

***FAITH AND POLITICS IN AFRICA:***  
***Emergent Political Theology of Engagement in Nigeria***  
 By Ogbu U. Kalu, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago

***1. Theoretical Framework***

It will not be pedantic to begin with theoretical musings because an old teacher taught me to ask simple questions about large issues. Why do we, for instance, speak of faith and politics as if both operate as separate dimensions and spheres of human life? This manner of posing the question that comes so naturally may possibly hide a worldview that may not be universally shared. It comes from a mental structure that puts the emphasis on the analytical mode of human reflection; it may jar with the feeling component in experiencing life. Western Enlightenment worldview drew the distinction that appears so natural to those brought up in its perception of reality. One dimension of globalization is that it is changing awareness of other worldviews. In Africa, the political realm is sacralized or enchanted and politics is a religious matter precisely because it is a moral performance; it is about the undergirding values that determine how we govern ourselves or exercise power in the task of wielding the authority given to us. Authority is legitimized or delegated power; every ruler is situated as a subsidiary entity. So, the questions of power are always: who holds power; for whom and to what end? While it is possible to answer these questions of power from humanistic perspectives, the moral dimension of power has not failed to assert itself. Indeed, there is always the problem of the source of authority and obligation. In pre-modern and Enlightenment Europe even kings appealed to God as the source of authority and themselves as mere viceroys.

Religion is intricately woven into the fabric of politics and provides the compelling touchstone of legitimacy or the love of the ruler by the ruled; the motive for exercising power; reason to be obeyed; the determinant of the moral standards and style of power and the engine that moves governance. In such contexts, the structure of governance had tremendous impact on the modes of religious expression and religion could not be conjured out of politics. The enlightenment project that sought to desacralize the political space and disenchant the worldview could only so dare with a myth that imagined three evolutionary stages of civilization shifting from the darkness of religion and philosophy into the blinding light of reason, science and empiricism. It conjured politics into a science and imbued it with secular morality and existentialist ideals. In spite of the vaunted claims, human nature remained resistant and theories of culture lag tried to explain the inexplicable. Why do people do horrible things to other people in spite of reason, technology and civilization? T.S Eliot could, therefore, re-imagine the post-world war period with the metaphor of the shadow in his *Wasteland* poems and Spengler moaned about the *Decline of the West* as the idea of progress suffered a defeat. The global village has brought people from high technological zones to revisit those from low technological regions where the world is still enchanted; religion colludes with magic to weave an organic perception of reality; and spiritual forces combine with humans to create a humane environment where human beings could be truly human. That is the goal of any viable political culture.

The emphasis here is that the linkage between culture, worldview and ecology has protected the centrality of religion in the public space in these non-Western contexts. Religion has not operated as an independent variable but has always been influenced by

these other forces and in turn influenced them. In spite of the insertion of secularism, religion has remained resilient and the heart beat of non-Western cultures. The worldview in African communities is charismatic as gods operate in the sky, land, water and ancestral world. They destroy the boundaries between the profane and sacred; sacralize reality and gives religious value to everyday activities. Religion, culture and ethnicity become the organizing frameworks of human lives and the modern public space is constantly villigized through the use of cultic elements acquired from the primal sector of the culture.

Just as an illustration from an event that occurred in the first week of February 2003: a Nigerian newspaper reported an event in a state house of legislature located in the south-west region. A member was to be dismissed for indiscipline. On the fateful day, as the Speaker of the House announced the verdict, the member strode to the center of the house, brought out an egg from the folds of his *agbada* or long-flowing apparel and broke it on the floor with incantations; a pandemonium ensued as he brought out a pot full of concoctions and broke it on the floor. By this time, honorable members were scampering over the seats in the bid to escape from the foul-smell of the enchantment. Without resort to filibuster he was able to disperse his opponents. Even the security guards of the House of Legislature escaped for their dear lives.<sup>1</sup> Cultic power is employed freely in the public space and often buttresses political clout.<sup>2</sup> As the competition for dwindling resources intensify, religion, even if manipulated, becomes central in political discourse. It is this context that informs our reflections on faith and politics in Nigeria.

It may be added as a necessary digression that the current literature on secularism and religion in the West is like a war zone strewn with contesting claims of victory. Within 2002 four books could serve as illustrations of the battle lines: Steve Bruce argued in his *God is dead: secularization in the West* that the emphasis on scientific and technological ways of understanding reality has induced the precipitous decline of religion and emergence of societies characterized by diversity, pluralism, individual choice and relativism. Edward Norman joined by declaring *Secularism: the New Century Theology*. Others demurred: Philip Jenkins in *The Next Christendom* accepted the shift of the center of gravity of Christianity to the southern hemisphere and therefore the imperative of paying attention to the journey of the gospel through those cultures. He argues that Western secularist theorists have ignored the “browning” of World Christianity and its impact for the future. This “new Christian world of the south could find unity in common religious beliefs...(and develop)..a powerful Christian identity in culture and politics”. But he made a special case for America, arguing that the pattern of decline witnessed in Europe does not apply here where a large percentage of the population still shows religious adherence; the strongest exception among industrialized nations. Reginald Bibby concurred in his *Restless God: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada*. Perhaps a large influx of immigrant population renews and revitalizes

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<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian Newspaper* (Lagos, Nigeria), 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2003:9

<sup>2</sup> See, O.U.Kalu, “ Harsh Flutes: The Religious Dimension of Legitimacy Crisis in Nigeria, 1993-1998” In T.Falola (ed) *Nigeria in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2002): chapt.45; O.U. Kalu, “*The Scourge of the Vandals: Nature and Control of Cults in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions (Nsukka, University of Nigeria Press, 2001)*. Both works discuss the proliferation and impact of cultism in modern Nigerian public space including schools from the 1980’s.

