

Appendix 47:**Repositioning Religion, Faith And Ethics For A Sustainable Economic Transformation Of The Nigerian People****By****Rev. Dr. Sunday Bobai Agang**
bobaiagang@hotmail.com**A Paper Presented At The Kaura Community Economic Summit, September 7-8/2007 By Rev. Dr. Sunday Bobai Agang, The Tim Lann And Langham Professor Of Christian Ethics, Theology And Public Policy, ECWA Theological Seminary, Jos.**
Introduction**Published on Gamji website, December, 2007**

The faith, ethic and theology of a people are formed by the religious narrative (story) that shapes their moral values and social practices. In *The Measure of a Man* (1959), Martin Luther King, Jr., cites H.G. Wells who says, “The man who is not religious begins at nowhere and ends at nothing.” Similarly King observes, “Religion is like a mighty wind that breaks down doors and makes that possible and even easy which seems difficult and impossible” (King 1959, 2001:47).

On *African Independent Television* (AIT) 8.00PM News, The National Orientation Agency said that Nigeria’s value system was in a desperate need for reorientation if Nigeria wants to meet the present pressure to be one of the topmost economies in the world by 2020 (The National Orientation Agency, in *African Independent Television* (AIT) 8.00PM News, Saturday, November 10, 2007). This is coming at the heels of the recognition that our past values which really cushioned body polity have been endangered to the extent that we are reaping the fruit of corrupted and distorted leadership in the country.

By way of contributing to this nostalgia, this paper intends to particularly look at the role of religion in facilitating a sustainable economic transformation of the Nigerian people. But you may ask, do we really need religion, faith and ethics in economic planning? What has happened to religion in that it now requires repositioning? How can religion, faith and ethics help promote good economic

attitudes? What have religion, faith and ethics got to do with economic matters? These questions will be my dialogue partners as I seek to unravel the place of religion in Nigeria's determination to have economic break through.

I suppose there are many compelling reasons for repositioning religion for a viable and sustainable economic transformation. For instance, the Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), Charles Chukwuma Soludo has expressed, time without number, his desire to make Nigeria's economy one of the 20 largest economies in the world by 2020. In "15 Banks to Hit N255b Capital Base December—CBN" Tom Chieahemen and Oluyinka Akintunde pointed out that on October 24, 2007, Soludo reiterated that Nigeria's quest to become one of the 20 largest economies in the world by 2020 has imposed on the CBN a sense of urgency to mainstream the economy as the international financial centre of choice and Africa's hub." (*Independent*, October 26, 2007, A2).

In as much as this goal is worth pursuing, the critical concern must be the plight of the poor who are already at an economically disadvantaged situation. In other words, how is this policy going to benefit the 80% of the Nigerian people who are already below the poverty level? How can the government assure its citizenry that the gap between the rich and the poor will be bridged? If the current attitude of Government officials and the elite of focusing on personal aggrandizement and the need of the poor second continue I doubt the possibility of ever bridging the gap. Government tends to tell us what it thinks we want to hear. But we know that in most cases government officials are only bend on fulfilling their goal of maintaining the status quo. That is, maintenance of their hold on political and economic power and not the poor's interest. That attitude encourages injustice, resulting in general uncertainty which negatively hinders economic freedom, justice and order which is required for the growth and sustenance of the economy for all and sundry.

Therefore we need a true and an unadulterated religion: monotheistic religion. A monotheistic religion, as a creator of moral values, has the capacity to encourage social and economic order, freedom and justice. Hence this paper is pushing for the need to re-instill value system, particularly, character virtues such as honesty, truth-telling, trust, hard work, selfless service, moral rectitude, integrity, God-fearing, compassion, love and justice. This paper also wants the Nigerian people to grasp the symbiotic relationship between faith and economy.

The Nigerian Situation

In Nigeria, and in fact in much of Africa, religion is the hope of our people. As Barrister Bob James tells us, in Northern Nigeria, “for most people, their religious convictions are their most cherished assets. For them, it is a matter of life and death” (James 1997:21). Thus it has been said, and rightly so, that Nigerians and Africans are very religious. Ironically, we tend to leave religion in the periphery in our discussion of crucial matters. In other words, we do not always make a deliberate attempt to include religious perspectives in our discussion of desperate life-affecting matters, such as the issue of socioeconomic or sociopolitical transformation of our people. This neglecting of religion in the scheme of things emerges from the assumption that religion is a private matter and must therefore be confined to the home, the church or the mosque.

