

**THEOLOGY AT THE SERVICE
OF NATIONAL UNITY**

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Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria

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*The Prophetic Role of Theologians
in the Service of the Nation: Insights
From the Prophets of Ancient Israel*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is aimed at highlighting the importance of the theological enterprise for the overall welfare, security, progress and benefit of the nation and of its citizens. It takes its inspiration from the positive contributions of the Israelite prophets during the nation's days of great political and religious crises. The paper proposes the thesis that the work of the theologian is indispensable for the survival and unity of the nation. Therefore, it challenges modern day theologians to assume their prophetic role towards the nation. The role of prophets in the history of Israel far exceeds what many generally know or think of them. As mediators of God's covenant, they are interpreters of experiences and faith in the light of the revealed word. This role embraces all the spheres of life of the nation: religious, political and social. Their role as interpreters highlights also their function as theologians. This paper aims at exploring the exercise of this function by the prophets in the task of nation building.

PROPHETS: INTERPRETERS OF THE NATION'S EXPERIENCE OF TRAGEDY

The significance of the work of prophets as interpreters could be assessed against the background of the crises that engulfed Israel following the destructions and exiles that marked her history in different eras. The emergence and survival of Israel from these crises was largely due to the prophets who helped Israel interpret and understand these tragedies and proffered answers in the light of their ancestral faith. We shall highlight in the following paragraphs how they exercised this function.

THE ASSYRIAN CRISIS AND THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE
The Assyrian aggression on Judah in the late eighth century B.C. presented the first major crisis that threatened the national religion to its foundations. The crisis stemmed from the internal problems that led to the destruction of Samaria in 722/721 B.C.: Socio-economic ills complicated by the Assyrian exactions, a progressive disintegration of the ancestral social patterns and the neglect of the obligations of the Sinaitic covenant.¹ Following this crisis, the people accused Yahweh of not having protected the nation in spite of their meticulous cultic observance (Isa 1:10-20). However, the people's absolute confidence in Yahweh's promises to David which legitimated Judah's monarchy tend to obscure the moral obligations arising from the Mosaic covenant. It was believed and cultically affirmed that Yahweh had chosen Zion as his dwelling and promised an eternal dynasty to David² and that the dynasty would grow to such heights that kings of the earth would come fawning at the feet of the Davidic kings (Ps 72:8-11). The events of the late eighth century called to question this national ideology. Apparently, the ongoing existence of the nation was in jeopardy, the end of the dynasty was inevitable, and the Assyrian god had taken possession of the temple of Israel's God. This event presented Judah with two choices: to disbelieve Yahweh and his promises or to give him a blind and fanatical confidence.³

Tormented both by his inaugural experience and vision of Yahweh's holiness and by the depth of the national sin (Isa 6:1), Isaiah of Jerusalem addressed himself to classes of people who contributed to making the nation vulnerable to the Assyrian conquest and menace. He attacked the dishonest wealthy, powerful people who connived with the judges to rob the poor of their rights.⁴ He assailed the upper classes who were morally decadent, concerned only for material possessions and pleasures, and without moral standards or faith in God.⁵ He likened the nation's inability to

¹ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, (Westminster: John Knox, 2000), 288.

² 2 Sam 7:14-16; Ps 2:7-11; 89:1-4.

³ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 288-290.

⁴ Isa 1:21-23; 3:13-15; 5:8, 23; 10:1-4.

⁵ Isa 3:164:1; 5:11-22; 5:18-21.

respond to God's grace in righteous behaviour to a well-tended vineyard, which ought to have produced good grapes but did not (Isa 5:1-7). Due to Judah's crimes against justice, her scrupulous cults are unacceptable and offensive to Yahweh (Isa 1:10-20). Isaiah tried in vain to change the political policies of Ahaz (735/733 B.C.) who apparently showed lack of faith in the national theology that he affirmed in his official cult (Isa 7:9). Isaiah depicted the dire consequences of surrendering the nation's independence to the Assyrian king.⁶ Isaiah, further, opposed Hezekiah in his reliance on Egyptian help⁷ and affirmed him when he finally trusted in Yahweh's promises to Zion (Isa 30:15). Isaiah, therefore, viewed Assyria as God's instrument of judgment (Isa 5:26-29).