Christianity and saves its total collapse in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Commentators of many hues agree that there is a tremendous spiritual quest that may not be Christian but bound to affect the critique of socio-political culture. The resilience of religion in the politics of the Third World and especially of Africa that Jeff Haynes has argued so forcibly may reflect a wider trend requiring scholarly inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

Two other issues of larger significance deserve attention. The impact of western culture on Africa determines the relationship of politics and religion because Western culture has reconfigured the terrain. It created three publics: primal, external and emergent public that is neither fish nor fowl and imbued with ambiguous morality and value system. Nigerians refer to it as the white man's world. For instance, if one stole in the 'white man's world', the person is beyond the purview of traditional sanctions. The development of urban contexts created the ambiguous space for people who neither internalized Western values nor kept faith with the traditional. It has been argued that the indiscipline and corruption among the political elite could be explained by the gap. A politician who robbed the state could still dance to the big drum in the village as a warrior who had forayed out into the white man's world and returned with a piece of the national cake for his people. The battering of traditional models of social control and yet inability to install a viable Western alternative has many implications including the sensitivity in doing a different type of political theology.

But it provides the class factor in social analysis. Often attention is focused on what the elite say and write. Beneath elite politics is a vibrant infra-political zone where the ruled comment freely on their rulers. It has its own language, symbols and meaning system. It exhibits a large dosage of local vitality and hidden strategies of resistance; it creates a domain of self-assertion. Take for an example a case when a ruler dons a laborer's gear, picks up a spade and plants a seedling in the inauguration of an expensive program called, *Operation Feed the Nation*; the infra-political zone would quickly sense that the ruler is defrauding the treasury in a program that should be named, *Operation Fool the Nation*. After the inaugural ceremony, the project will fail. Thus, *Better Life for Rural Women* was dubbed *Better Life for Rich Women* because they benefited from the resources allocated to the project. NEPA does not mean *National Electric and Power Agency* but *Never Expect Power Anytime* for those urban dwellers who fought mosquitoes in the dark throughout the night. Political theology is about what the people are really saying on the moral quality of the exercise of power among them and not about the pronouncements of the elites. Political speeches by the ruling elites and media reports do not constitute the stuff of political theology. What the people are saying and doing at the level of infra-politics provide clearer guides and these implicate the church because the wide range of the associational life of the church makes it the leader of civil society in most parts of Africa.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002); Edward Norman, *Secularization: New Century Religion* (New York, Continuum, 2002); Paul Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2002), see, p.11; Reginald Bibby, *Restless God: the Renaissance of Religion in Canada*.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Haynes, *Religion in the Third World Politics* (Boulder, CO., Lynne Rienner Publications, 1994); and *Religion and Politics in Africa* (London, Zed Press, 1996)

<sup>5</sup> O.U.Kalu, *Power, Poverty and Prayer: The Challenges of poverty and Pluralism in African Christianity, 1960-1996* (Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2000), chapt.2

With these caveats we can now use the Christian case study to illustrate the relationship between faith and politics in an African context, Nigeria. Applying a strong control with periodization, the reflection will examine four time frames: *God as a stranger*: pepper, guns and God under Iberian Catholicism. This would cover the early encounters with Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. *God of the Empire*: the church in the civilization project will examine the period, 1841-1960. *The Ethnic God*: decolonization and indigenization will cover the period between 1960 and 1990 when the second liberation from home-grown dictators started. *God of this World*: theology of engagement will point to some new features in Nigerian political theology inspired by two impulses, the charismatic/Pentecostal insurgence and the challenge of Islam in the period between 1990-2003.

## **2. God as a Stranger: pepper, guns and God**

European encounter with Nigerian communities started as a powerful political and commercial activity. Garbed in the crusading spirit, Iberians initiated the *reconquista* project to recover their native land from Arab domination and respond to the commercial and military challenges by the Arabs who occupied the Levant route to the sources of spices, seized the granary in the Maghrib and initiated a lucrative trans-Saharan trade in gold with the Futa Jallon and River Senegal basin of West Africa. Couched in religious rhetoric it was always obvious that the quest for national glory and gold predominated the service of God. Nigeria got enmeshed in the enterprise through the power of a myth about a sprawling empire of Benin in the interior that was rich under an enlightened ruler. The quest for the golden kingdom of Prester John fired imagination about such exotic places. The Portuguese found more than a rich empire, they found plenty of pepper. The Oba of Benin wanted guns and Christian priests were used as the mediators of a new relationship. The curious journey extended into Warri and the Olu was keen enough to send his son to Portugal to be educated who later ascended the throne as *Olu Sebastian*. But the repackaging collided with the ritual demands of a monarch; the effort to install a Christian God as the source of power could not be sustained and his reign was shortened. The court-alliance pattern of the encounter left the control under the indigenous ruler and Christianity sat lightly as a stranger, an instrument of diplomatic relationship and mediator of a new civilization. Neither the Franciscans nor the Capuchins scratched beyond the surface of the indigenous culture. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, only broken images signaled that Christianity once made a bid for political relevance in the culture theater.<sup>6</sup>