Therefore this topic, repositioning religion as a strategy for a sustainable economic transformation of Nigerian communities is timely. For as Nelleke Bosshardt rightly says, “The Gospel is the great resource, inspiration and grace for transformation from which both the roots for change can grow deeply and the fruitful tree can grow over time and be a source of health for many!” (Email note to me September 2007). Surely, religion can become a delivering resource when it is understood in all its truth. But when it is misunderstood it becomes “a weapon of mass destruction” as the Nigerian situation illustrates.

Our Context and the Larger Context

In the past two or more decades we have witnessed not only the polarization of religion but the distortion of religion. Since then religion has often been used as an instrument of divide and rule, resulting in religion becoming a weapon of massive social and economic destructions. Niels Kastfelt has very well given us more insight into our contemporary context. Kastfelt points out, Over the last decade the issue of religion and politics has been in the headlines in Nigeria, as well as in the international media. And regrettably so, since the people of Nigeria have experienced a long series of violent and bloody confrontations between religious groups.... [C]ausing the death of thousands of innocent Nigerians (Kastfelt 1994:ix).

Similarly, Samuel Huntington (1998) argues that the major world conflicts today are increasingly religiously and culturally biased.

These two studies have demonstrated that religion has become a critical matter in our contemporary world. This is why religion needs repositioning in Nigeria in particular and in Africa at large.

In this paper I am pushing for a thicker (more substantial) religious perspective that would allow for human flourishing and the harnessing of a social and economic lifestyle which fosters God's reverence in every aspect of our community's polity, truthful dealing with one another, trust and dependence on each other, respect for the God-given human dignity and human rights of each other, and the pursue of love, justice as well as peaceful coexistence. A misplaced religious perspective makes people see and treat others as less than human beings. Consequently, they deprive their victims of the basic goods of life by reducing their self-respect and their sense of dignity to nothingness. How can Nigeria become one of the 20 largest economies of the world in 2020 if her politicians and religious groups continue to treat others as if they are things rather than persons (King 1959: 20)? Religion kills when it becomes an instrument of manipulation and a way of maintaining the status quo.

Religious Manipulation in Nigeria

Religious manipulation has become the order of the day in Nigeria. One of the reasons is because certain persons in society feed on the back of victims of religious violence. As such, they hijack and manipulate religion in Nigeria to their own advantage; but to the detriment of the poor whose only hope is their religion. But you may ask which religion gets manipulated? The plain truth is, all religions. Jan Boer points out, "No religion is immune to manipulation—and neither are religious leaders, whether they be Christians or Muslims" (Boer 1994:6). Boer observes that this class of people operating under a hidden political agenda expect religion to "produce a people with high personal morality, a great sense of duty and obedience, but certainly not inclined to radical social thinking, let alone action" (Boer 1989:3).

A religion that is used as a tool for political manipulation creates structures of social, economic, and political injustice as well as perpetuates poverty, resulting in long-lasting frustration, hopelessness and wanton destruction of lives and properties in society.

A misguided religious perspective arises from the lack of paying attention to the interactive connection of religion and politics in our national history. The

interaction between religion and politics in Nigeria has been well documented. In *Religious Pluralism and the Nigerian State* (1997), Simeon O. Ilesanmi argues that there is no one single ethnic group that does not have some religious impact in its historic roots in Nigeria. Ilesanmi's work stresses the fact that religion in Nigeria plays an enormous role in the formation of moral values and cultural and social identity in all of the original three geopolitical regions of Nigeria (Ilesanmi 1997:119). Ilesanmi's study is very insightful. It provides us with the tool to look at the past role of religion in this country, particularly, how religion has positively interacted with the polity of Nigeria to the extent of helping government achieve its purpose of being: maintainer of order, guarantor of freedom and insurer of social justice. However, Ilesanmi's study left out the other vital area of religious interaction: the economy.

In *Nigeria: The Way Forward: Proceedings and Policy Recommendations of the First Obafemi Awolowo Foundation Dialogue*, (1993), Omafume F. Onoge observes that "The two most lively domains of the Nigerian social formation today are the polity and the economy, both structural institutional and procedural dimensions" (Onoge 1993:xiii). Yet in most cases the interaction between religion and the economy is often ignored. Rather, there is undue emphasis on the vital role that religion has played and is continuing to play in the Nigerian polity.

