the crucial need to merge the knowledge of Christ to the practice of Christian faith especially for the purpose of social transformation. Moltmann states that, "anyone who hears the message of the crucified Jesus hears the call to discipleship as well; and anyone who enters into the discipleship of Christ must be prepared to take up the cross. There is no Christology without christopraxis, no knowledge of Christ without the practice of Christ" (Moltmann 1994:47).

The knowledge of Christ remains grossly inadequate if it cannot be put into practice for giving a new direction outside the community of faith. Christo-praxis or 'the practice of Christ' supports the church's motif for mutual engagement in a nation's events and activities. It demands an urgent need for raising disciples who will go into various sectors of the African nations to exert positive influence in line with the message of Christ's reign (2 Cor. 3:2, 3). The church remains the channel through which the resurrected Christ encounters every nation. The pattern of the church's involvement and her social actions in the nation will determine how much relevance the church will be to African nations in years to come.

The initial dichotomy between the church and state popularly called the separation of church and state, which, according to Ogbu U. Kalu, hindered the church's significant influence upon African nations in the 1960s (Kalu 2000) has gradually become elusive. Most Christians in the African church have developed political association and participation contrary to the reality of the last two decades, for instance. There are Christians and clerics who are now vying for political offices. The popular slogan which depicts politics as a dirty game from which Christians should abstain can no longer hold sway. Whilst some Christians have been successful politically, others are still hoping for a day when that dream will be realized. The convincing concern as more Christians are becoming more involved in the politics is, what improvement has the African nations witnessed politically? Even with the affirmation of the growth of the church in Africa, what measure of development has this growth had on the political participation and the economic mobilization among these nations? These are heart-pondering questions which will continue to arouse different analyses from the church life and the academy.

Paul Gifford's *African Christianity, Its Public Role*, examines the ongoing/likely contributions of Christianity in four African nations; Ghana, Uganda, Zambia and Cameroon. (Gifford 1998). In some of these contexts African Christians have developed some measures of political theology to resonate impact on their nations. Besides, there have been an increase in the participation in the political association by the newer Pentecostal churches than the mainline churches. Their involvements could, however, be interpreted as having a mixture of problems and blessings. The church's presence has been felt deeply on economic development and mobilization. It has championed an emerging cultural shift in relation to women, marriage and youths' participation in church-community engagement (Gifford 1998:328-346). Other area such as education is also noticeable at the moment. Of the three major areas Gifford identified; social, economic and politics, the latter remains the aspect in which the church is least successful. Gifford's conclusion was that, "But African socio-political systems just as certainly need radical restructuring, and it is not self-evident that these churches will contribute much in this direction" (Gifford 1998:348). It seems that Gifford is right, although not in his analysis of the case studies but in his conclusion. The problem is not that African Christianity cannot become resolute to the point of social transformation. But there are no clear indications this is taking place vigorously at the moment.

There cannot be any substantial development in the political structure and governance of Christian Africa unless the church moves from Christology to Christo-praxis. It must essentially be willing to engage the political life and political participants with the urgent need for social transformation. Praxis itself relates to how the faith profession can actualize needed changes on social and political strands. Paulo Freire defines a praxis as a "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1982:36).

As stated earlier, it is impossible to speak of any meaningful development among African nations without a specific mentioning of the roles of religion probably as a form of continuity to the traditional perception of religion of African historic past. It may also be considered from the centrality of religion in the present African life and affairs. Hence, there is an urgent need on the part of the church to embark on an internal renewal of politics and political motif in the church. Such a motif in the present Africa must bear on how Christians can move from Christology to Christo-praxis.

The Christo-praxis demands that African Christians take with them the message of Christ to their political and economic roles in their different nations. It first of all dictates that the individual Christians will consider themselves as agents of the Kingdom of God, as light and salt of the earth. They are both accountable to God and the ethical demands of their various professions. The implication of the above includes that the Christians will be prepared to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. Secondly, Christo-praxis will compel the Christians to consider their patriotic duties to the nation. It is in this way that the church can cooperate with the government to wipe off corruption and corrupt practices, revitalize the economy and economic policies, curtail religious fundamentalism and establish adequate influence on governance. Again, Christo-praxis is prophetic in nature. It reflects upon the ethics of Christian profession in addressing the political and social problems of the nation.

5.0 Conclusion

It is appropriate to return to the working assumptions I made at the beginning of this paper. Christianity has never been isolated from its contexts in various ages. It has not only been shaped by its contexts but also influenced its context by obtaining some concepts for the formation of Christian dogmas and orthodoxy. That was a channel for accommodating Christianity at various stages of its expansion. There were manifest examples of how the Christian mission engaged the immediate pressing needs in Africa in the 19th century, too. These include the provision of free and quality education, good healthcare delivery and other social services. The changing contexts of African nations demand a redirection of the method of Christian engagement with the nation's affairs today.

In African Christianity today, the church needs to learn from the various forms of engagements Christianity has had in its history. The current growth and emphasis of the church on Christological themes can provide a hermeneutical lens for reflecting on and providing solutions to the corporate challenges of economic, political, governance, and religion in Africa. It must develop this growth through a conversation in which the praxis of Christ is brought into the formation of ethic for Christian participation in the life of the nation. Theological reflection must engage the situation in the nation. This will imply a renewed emphasis on the Christo-praxis and urgency of recovering the prophetic ministry of the church to the events in the nation.

If this prophetic stance of Christo-praxis will generate a useful outcome, it must do so from the life of the church, to ecumenical relations and to the nation at large. It must necessarily begin with the church's internal prophetic purity that addresses the internal issues in the life and ministry of the church. It must consider its orientation and theology as it affects the role of the church in the nation. The church's attitude to the political office holders and reasons for associating with the politics as a source for mobilization of funding for the church needs urgent re-evaluation. The movement from Christology to Christo-praxis is potentially powerful to pledge a new way of living for the church in sub-Saharan Africa.

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