Like his contemporary Isaiah, Micah assailed corrupt leaders and greedy men of Jerusalem who dispossess the poor (Mic 2:1-10), who did not dispense justice and were guilty of cruel oppression (Mic 3:1-3.9-11). He also opposed the prophets and the clergy whose only concern was their wellbeing (Mic 3:5-11). Since the people felt secure in the unconditional promises of the royal theology, which assured them that Yahweh dwelt in their midst, they did not realize like Micah that because of the evils committed in it, Jerusalem was as bad as Samaria and equally under judgment.⁸ Micah criticized the confidence of the people in the royal theology and reminded them that the multiplication of cultic piety cannot avert the punishment due to their breach of the covenant stipulations (Mic 6:1-8). The spiritual crises occasioned by the Assyrians' destruction of Jerusalem, the humiliation of God's people and the seeming inability of God to defend his Temple raised the question as to the validity of God's promises. Faced with this theological problem, the prophets tried to harmonize two theologies, which had been brought into conflict: the royal Davidic covenant and the Sinaitic covenant. The former implies the inviolability and indestructibility of Zion owing to Yahweh's ever abiding presence and the later emphasizes Yahweh's past gracious

⁶ Isa 7:18-25; 8:5-8.

⁷ Isa 28:14-22; 30:1-7; 12; 31:1-3.

⁸ Mic 1:2-9; 3:12.

acts and moral demands. According to the interpretation of the prophets, the Davidic covenant is only apparently unconditional. It harmonizes with the Sinaitic through the emphasis on the possibility of chastisement inherent in it (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 89:30-32). The popular understanding of the Davidic covenant is that the punitive clause could be avoided through intensive cultic activity that would appease God's anger and win his favor.⁹ The preaching of Isaiah and Micah was a defence of God's promises, a rejection of the national theology as popularly held and their reinterpretation of it in the light of the Sinaitic covenant. Therefore, God's chastisement of Israel through the rod of Assyria does not revoke his promises. Isaiah's assurance to Hezekiah that Jerusalem would not be taken was vindicated by events and by the sudden collapse of Assyria. It confirmed the national theology and its promises in the people's mind and the inviolability of Zion became a fixed dogma. Although the Judah of Isaiah's time could not meet up with the moral obligations of the national theology as reinterpreted, the national hope survived because the prophets pushed it into a future when an ideal Davidic king would arise and the promises fulfilled for a future remnant. Isaiah's preaching marked the beginning of the restless search for a remnant, a new Israel.¹⁰

THE BABYLONIAN CRISIS AND THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE

In the successive years, other dramatic incidents happened which brought the spiritual basis of the nation to further jeopardy. Josiah's reform (622 B.C.), by far the most thorough in Judah's history,¹¹ reconfirmed the profound moral note that had been injected into the national theology. However, the death of Josiah marked the end of Judah's independence and placed the nation before a new danger. Josiah's tragic death and the attendant national humiliation, first by Egypt, then by Babylon, questioned the Deuteronomic covenant theology since compliance with its demands through the Josianic

⁹ Isa 6:14; 8:11; 14:7-9.19-22.

¹⁰ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 297.

¹¹ Cf. 2 Kings 22:323:25; 2 Chron 34:135:19.

reform did not forestall the disaster as promised. Under Jehoiakim, the reform lapsed and public morality deteriorated (Jer 5:26-29; 7:1-15), and the national theology began to triumph once more in a more distorted form.¹² However, as the Babylonian army overran Philistia in 604 B.C., Judah was thrown into confusion and without hesitation, Jehoiakim transferred allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24:1). When he foolishly withdrew from Babylon and submitted to Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar came against the nation and destroyed it (598/597 B.C.). He exiled the new king, Jehoiachin, the entire royal house and the cream of the country's leadership (2 Kings 24:10-17), and installed Zedekiah in his place. Meanwhile, the revival of the national theology led to fierce and uncontrolled patriotism and irrevocable rebellion which outweighed Zedekiah's control. Babylon's response to this development (2 Kings 25) brought the state of Judah to its final end in 587/6 B.C. The works of Jeremiah and Ezekiel should be interpreted against this political and historical background.¹³