The explanations are simple: Portugal was more interested in pepper and the kings in guns. Portugal soon found more pepper in India and with greater accessibility, making Benin irrelevant and the journey to Warri tedious. When the Oba of Benin failed to get guns, he sent away the priests and closed the school that was in the palace. Portuguese presence clung safely to the coast except in the Kongo- Soyo kingdoms;<sup>7</sup> they preferred to trade from their *feitoras* and hugged the unpopulated and safe islands such as Sao

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<sup>6</sup> F.C.Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans, 1485-1897* ( London, Longmans, 1969); Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: its religious impulse* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1983); O.U.Kalu, *The History of Christianity in West Africa* ( London, Longmans, 1980); C.R.Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire* (London, Hutchinson & Co., 1969); J.H.Parry, *Europe and a Wider World* (London, Hutchinson & Co., 1966 ed)

<sup>7</sup> Richard Gray, *Black Christians White Missionaries* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990).

Thome, Il Principe and Fernando Po. The cathedral built in Cape Verde for training missionaries for work in the mainland of Africa did not provide enough indigenous manpower to attempt daring relationships with Africans while the *padroado* agreements left the missionary enterprise under the sole control of the Portuguese monarch.

Geography and demography constitute important factors in the explanation. Portugal itself was too small to occupy the wide territories “discovered” especially in the face of competition from other Europeans such as the Danes, Dutch, French and English—the last two fought the Seven Years War while scavenging on Portuguese territories. Primal religion constituted the basis for governance; the monarch was a priest-king, an image that King James I of England strenuously sought to consolidate under the concept of divine rights of kingship. In this time frame, the force of the gospel was too weak to challenge a different conception of governance. Indeed, the gospel bearers soon started to enslave the prospective converts and slave trade not only overawed the character of Christian presence but gave it a bad press. In this period of the migration of the West to other lands, the rhetoric of Christendom soon lost actualization and remained mere rhetoric.

### **3. *God of the Empire: Godly politics and the civilization project***

This weak Christian presence changed significantly from the 19<sup>th</sup> century when abolitionists attacked slave trade and opened the space for evangelical revival to export a new spirituality into a wide range of cultures. Industrial Revolution provided more powerful technological tools that compelled a massive European migration into non-Western worlds. A certain feature was that evangelicalism was recruited as the civilizing component of the new endeavor. Thus, while it had the ambition of focusing on the sharing of the gospel in a more intentional manner than the Iberians dared in Africa, its political implication was just as compelling. Two contrary winds blew. Voluntarism in mission webbed a wide range of populations into the endeavor and enabled a different project that could counter the commercial self-interest in the imperial project. Colonialism had asset of identifiable goals; it set out to install a new economic order, legitimate trade and a new political order built on rational administrative structure that would be anchored with treaties with indigenous political leadership. But right from Fowell Buxton’s proposal to Parliament, *African Slave Trade and Its Remedy* in 1841, Christianity was imaged as the civilizing yeast in the colonial enterprise. God and empire were ineluctably bound because the culture contact could not be articulated in secular terms; it must be a fulfillment of a covenantal manifest destiny, a redemptive endeavor. Rudyard Kipling distinguished himself in propagating the alliance and potentials for collusion of Bible, flag and plough.<sup>8</sup> But the reality showed that the two did not always agree: on cultural policy, the colonial enterprise was short of manpower and distracted by the unsettled geopolitics in the period 1906-1946. During this period, nations fought themselves, the economies crashed and the hubris about the idea of progress cracked. The colonial enterprise needed indigenous cultural vitality: its social networks; indigenous political system and social control models in a policy dubbed as the Indirect Rule. The gospel bearers sought to supplant the indigenous religion and transplant Christianity by first providing a new and sustainable cultural infrastructure. The instruments employed

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Orbis, 1996); *The Cross-cultural process in Christian History: Studies in Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Orbis, 2000).

included a vast array of educational techniques; translation of the gospel into indigenous languages; engagement in cultural reconfiguration that touched every aspect of every day life-music, dance, art, agriculture, clothing, celebration of the rites of passage. In this cultural deconstruction, they were assisted by the fact that by the mid-century, specifically after the Berlin Conference of 1885 when the partition of Africa was conceived in the heat of national rivalries, European countries diminished the real powers of indigenous rulers and installed new structures of governance and personnel. Christian court alliances were now joined to a mass movement.

A second contested area was the content of education. Colonial governments wanted literate personnel for its offices and commercial agencies. Missions used schools as a means of evangelization and for creating an educated elite that would mediate the new civilization and gospel. Professor J.Ade Ajayi is quite perceptive in the subtitle of his book on Christian missions in Nigeria: *the making of an elite*.<sup>9</sup> Missions did not plan a high level of education and certain subjects for votaries. It was not that they dreaded the potentials of knowledge or presumed it to be a forbidden fruit that might open the natives' eyes. Education was a capital investment not a consumer good; they did not wish to encourage indulgence. The missions acquired much power through their control of social welfare apparatus. The empire removed its gloves and insisted upon peculiar versions of God. Christianities from different nations suffused Africa: some used a *volkskirche* ideology to experiment on indigenization; others simply assimilated. In the heat of the December sun in Nigeria, all sang the same song as in Europe about snow falling on snow in the bleak mid winter amidst howling frosty winds.