Religion permeates every aspect of human behavior. It is all-embracing because of its natural ability to provide a transcendent moral perspective. It connects finite men and women with the infinite. In his article, "Religious Background of the Old Testament" in *Foundation for Biblical Interpretation* (1994), E. Ray Clendenen says, "The world is filled with various value systems and worship system which direct our lives" (Clendenen in Dockery ed. 1994:274). This is nowhere clearer than in Nigeria where the various groups of the over four hundred ethnic groups used to worship various systems but today have been largely focused on Islam or Christianity as well as maintaining some degree of the traditional religions.

The term religion in this paper refers specifically to the two monotheistic religions—Christianity and Islam—and their interaction with the economic dimension of our social structure in Nigeria. Religion as Clendenen rightly defines it is "that aspect of human culture constituting the response of individuals [groups] to the prevailing concepts of the supernatural. This includes what people believe about the supernatural and how their beliefs directly affect their actions [and practice] (Clendenen in Dockery 1994: 275). That is to say, religion is part of the social system which gives a society its social and cultural identity, "self-affirmation and self-definition" (Ilesanmi 2003). Monotheistic religion provides a richer and

thicker (more substantial and broader) narrative which encourages the entrenchment of economic order, freedom and justice in any given society or community.

The traditional religions, on the other hand, lack this ability because “there were many gods; none could possess unlimited wisdom or power. The activities of one god would often be counteracted by the activities, opposition, or deceit of another.... The divine will was thus fragmented so that a person could never be safe and secure from divine displeasure and punishment, since the will of one god may very well conflict with that of another” (Clendenen 1994: 275). In contrast, monotheistic religion provides both political and economic certainty. In worship, economic and political realities are cast in new light. In monotheistic religion God is seen as the God of political, social and economic justice and God protects the oppressed from their political and economic injustice. Thus religious, economic and political perceptions are intrinsically and intriguingly connected.

The hope for a sustainable transformation of the Nigerian economy must not ignore the vital role of religion as one of the cardinal dimensions of the Nigerian social landscape. I am arguing for an enabled moral agency in our quest for economic transformation. A disabled moral agency will only lead to economic oppression, political manipulation, resulting in the destruction of human flourishing.

Thus an authentic understanding of religion is desperately needed in Nigeria. I would argue that an unadulterated religious perspective encourages the creation of an inclusive community where people are encouraged to trust and depend on each other, to respect the God-given human dignity and human rights of each other and to meaningfully exercise their social responsibility and obligation to each other. In other words, a healthy religious perspective provides a narrative that is necessary for the creation of not only a community of moral character, moral conscience and moral conviction but also a community of social resilience that facilitates active engagement in economic activities, resulting in a well informed radical social thinking and action. In sum, a true and pure religion fosters a community where there is recognition that this world is not all that is but that while we are here God has given us the mandate or the responsibility of making the world habitable to all and sundry: living in peace with one another and the environment.

The Need for a Model

African countries are searching for a paradigm that would deliver their peoples from the spiral cobweb of religious violence which causes enormous economic destruction of lives and properties. Would the Nigerian people be willing to provide this model? I am simply arguing that the Nigerian people needs to show the rest of this continent what it means to respect our rights to religious, social, economic and political freedom. But do we have the capacity to provide such a paradigm? I think we do. For as a people we have shared values and shared understanding which if harnessed could enable us to foster an inclusive community.

Speaking from a Christian perspective, Jesus Christ should be our model of Christian faith and practice. In his life and ministry on earth Jesus embodied (exemplified) God's love and God's *shalom* (peace) community. For example, those who were outcast (the tax collectors and prostitutes), were delivered from a community where they were excluded to an inclusive community which fostered its members hope for the future. An inclusive community offers hope for future generations because it is not afraid of truth-telling or dialogue with its neighbors. It shuns deception and corruption in all forms of interpersonal relationships. And for the sake of love, justice and peace it is willing to go beyond its comfort zone. As Boer rightly puts it,

The Christian religion is not designed to aid only its adherents; it is meant to benefit all citizens. [Therefore], if the Christian religion is going to encourage the liberation of the poor, the benefits should not be restricted to Christians, for millions of peasants adhering to either Traditional Religion or Islam are equally oppressed and equally in need of emancipation. Any attempt on the part of Christians to restrict the benefits of Christ in the area of liberation and rights will eventually backfire and lead to the accusation that, while they seek their own emancipation for freedom they will end up in new forms of oppression (Boer 1989: 6).