Living through the reforms of Josiah and the final demise of the kingdom, Jeremiah realized that the reform had not been implemented by Josiah's successors; it had effected no repentance (Jer 4:3f; 8:4-7) and the demands of covenant had been lost behind cultic externals (Jer 7:21-23). He therefore affirmed that the Babylonian humiliation was not a denial of the Deuteronomic covenant but an illustration of it, since the nation brought disaster on itself by forsaking Yahweh (Jer 2:16). Jeremiah rejected the national confidence in the Davidic promises (Jer 21:12-22:30) on the grounds that the state had failed on its obligations to the Yahwistic faith. He preached that Yahweh would abandon his house and give it over to destruction as he had done the Ark shrine of Shiloh.¹⁴ He was accused of both treason and blasphemy since his rejection of national theology was an indirect accusation of Yahweh of faithlessness to his covenant (Jer 26:7-11).

¹² Jer 5:12; 7:4; 14:13.

¹³ Cf. Bright, *A History of Israel*, p331-339.

¹⁴ Cf. Jer 7:1-15; 26:1-6.

Ezekiel likewise announced Judah's doom as the righteous judgment of Yahweh. He preached among the exiles for twenty years (Ezek 29:17; 40:1) with the authentic voice of Israel's normative faith. Unlike Jeremiah (2:2f) and Hosea (2:15f) who had idealized the wilderness days, Ezekiel declared that his people had been corrupt from the beginning.¹⁵ He regarded the nation as dross to be hauled into the furnace of Yahweh's wrath (22:17-22) and declared that even the last remnant of Israel was to be destroyed.¹⁶ Ezekiel interpreted the national hope as sternly as Jeremiah did. However, he did not reject it entirely but he tore it from its roots and hauled it into the future. His vision of the departure of Yahweh's glory from the Temple¹⁷ implied that Yahweh has cancelled his choice of Zion and was no longer in the midst of his people. The humiliation, which Judah suffered, was Yahweh's vindication of himself as sovereign God (14:21-33).

The prophets' interpretation of the calamity that befell Israel in different historical eras did a lot to save Israel from extinction. They demolished false hope and announced the calamity both as well-deserved and as confirming Yahweh's holiness and sovereignty. Their interpretation brought many to the threshold of despair and others to blind and confident faith in God. Since the national cultic community was disappearing with the exile, they also encouraged an individualistic religion in which individual Jews should be loyal to the calling of Yahweh who would be with them, without Temple and without cult, in the land of captivity if they sought him with their whole heart.¹⁸ Although they demolished false hope on national theology, they offered positive hope in regarding the exile as an interim beyond which lay the resurgence of the nation (Jer 32) thanks to a new redemptive act of God.¹⁹ Yahweh would again call his people as he did in Egypt and renew the covenant with

¹⁵ Jer 20:1-31; 23.

¹⁶ Cf. Jer 9:8; 11:13.

¹⁷ Ezek 9:11.

¹⁸ Jer 29:11-14; Ezek 11:16; cf. Deut 4:27-31.

¹⁹ Jer 29:10-14; Ezek 11:16-21.

them, inscribing its law in their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). With this, the very exodus theology that had condemned the nation became the foundation of its hope.²⁰ Ezekiel retained the old national hope, although its fulfillment is for a future Israel, transformed and dependent upon a new divine saving act. Ezekiel anchored hope on both the exodus and creation theologies. He spoke of a new exodus (deliverance, Ezek 20:33-38) and expected Yahweh the shepherd of his sheep (chap. 34) to reunite his people under the Davidic rule.²¹ He said in addition that Yahweh would breathe his spirit upon the bones of the defunct nation, causing it to revive (37:1-14), and giving his people a new heart and a new spirit to serve him.²² He would establish with them an eternal covenant of peace²³ with his sanctuary in their midst forever (chaps. 40-48). Thus, the prophets kept the hope of the nation awake as they journeyed through the darkness of the exile into the future.

THE PROPHET AS COVENANT MEDIATOR

Israel's relationship with God is defined by the covenant which subsists even in the face of Israel's disobedience and unfaithfulness. This, in turn, defines the necessity of the prophetic role. He is the intermediary established by God to summon the people back to fidelity. His role permits the possibility of repentance on the side of Israel and forgiveness on the part of God. On the other hand, he also stands in defence of God's integrity and faithfulness in the face of misunderstanding of God's promises and of popular practice of religion that does not mirror the revealed faith. The difficult nature of this mediatorial role is illustrated especially in the life of Moses and Jeremiah. It shows forth in Moses' frustrations in the face of Israel's continuous rebellion;²⁴ and in Moses' rebuke of his own siblings who spurned his mediatorial role;²⁵ it is seen in the threat

²⁰ Bright, *A History of Israel*, p339.