As imaged by His servants, the God of the Empire brought suffering and salvation. An iconoclastic trait demonized indigenous cultural production and implanted an Enlightenment worldview that separated faith and politics. The teaching was that a good Christian should avoid the political kingdom and seek first the kingdom of God. This did not mean that missionaries were not involved in politics; much to the contrary they engaged in the politics of collusion. There are always exceptions as some missionaries took the interests of their people to heart. For most, the core of their political theology was to keep the natives from engaging in matters above their heads. An ideology of trusteeship supplanted the idea of indigenous capacity. Ironically, both the making of an elite and the translation project bore subversive, unintended consequences. The new indigenous elite soon initiated programs for self-esteem and self-fulfillment. The backdrop is the complexity in colonial cultural presence: at one level it relied on the adaptation of indigenous African political institutions; at another, it diffused European institutions and at a third level, it disregarded subordinate African authorities, acknowledged no legal restraints on the exercise of power over Africans.<sup>10</sup> The despotic element resonated with the demonizing cultural policy of missionaries. The nationalists responded by employing the church as the free political space for voicing indigenous protests against white monopoly of decision-making processes; soon, some proposed an exit and formed African churches, a Christianity that dialogued more intimately with African cultural initiative. The genius of the movement was that it was not opposed to the God of the Empire or the cultural resources of the propagators; rather, it essayed to

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<sup>9</sup> JF Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria: The making of a new elite* (London, Longmans, 1965)

<sup>10</sup> Toyin Falola ed. *African politics in Postimperial Times: the essays of Richard L. Sklar* (Lawrenceville, Africa World Press, 2002): 507-508

appropriate these for indigenous progress. Dubbed as “Ethiopianism”, this form of racial and cultural nationalism had two impacts: it nurtured the resilience of primal vision that the policy of indirect rule had protected and missionaries attacked; it reared the new protagonists for political nationalism.

In the post World War II period, the missionaries’ educated elite who were the scions and protégés of the Ethiopians became the protagonists in the struggle for political independence. Religion, therefore, was a key element in the politics of de-colonization. It was the God of the Empire who bred the political leaders for the new Africa. Some missionaries who thought that their indigenous agents were ungrateful by participating in the politics of independence soon changed tacks by assuming that their accession to power would benefit the mission. Rivalry ensued as each mission supported their people. The Catholics, for instance, saw the handwritings on the wall clearly in the early 1950’s and intensified a program of indigenous ministerial formation. In some places, political parties emerged along denominational lines. In Nigeria, denominational differentiation served as a key aspect of electioneering in the early politics of independence.<sup>11</sup> A new version of politics of collusion was choreographed as Christian churches waltzed with nationalists. The leaders were invited to the ceremonies ushering a new political dispensation and presumed themselves to be a part of the enchanted circle. Meanwhile, translation nurtured religious initiative as the African Indigenous Churches challenged the pneumatic traditions of the mainline churches.<sup>12</sup> From the middle 1920’s, indigenous Christian initiative became a major feature of the Nigerian scariscape. However, neither its traditionalization of the gospel, liturgy and polity nor its eschatology yielded a theology of engagement but rather created safe havens where the victims of the colonial enterprise rebuilt their bruised bodies and spirits.<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. The Ethnic God: Indigenizing God and Politics**

Two major trends characterized the prevalent political theology of the post Independence period. Nationalism was so much in the air that T.A. Beetham wrote a book on *The New Africa* in which he wondered whether Christianity would survive or whether the renaissance of primal religion would overawe the young plant.<sup>14</sup> The God of Africa was a part of the nationalist rhetoric and propaganda. “Godianism” as a religious form emerged arguing that Africans had a concept of God before the white man tried to subvert it. It was as if there was a trend to return to the posture of God as a stranger but unlike the earlier period, this period co-opted the Christian God and essayed to image him as the ethnic God. E.A. Ayandele’s study of the impact of the missionary enterprise in modern Nigeria captures much of the nationalist mood and glorification of the ethnic God. He gave a high profile to those who saw the pernicious character of the God of the Empire and opposed its unrestrained insertion.<sup>15</sup> Cultural theologizing predominated in the churches. It was called *indigenization* project but the concept continued to spin

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<sup>11</sup> Elochukwu Amucheazi, *Church and Politics in Eastern Nigeria, 1945-1966* (Lagos, MacMillan Publishers, 1986)

<sup>12</sup> See, Allan Anderson, *African Reformation* (Lawrenceville, Africa World Press, 2000)

<sup>13</sup> O.U. Kalu, “The politics of religious sectarianism in Africa”, *West African Religion* (University of Nigeria), 16,1 (1975):13-25

<sup>14</sup> T.A. Beetham, *Christianity in the New Africa* (London, Pall Mall, 1967):ix

<sup>15</sup> E.A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria, 1842-1914: a political and social analysis* (London, Longman, 1965) see a discussion on the historiography in O.U. Kalu, *African Church Historiography: an ecumenical perspective* (Berne, Switzerland, 1988), chapter 1.