The Role of Religion in the Economic Transformation of the Nigerian people

Religion is the most important of all the many ways in which Nigerian citizens “get involved” in the life of their community and society. Therefore our religious life must equally impact our social, cultural, political and economic life. But how can our religion really promote economic transformation?

1. We must let religion play its powerful influence not only on individual character and action but also on our communal life as a people.
2. We must be willing to recognize the fact that religion is the foundation for a just economic transformation. Religion provides the needed ingredients for sustainable business ventures in the world: love, justice and peace. Religion helps persons in their pursuit of profit to abstain from unscrupulous activities that are in many cases detrimental to human flourishing. Religion, if wholly understood in all its truth, encourages justice, love and peace in all human relationships.
3. Through worshipping God religion ushers the worshipers into a way of life that encompasses economic perspectives. As Robert Bellah et al observes, Worship also reiterates the obligations that the community has undertaken, including the biblical insistence on justice and righteousness, and on love of God and neighbor, as well as the promises God has made that make it possible for the community to hope for the future.... through reminding the people of their relationship to God, it establishes patterns of character and virtue that should operate in economic and political life as well as in the context of worship (Bellah 1985: 227).

Therefore, in order to reposition religion for a sustainable economic transformation we must be willing to relate biblical faith and practice to the whole of our contemporary life—cultural, social, political, and economic—not just to personal and family morality (Bellah 1985: 237).

4. Religion helps us to realize that hoarded wealth breeds frustration because the victims always feel humiliated. This humiliation is the key to all kinds of violence. As the author of the bestseller book, *The World is Flat*, Thomas Friedman argues, “It is when people or nations are humiliated that they really lash out and engage in extreme violence” (Friedman, 2005: 400).
5. True and pure religion promotes peace which is an important ingredient in economic matters. Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith have correctly pointed out that “[T]he failure to recognize the place of religion in the dynamics of economies and peacemaking has too often resulted in misunderstandings, inappropriate and sometime disastrous policies and actions, and most importantly, missed opportunities” (Coward and Smith 2004: 280).

6. We must therefore realize that repositioning religion for the economic transformation of Nigeria is the responsibility of all and sundry. For example,

Coward and Smith argue that the “Responsibility for discerning and developing appropriate and effective roles for religion and religious actors belongs jointly to political, religious, and nongovernmental organizations and their leaders” (Coward and Smith, 2004:280). Coward and Smith believe that “Expanding the community to which religious principles and virtues are applied is critical to the achievement of world peace” (Coward and Smith 2004:281).

Repositioning religion for a sustainable economic transformation in Nigeria would entail encouraging interfaith and interdenominational interactions. Interfaith and interdenominational activities offer opportunities to collaborate, share the work of economic development that results in peace building. “Teaming up with other religious and nonreligious actors (entrepreneurs) also models the behaviors required to promote peace” (Coward and Smith 2004: 290-291). Interfaith initiatives also offer opportunities for the personal and interpersonal transformation required to build peace” which is a necessary ingredient in economic transformation (Coward and Smith 2004: 291).

Conclusion

As I conclude this essay, I would like to call on our political leaders to pay attention to the role that religion plays in many people’s lives in this country. They need to understand how religion permeates belief and behavior and factor religion into their thinking, economic policies, and actions. “Political leaders should give careful thought to integrating religion as a force for economic peace into political and civic life, and then try to develop constructive roles for religion and its adherents in making and executing policy” (Coward and Smith 2004:292). Finally, I would like to stress the fact that economic transformation depends very much upon cultural or religious values and not just upon the application of methods, models, theories and tools. Religion can influence economic transformation in the following ways:

- 1) Religious prescriptions of conduct, especially the more realistic ones, could have a direct impact on economic activities;
- 2) Religious ideas could be a source for the legitimization of social and political institutions, and
- 3) Through religious sanctioning, human motivations and interests might be channeled in the direction of different types of goals which can positively affect

the paths to a sustainable economic transformation. If Nigeria truly wants a sustainable economic transformation, “Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord” (Lamentation 3:40).

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