²¹ Ezek 34:23f; 37:15-28.

²² Ezek 37:14; 11:19; 36:25-27.

²³ Ezek 34:25; 37:26-28.

²⁴ Exod 17:4; Num 11:1-15.

²⁵ Num 12.

against Jeremiah's life by the people of Anathoth (Jer 11:21-23) and the entire nation;²⁶ it appears finally in the nation's rejection of the prophetic mediator (Jer 11:10). The prophet is one that both admonishes and intercedes for the people. When admonition fails, the prophet's power of intercession serves to avert God's anger. Moses' intercession averted the final disaster for Israel's ancestors in the desert prior to entering the Promised Land (Deut 9:8-29). No other prophet after Moses had had such influence in the history of Israel. That is why Moses remained the model of prophecy for all times.

THEOLOGY AT THE SERVICE OF NATION BUILDING AND NATIONAL UNITY

The Importance of the Theological Enterprise

The previous section outlined the contribution of prophets to Israel's national unity as chiefly theological in nature. It highlighted the indispensable nature of theological enterprise for the survival of the nation. "The people of Israel were able to survive for several generations even in spite of experiences of oppression in the land, of the cataclysmic experience of destruction of the land and the exile from the land, and also in spite of the difficult conditions of life during the post-exilic period".²⁷ Their survival was "thanks to the continuous prophetic interpretation and reinterpretation of the covenant in the light of these experiences, which lifted the people from their disillusionment, gave them new hope and sustained their vision".²⁸ This prophetic activity, as exposed in this paper, highlights the importance of the theological enterprise in the life of every nation. Theology sustains a given community as it is constrained to suffer experiences that threaten its internal organization. Such obliterating experiences come from the political and socio-

²⁶ Jer 15:10-17; 18:18; 20:10.

²⁷ Mary-Sylvia Nwachukwu, "Theology and Human Experience", *African Journal of Contextual Theology* 1 (2009) 33.

²⁸ Nwachukwu, "Theology and Human Experience", 33

economic sectors of life and from the culture as lived by the people.

The contemporary Nigerian is persistently exposed to factors that endanger life, and which diminish or make inaccessible the means of life's sustenance and enhancement. Considering that the country is blessed with abundance of human and natural resources, the factors that militate against life are chiefly human. God cannot be held responsible for the bad situation of the country. There is nothing wrong with the country's political system. Clean and fair elections into political seats are possible only if we want them to happen. The poverty toll of the country is very high and this is not due to famine or lack of the means of production or the like. It is chiefly because those means are craftily designed to be within reach of only a few. Moreover, other problems confront the Nigerian in the cultural and religious sectors. There still exist some cultural practices that violate the rights and dignity of the average Nigerian. And most Nigerians live in fear of witchcraft and other diabolic forces: existent and non-existent.

Human life in Nigeria is therefore riddled with these paradoxical experiences that tend to question the tenets of divine revelation as enshrined in the Scriptures. There are innumerable experiences that tend to negate the whole course of faith and God's existence. Sometimes, the proclaimed faith appears irredeemably incapable before various difficult and intricate human experiences. In some situations, God is experienced as being absent and far removed from people's experiences. In the face of all these, theology has to assume an interpretive responsibility and try to make sense out of seeming contradictory experiences in the life of people.²⁹ It interprets human experience and demonstrates how it can be a reliable guide to the knowledge of God. If it must be relevant and credible, theology should provide the language and the method for a meaningful interpretation of people's experiences. In order to do this, it demands a new audience. It should direct its critique away from the leaders to the populace.

²⁹ Cf. Nwachukwu, "Theology and Human Experience", p39-41.