around *contextualization*, *incarnation* and recently *inculturation*. Each of the concepts signaled an awareness of the inadequacy of expressing what Africans wanted to say and what Europeans wanted to hear. Indigenization was attacked as suggesting that the gospel was native to the soil of Africa when everybody knew who brought it, from where, when and at what costs. Contextualization bore the imprint of liberation theologians who started from the context to the gospel and, according to some evangelicals as David Hasselgrave, ran the risk of undercutting the authority of the Scriptures, “consigning to them a secondary role in the contextualization process.”<sup>16</sup>

Parratt has argued in his *Reinventing Christianity (1995)* that the cultural theologizing in much of Africa could be distinguished from the political theology that emerged in Southern Africa in response to racist ideologies and practices. There was more to it than that because what is termed as cultural theologizing had political overtones. It depends on whose lenses were employed. Many of the nationalists who participated thought that they were serving a higher cause by confronting the God of the Empire with the ethnic God. They quickly moved from there to design a new political space that sought to confine Christianity, by profiling it as a handmaiden of imperialism. One-party states and dictatorships soon emerged amidst African cultural and political nationalism. The implosion of ‘theological’ states that sought to monopolize every sphere of life engulfed the continent. They experimented with new transformative ideologies such as African Socialism and Humanism and drank pints of Marxist ideology and rhetoric without full commitment to the tenets.<sup>17</sup> Coups followed coups. Westminster structure was experimented in Nigeria between 1960–1966; then the calabash of blood broke, washing it away in a bloody fratricide till 1970; thereafter long years of military rule followed till 1999 with a brief interlude, 1980-84. The Moslem challenge to Christianity changed the political landscape because all the military dictators were Moslem and they ruled with fiat and decrees. The disengagement between Christianity and the new politics of independence is a significant factor in the political theology of the period. Christianity was no longer associated with the center of power; it was contested in an increasingly pluralistic context. The danger was whether it was conscious of the change of status and marginality and how it responded.

A number of trends ensued in the internal politics: the ecumenism among Protestants that was foremost in the period 1960-1965 vanished by the end of the civil war in 1970; as it was driven out of the center stage it indulged more and more in an intentional refurbishing of denominational profiles.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the elite took part in conferences on African theology designed to plant Christianity into the soil of communities and thereby transforming their lives and understanding of the presence of the kingdom in their midst. In the 1980’s the Moslem challenge compelled a different form of ecumenical enterprise and by the 1990’s the scourge of poverty and abuse of human rights compelled the Roman Catholics to develop strategies for raising political consciousness among the laity. An aspect to this was the proliferation of NGOs. The end

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<sup>16</sup> Robert E. Coleman, ed. *Evangelism on the cutting edge* (New Jersey, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1986):75-88. see, p.78

<sup>17</sup> J.C. McKenna, *Finding a social voice: Church and Marxism in Africa* (New York, Fordham University Press, 1997)

<sup>18</sup> O.U. Kalu, *Divided People of God: church union movement in Nigeria, 1878-1965* (New York, NOK Publishers, 1978)

of the cold war changed the international political scene. Western countries moved against African dictators; by-passed corrupt military governments by channeling funds through NGO's to support civil societies; empower rural sectors and battered civil society and mobilize democratic forces. In this new dispensation the NGO-ization of churches became prominent because of the vast array of social network that could serve as a civil society's active force. Prominent was the church's lack of political consciousness. Years of collusion bred a laity that lacked the will and theology to engage the political space and utilize its numerical strength and its vast potentials.

There was another significant dimension best explained with the concept of social suffering. Just like individuals facing terminal illness, society responds to intense suffering by resorting to coping mechanisms that worked in past experience. Nigerians resorted to primal religious powers as enabling vitality for competing for scarce resources in the modern public space. The proliferation of chieftaincy titles marked the quest for legitimization by the elite; traditional medicine men would imbue them with supernatural powers; reinvention of traditional societies and cult groups followed apace; resurgence of membership in Western secret societies such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism; soon the public space was imbued by competing cults. To counter the membership of Christians in a number of these groups, mainline churches intensified the encapsulating strategy that compensated the elite with knighthoods clothed in rich symbolism rooted in an imagined history.<sup>19</sup> The password for knights, *diligence, devotion, and defense* served as a means of retaining members of the elite and mobilizing them as agents to covertly foster the church's influence in the public realm. A devoted knight pledged his fealty to respond to a brother in distress and to defend the church against its enemies.

### ***5. God of this world: a new theology of engagement***

This backdrop gives prominence to the new theology that emerged from the fringes of mainline churches and among the charismatic youth groups. Paul Gifford has argued that in Africa, the mainline churches had engaged in charitable institutions and were prominent in the Second Liberation of Africa that started as the western nations supported democratization and taming of predators.<sup>20</sup> In one country after another, conferences were held to negotiate new liberalized constitutions. Church leaders were selected to preside over such parleys. The perception here is that the dictators had decimated other arms of civil society; the churches survived because of their international connections; the new roles for the churches challenged them rather than confirmed their previous track records. In Nigeria, no such conferences were held as the dictator gave up inexplicably; some suggest that he was murdered; that his viagra was laced with poison as he breathed his last in the arms of Indian female consorts. More interesting is that Gifford imaged the charismatic and Pentecostal churches as led by vanguards of American right wing groups and supportive of dictators; that they were fronting for the American CIA.<sup>21</sup> The conspiracy theory has been rejected by most scholars and African