In this perspective, theology should provide useful interpretation to the dilemma of faith as evidenced by Nigerians today. The Nigerian theologian can respond to these problems because as an expert in the knowledge of God; as one who has the passion for true religion, he or she can locate the edges of ominous peril of chaos in the lives of the people and articulate for them a future in which they could find coherence and assurance. Theology must make itself relevant and responsible by dialoguing with the cultural practices which constitute human experience. Similarly, human experience should at the same time appreciate the dogmatic duty of theology to define in precise terms the belief and faith of the Christian Church. For theology to be authentic, it must be courageous. It must not exhibit indifference in the face of human condition, human experiences and the deepest aspirations of the people.³⁰ The following paragraphs articulate the specific image of the theologian and areas of interest for the theological enterprise.

THE IDENTITY OF A THEOLOGIAN

A theologian is not the person who has a certificate in theology. The theologian is first and foremost a deeply religious person, who is able to intuit God's project for the nation. We can find some helpful guidelines to the assessment of the role of the theologian in the image of the prophet as an inspired individual. The prophet's intimate relationship with God and deep knowledge of the spiritual traditions on which bases the survival of the nation gave the prophet access to both the mind of the God and to the fate of the nation. The theologian can undertake the theological enterprise, as described above, only if he or she merits the name 'theologian', that is, possess deep knowledge of God and of his design for the nation. Such knowledge comes not from academic study but from an intimate relationship with God. A biblical example of the self-concept of the theologian is Moses whom Deut 34:10-12 describes as the greatest of the prophets because he is the only man of all the prophets of Israel who has the most immediate (face to face)

³⁰ Cf. Nwachukwu, "Theology and Human Experience", p41.

relationship with God. Owing to this form of relationship with God, Moses could dialogue with God and *change* the mind of God for the benefit of the people.³¹ The role of the prophet as interpreter and as covenant mediator is possible especially because the prophet so identifies with God that his life is defined by this relationship. God is the reason for his existence (the call) and the reason for his actions (prophetic mission). The words that he speaks are not his but God's. Similarly, his actions are done at God's command and are, thus, divine actions. A deep and intimate relationship with God grants the theologian access to the knowledge of God's holiness and to a deep sense of the sin of the nation. From this perspective, the theologian can denounce, condemn evil, encourage the suffering and intercede for the people.

Intercession for the people is another major function of the theologian. Intercession marks the theologian off as the authorized spokesperson of the people. In their interpretation of the experiences of the people in the light of faith, the theologian identifies fully with the story he or she interprets and with the people whose lives are marked by those experiences. Seen in this way, the activity of any theologian would be of far greater historical significance than any of the nation's leaders.

AREAS DEMANDING THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

Theology in Nigeria and Creation Theology

The first major area that demands theological interpretation is the religious self-concept and mission of the nation. For Israel's prophets, Israel exists only thanks to the covenant. Israel dates her founding experience to the event of Yahweh's deliverance from slavery and exodus from Egypt and to the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. The exodus and the covenant remained the events that gave meaning to the life of Israel in different historical times. They also remained the particular object of the instruction of

³¹ Deut 32:11-14 (read the entire chapter for the whole story).

successive generations of Israel and object of catechesis in times of trouble. They are experiences with which every generation of Israel identifies and which became significant items for their self-concept through several generations. This was thanks to the invaluable theological enterprise of prophets and theologians from the era of Moses to the time of the scribes of the post-exilic era. Like Israel, every nation has an experience or one aspect of her history, which best articulates the nature of her relationship with God. Every nation needs a theological interpretation of her entire history, which defines her self-concept and mission in the world. With such interpretation, theology can give the nation a theological program for future reforms and renewals, a program that can give character to the hope of the people for a better world and which can sustain their vision. Considering the nature of our history, I believe creation theology can best articulate our nation's relationship with God.

Beauty, variety, multiplicity, fullness are words that describe the Nigerian reality. Nevertheless, these vocabularies do not usually appear in the stories Nigerians tell about themselves and about their nation. They talk about gloom, sadness, disappointment, trauma and death. When they discuss themselves and their environment, expressions of ugliness seem to overshadow those of beauty. Nigeria is really beautiful and with unlimited potentials for success, yet many of its citizens are blinded by their circumstances from seeing it. The first image that greets any visitor to Nigeria is beauty. The multilingual nature of the country reflects the wealth and the uniqueness of the cultural heritage that beautify the different peoples that make up the country. The abundance of natural ingenuity, creativity, music and dance all add up to characterize the peoples of Nigeria. Moreover, Nigeria's very large share of world's mineral resources and its vegetation zones place her as a nation with a very large potential for wealth.

Considering all these, and much more, theology done on the Nigerian soil should begin with a good appreciation of how richly God has endowed the nation with blessings of nature, in order to explain the gloom that characterize its present condition. Theology should direct the mind of the people to the positive aspects of their reality. The pessimism and lack of enthusiasm for the nation is

clearly obvious especially in liturgy. In liturgical settings, where our experiences of joy and sorrow form part and parcel of the worship we render to God, the aspect of communal praise for nature is clearly absent. God is barely thanked for his blessings of human and natural resources. The extent to which lament outweighs praise should arouse the concern of every theologian. It is the task of theology to underscore and to bring the people to a positive awareness of God's gifts and a befitting appreciation of them in such a way that it opens their mind to hope. The reality that overshadows the beauty of Nigeria is the experiences that come from the political, socio-economic and religious spheres of human relationships and existence.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE

The contemporary political society is riddled with dehumanizing history. It is repeatedly unstable and tied to dictatorial one party system of government. Due to the level of selfishness and violence that characterize the actions of individuals in the country, one would dare describe Nigeria as a jungle of competing savage interests. There is inequitable access to justice. These and similar issues characterize the political order in Nigeria.

For theology to be relevant in the situation thus described, it must be able to stand out prophetically amidst these degrading political situations. The methodology that this political situation requires from the theologian is not the revolutionary type; rather, theology is required to be analytic in this situation. Analytical theology does not treat the populace as helpless victims deprived of responsibility. It neither proffers solutions nor incites revolutionary actions against the oppressors. Rather, it brings every member of the community to the knowledge of how and where history has gone awry and how each had contributed to the current state of affairs. Analytical theology explains the present through a critical assessment of the way in which the immediate past has betrayed the founding vision of the community. It interprets the meaning of the actions of individuals in the light of God's revelation. Its precise function is to provide the community with tools for self-assessment, to help them to make sense of their failed history, to lead them to repentance and to give them the inner ability to reclaim their vision.

The work of the theologian defined in this way clearly holds enormous promise for Nigeria.

Secondly, in order to stand against unjust political order, it is demanded of theology to encourage the Church and her institutions to bear concrete witness to the Kingdom of God. This involves denouncing injustice, helping victims of injustice, but most especially refraining from injustice. The Church should not liaise with political authorities in perpetrating injustice through unholy alliances. Instead, she should encourage her members to involve themselves in politics and actively guide them to enthrone a just political order. The political sphere of human experience plays a primary role in shaping the experiences of the people. It affects all other areas of life. On it hangs the state of wellbeing and stability, especially in the socio-economic and religious spheres.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SPHERE

The responsibility of theology in regard to the socio-economic situation of Nigeria is enormous. Nigerians experience the scourge of poverty because the country has suffered exploitation from political leaders of different historical periods. Taken from a global perspective, "poverty is one of the issues that have made Africa the most humiliated continent in the world, with the result that the name 'Africa' is synonymous with poverty and suffering. The poverty-stricken economy has affected other areas of life in the continent: family stability, health, education, childcare, and employment, to mention but a few. The scourge is all over the continent and despite the awareness of its presence it continues to feed deeper on the flesh of the continent and that of its citizens".³² This blighting condition of the people should be a source of concern to the theologian. In the face of this situation, the role of the theologian is multiple.

Firstly, in the face of the response which the biting effects of poverty demand from the Church, one of the glaring weaknesses of theology is its search for solutions in the generosity of Christians or its focus on national and state governments as the key solution to

³² Cf. Nwachukwu, "Theology and Human Experience," 44-45.

the problem of poverty. Secondly, the paradoxical situation in the country comes from roots deeper than political. Therefore, although the socio-economic situation of any community depends largely on the political order, the theologian should know that an adequate response to the plight of the poor should be addressed to the community that produced poverty in its socio-economic relations. Lastly then, the work of the theologian is to address the very cause of poverty and oppression. They should address the cankerworm of insincerity, lack of integrity and exploitation which has eaten deep into inter-personal relationship of people in the religious, political and social order, and at all levels of existence. It is no longer possible to separate the oppressors from the oppressed because only a slight change of circumstance turns the oppressed into an oppressor. The government cannot be blamed for this 'way of life' in the country; rather, it is a way of life that has produced leaders in different sectors of life and which is also breeding tomorrow's leaders.