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<sup>19</sup> As an example of one of the knighthood orders, see, Christopher J. Kauffman, *Patriotism and Fraternalism in the Knights of Columbus: A history of the fourth degree* (New York, Herder and Herder, 2001)

<sup>20</sup> Paul Gifford, ed. *The Christian Churches and Democratization in Africa* (Leiden, EJB Brill, 1995); Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1995)

<sup>21</sup> Paul Gifford, *The New Crusaders* (London, Pluto Press, 1991) and *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington, IN, University of Indiana Press, 1998); J. Marishane, "Prayer, Profit and Power: US

creativity reaffirmed. The chronology of African charismatic and Pentecostal insurgence does not support an American origin.<sup>22</sup> But Gifford ignores the political theology that emerged. The perspective here is that the political theology at the center characterized by Christian Association of Nigeria that some described as “dangerous awakening”<sup>23</sup> was less radical than the theology that emerged from the fringes; and that the charismatic groups from the fringes soon radicalized the politics of the mainline churches.

Some explanations could be canvassed for rapid growth of charismatic and Pentecostal forces in the 1980-1990's: the fit into the primal worldview that accepted the spiritualized worldview and offered a new power in Christ to deliver people from witchcraft and other demonic forces; the instrumentalist perception that argues that the collapse of the economy and abuse of human rights made the upper and middle class just as vulnerable; all surged into charismatic churches that preached prosperity gospel and appropriated modernity; a religious perception traces the outpouring of the spirit in Nigeria from the 1970's and the increasing intensity that changed the shape of the religious landscape.<sup>24</sup> Two aspects deserve attention: the phenomenon caused the explosion of the numerical strength of Christianity in Nigeria. The character of the movement changed every decade: the emphasis on holiness and evangelism shifted to prosperity, upward mobility and faith/claim theology in the 1980's. By mid-1990's there was a sharp return to holiness ethics led by The Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship and the Intercessors for Africa. For our purposes, the Intercessors serve as the exponents of a political theology that soon flowed into the mainstream of the movement.

The Intercessors developed as a ministry among University of Ife students with the mentorship of Pa G.Elton, a Briton who had come to Nigeria in 1937 under the auspices of the British Apostolic Church. It has African and international networks with the emphasis to change the lives of nations through prayer.<sup>25</sup> First, it perceives prayer as political praxis and that the social, political and economic fortunes of nations can be reshaped through the power of prayer. Second, hindrances to individuals and nations occur through internal sources such as the sins, pollution and acts of disobedience that offend God and attract punishment or withholding of benefits. Spiritual forces also externally attack the fortunes of a nation. Pauline images of the powers suggest the hierarchy of forces that war against human beings and determine life fortunes. There are a number of dimensions to this assertion: the first is that individual and communal responsibilities explain poverty and suffering. Human beings bring misfortunes to themselves. Repentance becomes the key weapon. The events in human life are connected to events in the spiritual or supernatural realm. The things that are seen are made of things that are not seen. Some may want to blame social structures for the

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Religious Right and Foreign Policy” *Review of African Political Economy*,52, (1991):73-77; Sarah Diamond,*Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right* (Boston, South End Press,1989).

<sup>22</sup> O.U.Kalu, “Third Response: Pentecostalism and the Reconstruction of Christian Experience in Africa”*Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, University of Pretoria,24,2 (Dec.1998):1-34

<sup>23</sup> I.M. Enwerem, *A Dangerous Awakening: The Politicization of Religion in Nigeria* (Ibadan, IFRA,1995);M.H.Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan, Spectrum Press,1994); S.O.Ilesanmi, *Religious Pluralism and Nigerian State*(Athens, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> O.U.Kalu, “The Pentecostal/Charismatic Reshaping of the African Religious Landscape, 1970-2000” *forthcoming in Mission Studies: Jnl. of IAMS*,20,1,39,2003

<sup>25</sup> O.U.Kalu, “The Practice of Victorious life: Pentecostal Political Theology in Nigeria,1970-1996” *Mission: Jnl of Mission Studies (University of Ottawa, Canada)*,5,2 (1998):229-255

suffering of the vulnerable. Pentecostals image social structures as being capable of being hijacked by demonic forces. People serve as tools of such forces. Thus, certain leaders could be profiled as being possessed. Deliverance strategies for discerning the powers and liberating individuals from them; and re-sanctifying communities have evoked emotional discussions among theologians.<sup>26</sup> Third, they insist that Christians are not to pursue only personal salvation but have obligations to engage in the restoration of their nations. This theology of engagement denies the two kingdoms concept; reinterprets salvation to include liberation from material want, psychological needs; access to education or just about anything that dehumanizes or diminishes the full potentials of people.