THE RELIGIOUS SPHERE

Contemporary writers and interpreters of the practice of religion in Africa concur in their view that the problem of Christianity in Africa is that of its superficiality.³³ The following challenges are outlined as issues which the theologian must respond to: the preponderance of the phenomenon of syncretism among many African Christians today, the recurrent issue of witchcraft and demonology, pervasive influence of practices unacceptable to Christian faith, the progressive or successful influence of independent churches and effervescent affect of Pentecostalism, and the indifferent attitude of Elites / intellectuals towards religion in the contemporary African society; all these pose serious problems of interpretation of the religious experiences of the people for the theologian.

³³ Cf. E. Ezenweke and J.E. Madu, "Skin-Deep Christianity: The Outcome of Evangelization, Cultural Neglect and Upsurge of Pentecostalism" in G. Nnamani, ed., *The New Religious Movements: Pentecostalism in Perspective*. Proceedings of the 21st Conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria, Benin City: Ava Publishers, 2007, 265-281.

Scholars have long recognized the profound changes that came into Africa as a result of the new religious movements and Pentecostalism. The result has been a more individualistic type of piety as a central feature of religion, of course with the resultant obscurity of the significance of the cult for national and individual existence. It is important to note that we cannot interpret religion in Africa simply in individualistic categories of private piety. African theologians expend their efforts in critiquing private piety and neglecting to interpret and project the cultus as a vital ingredient in the stability of every nation. In most religions, national existence is believed to be upheld through the rites of the cultus. Piety is only derived from the reality that the cult celebrates. This is particularly true of both the Jewish and Christian religions.

The need to draw the sketch and to interpret the meaning of this important change is an important item in the agenda of the theologian. On the one hand, theology should do more in educating towards the importance of the cult. A piety that is not derived from the celebration of the sacrificial event of Jesus is the reason for the cross-less spirituality that the new religious movements are promoting all over Africa. On the other hand, it is important to underscore the positive contributions of these movements and of Pentecostalism to the practice of religion in Africa. Nevertheless, the theologian should carefully understudy these movements and identify parts of their belief systems that do not promote authentic Christian values, especially prayers against the enemy and the 'Holy Ghost fire' saga which do not promote Christian forgiveness and love of the enemy. As Africans struggle with realities that becloud their vision, the theologian should be able to accompany them in this journey through a responsible and matured faith in the God of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the ways in which theology is an indispensable enterprise for any nation that intends to live beyond the immediate century. It presents how theology could make the tenets of faith credible to the modern-day Nigerian through a grounded interpretation of human experience in the light of the country's founding relationship with God. This is the relationship that gives the nation its self-concept and which defines her vision

and mission in the world. From the perspective of the role of the theological enterprise for Nigeria, a special interest attaches to its contribution in the area of creation theology. Fundamental to the role of the theologian is the duty to underscore and to bring the people to a positive awareness of God's gifts and a befitting appreciation of them in such a way that it inspires spontaneous praise of God and opens the mind of the people to hope. On another note, it cannot be overemphasized that Nigeria faces the risk of passing from a series of gradual social and political changes into a condition of relatively permanent disintegration. Theology's specific contribution in this regard is found in the way in which it gives vision and orientation to the traumatized peoples of this nation.

The Catholic Church in Nigeria has produced more theologians than any country in the developed world. Yet, it is difficult to register any national development political and social which is attributed to the particular work or presence of theologians in the country. This is due to the fact that we lack a working definition with which the theologian could define his or her job description or identity. When we define theology as the science of God, theologians work with the premise that they are simply interpreters of the word of God and of the tradition of the Church. This definition neglects another very important aspect of theology theological interpretation of human experience. A focus of study that does not include all these aspects of the theological enterprise limits the work of the theologian and limits his or her impact to the nation.

I have suggested above that a clue to the role of the theologian could be taken from the work of Israelite prophets who gave guidance and fresh orientation to the people especially in their periods of crises. In a similar way, the distinctive experiences of the Nigerian in different areas of life should shape the development of theology in the country. We may claim that theology in Africa has been following this methodology since the inception of Inculturation theology for more than forty years now. Nevertheless, theologians should still question their relevance and rethink their methodology if signs of conflict, disorientation and disintegration still occupy the center stage of life in Nigeria.