There is a strand of ecological ethics in Pentecostal political theology of engagement. It is built on an understanding of a certain order in creation and human role as stewards; failure brings suffering. Within this perspective is a strong attention to land as gift and covenant. Sin and pollution break the covenant and compels the need for the deliverance of land.<sup>27</sup> Fourth, to explain how this works: Emeka Nwankpa, who is a lawyer, mines the primal worldview to show how our forefathers covenanted the land and all its people to various deities; how fratricide and collusion in slave trade polluted the land and how certain indigenous ethics such as the killing of twins brought evil upon the land. He moves from there to profile the forces within the land that could be the hindrances. It is a prophetic ministry that utilizes the full range of charismata as the tools for diagnosing the problems and proffering solutions. Another strong strand is the nationalist concern of the theology. Thus, Steve Okitika in his *The Battle for the Nations: Ministry of Interceding for Our Nation* catalogues the prophecies that the Lord gave them about Nigeria in a period of two decades.<sup>28</sup> As a priestly ministry of being watchmen for the nation, they listen and act out the spiritual guidance. For instance, in 1995, the Holy Spirit asked them to send intercessors to Liberia and they commissioned people who not only took gifts to the brethren in Liberia but also taught intercessory ministry and prayed for the recovery of the nation.<sup>29</sup> When the state intervened with military force under the ECOMOG program by West African nations, the saints sent a vanguard to deliver the land from the negative consequences from blood-shed and to invoke God to bring true peace.

Pentecostal theology is done in a Biblicist temper without the decorum familiar with critical scholarship and it uses the ingredients from indigenous religion to achieve contextualization. It mines the interior of primal worldview and images the entire structure of indigenous religion as the weave of covenants with the gods of the fathers. Ritual agents and rulers dedicate their lands and peoples to various deities. Festivals, rites of passage and the celebration of the agricultural cycle are rituals that re-energize the covenants periodically. Libations are tools for implicating the entire community, born and unborn to ancestral spirits. The conclusion follows that the poverty that has stunned the people and other misfortunes trailing families could be explained: they have offered

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<sup>26</sup> see, *Pneuma*, vol.13 is devoted to the controversy.

<sup>27</sup> Emeka Nwankpa, *Redeeming the Land* (Achimota, African Christian Press, 1994); Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: the language of power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984)

<sup>28</sup> Steve Okitika, *The Battle for Nations :the Ministry of Interceding for our Nation* (Lagos, Moinab Ltd., 1996)

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 160

to deities what belongs to God and the remedy is to confess, reverse the covenants and rededicate their lands to God so as to regain prosperity and recover the years that the locusts have eaten. In Village revival meetings, chiefs are invited to stand in the center of the congregations and confess the sins of idolatry in the past and commit the land to Christ.

Pentecostal cosmology links individual, social and political misadventures to the larger cosmic battle between God and His enemies. They declare that God has a purpose and counsel for individuals, families, communities and nations. By opening *doors* of the body and *gates* of communities and nations, demonic forces enter to possess, control and derail from God's munificent design. Contrary to some criticisms that Pentecostals see the devil in everything and refuse to acknowledge systemic evil, Pentecostals place responsibility on both individuals and social structures; on the rulers and the ruled. They also affirm that some of the problems are aspects of a larger cosmic consequence beyond human ken. Intercession becomes a strategy for self-reintegration, re-alignment of the path of destiny of society and nations; it serves as political praxis. Embedded is a veiled iconoclasm and demonization of indigenous culture; it asserts that the primal vision has failed and anew dispensation is needed. But because it works from the interior of the worldview, the rural populations appreciate its critique and often accept the proffered solution.

Intercession serves as a form of political critique at the national level. They accuse the military of shedding blood and militarizing the society. People begin to imitate its culture of force in social relationship. Using a certain exegesis, they explain that from Cain's example, when blood is shed, the earth withholds its increase or economic collapse occurs. They designed a program to teach civil servants and public officials how to govern with good conscience; their sins and corruption serve as lightning rod that brings hunger in the midst of plenty. They emphasized that born again Christians must become detribalized but re-organized to work as a new community. This attacks the dysfunctional force of ethnicity. From here it has been a short step to the insistence that Christians should pray the righteous into the corridors of power.

There is more: a certain nationalistic tinge rings through the rhetoric; expressed metaphorically that Africa is like a gun that God will use to deal with His enemies and Nigeria is located in the position of the trigger. Nigeria has a special place in God's redemptive will for Africa. Its huge human and mineral resources must be redeemed and made available for this noble use. Therefore, the poverty in the midst of plenty; disorganization in the midst of vast resources must be rejected. This is the generation to pray Nigeria into its proper place! Such rhetoric has captured imagination. But along with this is an internal debate about prophecy in political matters; whether personal predilections do not influence prophecies. Another angle is about false mercenary prophets who dupe the politicians. As the numbers of Charismatic and Pentecostal groups bulge, their political importance has not been lost on the political elite who urge prayers and political support. For instance, *This Day News* reported on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2003 about the crusade by Reinhard Bonnke:

*The leader of the Christ for All nations (CFAN) who has been organizing crusades in parts of Africa, on arrival headed straight for the office of the Governor Adeniyi Adebayo of Ekiti State where he was received by the Deputy Governor, Chief Paul Alabi. Bonnke prayed for the governor, his deputy,*

*members of the state executive council and civil servants who stormed the state conference center to catch a glimpse of the evangelist. Chairman of the Local Organising Committee for the Great Gospel Crusade in Ekiti State, Rev. Kunle Salami, expressed appreciation to the state government for offering to host Bonnke during the crusade.*

This report has many intriguing dimensions including the popularity of prayer crusade in the state; its value for elections; the specific role of the government in funding it and the salience of religious actors in the public space. Specifically, the protagonists in the center are of the charismatic Pentecostal type.

Nigeria entered the year 2003 with the drum beats of elections that will be held in April 2004. Unlike any election in the nation's experience, religion is at the center. One index is to follow the number of religious items that appear in all the newspapers: in the editorial column, letters to the editor, syndicated pages and other commentaries and specific articles about religious matters and religious leaders commenting on religious matters.<sup>30</sup> All newspapers carry an unusually large numbers of religious items daily because the Presidential and other elections are being fought on religious lines. The incumbent President, Olusegun Obasanjo, claims that he became born again during his years in prison under the former dictator Sanni Abacha. He has written two books including a collection of sermons. He constantly attends revival meetings and patronizes charismatic pastors and causes. For instance, in 2001, when the Gideon Bible had problems in clearing containers of Bibles from the wharf because of high duties, they appealed to a born again President. Instead of ordering the Port Managers to allow the goods without duties, he paid the three million *naira* (ca. \$30,000) duties from his personal purse. He is pitted to a Moslem retired General and former Head of State, Buhari. Once again, religion has been given a front seat in the Nigerian public space. The contest is heated because the Charismatic and Pentecostal forces have in the last few years become actively engaged in politics. The Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria as well as other mainline churches mobilized. The Lagos branch of the PFN announced that four million of their people registered during the Voters' Registration exercise of 2002. As one argued, they do not wish to pray down God's blessings on the nation only to allow unbelievers to benefit! Their political ideology images a God of this world and this is a long distance from the missionary political theology that they inherited. The Moslems are also politically conscious and assured that sharia will only be protected by a Moslem leader.

In conclusion: there has been a tremendous numerical growth of Christianity in Nigeria in the post-independence period. A significant part of the growth occurred after the civil war propelled by the charismatic and Pentecostal forces. All Christian forms have benefited. The charismatization of the mainline churches has a number of implications including the acceleration of growth and a higher level of faith commitment. Instrumentalist explanations do not negate the impact. Economic collapse in the last decade of the last millennium has decimated the middle class and the professionals. religious commitment provided solace and a survival strategy; it bred moral integration and provided a caring network. The demographic shift in the class patronage of

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<sup>30</sup> see, [www.gamji.com](http://www.gamji.com) that carries all the Nigerian newspapers. See, the Bonnke story in [www.thisdayonline.com/news/20030115news20.html](http://www.thisdayonline.com/news/20030115news20.html). There is an interesting long commentary on "The church and southeast politics" in [www.mtrustonline.com/dailytrust/opinion1522003.htm](http://www.mtrustonline.com/dailytrust/opinion1522003.htm)

charismatic and Pentecostal groups has immense social and political implications. Christian population constitutes a critical mass in the election process. Their mobilized and committed ideological posture gives them an edge over centrifugal competing forces. As the movement has shifted into the rural areas, its mobilized power has increased and its ability to encompass the infra-political zone has enabled it to articulate a deeper level of political theology. It has also essayed to contest the power node of the primal religious leaders. Chiefs are imaged as the stumbling blocks if not the source of the misfortunes of the youth and upward mobile sectors of the population. Born again people urge their village chiefs to make open confessions and re-dedicate the land to God so that they themselves may succeed in the competition for wealth in the nation. They argue that if they prosper, the village will prosper; if they fail, their villages will be desolate.

There are a number of significant changes in the political space: in the quest to get Christians into positions of power, the discussion is hardly around denominational affiliations. The category has changed to the born again mark. It is as if the denominational politics of the 1960-70's failed and only the trans-ethnic, non-denominational categories will suffice. The political class has identified with charismatic and other Christian affiliations more than before. One explanation is that the political class is made up of professionals whose businesses collapsed with the economy and politics is the only avenue to recovery in a context in which the Federal Government controls the resources of the nation. Most of the elite live on one form of Government patronage or the other. Those without support from military Government failed. Indeed, most of the financiers of the political system in Nigeria are connected with the military whose members were able to accumulate vast wealth and therefore could control the political system. Thus, the demographic change in the patronage of charismatic religiosity means that people with influence could give it a higher political profile. The danger is that they could hijack the movement from its Godly cause unless the charismatic spirituality embeds a vigilant spirituality that could detect the danger. This was the point in the interview given by the Chairman of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, Lagos State, Bishop Lanre Obembe on Friday, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2003. He warned against dupes and charlatans within the fold and politicians who may wish to exploit the organization:

*“from available records, over four million Pentecostal members registered during the last voters’ registration exercise;...in the past, Pentecostal Christians suffered undue hardship as they were marginalized in the running of the state. But now, with the dynamic and responsive leadership that God has given PFN, it was ready for constructive negotiation to enable its people hold elective and political offices. We are open and ready to negotiate directly with political parties and contestants about sharing equitable distribution of offices and resources. PFN will no longer be marginalized.”<sup>31</sup>*

The intentional mobilization in the political arena and battle rhetoric provide materials for examining an emergent form of political theology in contemporary Nigeria.

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<sup>31</sup> [www.guardiannewsngr.com/news/article23](http://www.guardiannewsngr.com/news/article23)

**President, Academic Provost of the College and Director of the Institute for the honor, kindness and gracious hospitality.**

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