

## "The Politics of Righteousness"

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### Abstract

More and more Christian denominations across Africa are showing unprecedented interest in politics. It is critically important, therefore, to draw their attention to the need for those of them who are going into politics to model what godly politics entail. For we live in a continent where our religiosity has not stopped corruption in high and low places. Both Christian and non-Christian leaders at every level of our society tend to disconnect their faith and morality from their political activities. As a result, the masses in Africa are denied access to the common good and flourishing life or the respect for their human dignity and the right to earn a living as dignified human beings. Thus, they have not yet had the Africa God wants them to have and enjoy the realization of all their God-given potential as dignified human beings. To have the Africa God wants us to have, politics must be seen as a sacred (divine) affair. In other words, although politics is a divine responsibility, today, however, the average African politician does not seem to see any correlation between politics and their faith and spirituality. This is what has led many people to see modern politics as a dirty game or to associate it with deceitfulness. It seems that many African Christians who go into politics go with the notion that God has no interest in politics. As such, they are free to do whatever they want with the national resources at their disposal. Therefore, this article is primarily arguing that politics is a divine assignment and therefore it cannot be devoid of righteousness. This clarification is necessary because of the increased interest in politics that Christians in Africa are showing. If we must change the present wrong notion of politics, it is absolutely critical for Christian politicians in Africa to rediscover the Christian roots of modern politics. For instance, it was the belief in "the

priesthood of all believers" that led to the discovery of the idea of modern democracy in the 17th century. This revolutionary discovery was led by John Calvin and his disciples. Consequently, the old status quo of rulership where a few people held the rest of society to ransom was changed to a government of the people by the people for/with the people. Democracy supplanted the old feudal system. Modern democracy all started with the Calvinists' revolutionary belief in the biblical idea of "the priesthood of all believers." So, in this article, I attempt to argue that to have the Africa God wants us to have and enjoy the realisation of our full potential as dignified human beings, all Christian politicians need to grasp the correlations between their faith, everyday life, and governance.

## **Introduction: Situating the Context of Politics of Righteousness<sup>1</sup>**

Politics has long been associated with deceitfulness, so the concept of politics of righteousness would naturally raise some eyebrows. To calm some nerves, the starting point for a conversation or a discourse on the politics of righteousness is faith in Christ.<sup>2</sup> It is the cross that made us right with God, ourselves, other humans and with the environment. So, the truth embodied in the politics of righteousness cannot be understood without faith in Christ. This is why a politics of righteousness is not a simple possibility.

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<sup>1</sup> A Paper Presented at the Public Theology Consultation at TCNN Bukuru – Nigeria, JETS, 10th March, 2022

<sup>2</sup> The present study differs significantly from similar work based on interviews with 520 'Christian patriots' who either resided in Idaho or were closely linked to groups headquartered there written by James A. Aho, *The Politics of Righteousness: Idaho Christian Patriotism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990); cf. Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012); Elizabeth A. Ten Dyke, "The Politics of Memory and Moral Righteousness: A Case Study from Dresden, Germany," *PoLAR* 18/1 (1995): 89-95; Next is a work entirely based on a reinterpretation of Matthew 7:3-5 by Carl E. Schneider, "Hard Cases and the Politics of Righteousness," *Hastings Center Report* 35/3 (2005): 24-27; Judith Casselberry, "The Politics of Righteousness: Race and Gender in Apostolic Pentecostalism," *Transforming Anthropology* 21/1 (2013): 72-86.

This article hopes to correct some Christian assumptions. It is, thus, part and parcel of human cultural lenses that provide the data needed to fully understand how to navigate life in a world of complicities and excesses. In discussing the politics of righteousness, therefore, it will be a big jump and a grievous mistake on our part if we allow the human pursuits of political goals and aims to distract us from concentrating on the important principles that should guide this discourse.

The politics of righteousness is not in the political dictionary of many of our contemporary politicians, both Christians and non-Christians. As we watch where and how contemporary politicians<sup>4</sup> come into the political arena with faulty assumptions, philosophies and ideologies that badly impact the way they do and practice politics, we cannot help but wonder whether there is any hope. Given the absence of the idea of politics as righteousness in most political agenda, we see many of our so-called ‘honorable’ abusing many God-given opportunities, which they are supposed to use to transform and reposition the nation. Such attitudes of these politicians have been described as a “culture of corruption”<sup>3</sup> or what Nigerians would prefer to refer to as “the Nigerian factor.”

In the wake of atrocities such as the barbaric killings of Christians in places of worship or the incessant attacks in the Northeast, Stephen Dawson is right when he notes, “The choice between the politics of righteousness and the politics of fear will press upon us with a renewed urgency. However, it is righteousness—justice and ethical probity<sup>4</sup>—that is the only genuine answer at such a time.”<sup>5</sup> Put differently, if Nigeria has “fallen” as Karl Maier would

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007). Ngozi Nkonjo-Iweala has given a deep insider analysis of how corruption has eating deep into the Nigerian system. see Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, *Reforming the Unreformable: Lessons from Nigeria* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012); idem., *Fighting Corruption is Dangerous: The Story Behind the Headlines* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman, *Justice and Righteousness Biblical Themes and their Influence*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 137 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Dawson, “The Politics of Scripture: The Politics of Righteousness—Zephaniah 3:14–20,” no page. *Political Theology Network*, 2015. Cited 10 June 2022. Online: <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-righteousness-zephaniah-314-20/>

want us to believe, then, the politics of righteousness is that which can resuscitate it.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, these unacceptable turns of events have raised some sober, rhetorical, and hypothetical questions in this article that demand urgent attention. For example, do our politicians know (1) whose idea is politics? (2) If we will get them to grasp the idea of a politics of righteousness, what specific assumptions will we need to dislodge? (3) Why is it that we, the electorates, cannot trust many of our politicians anymore? (4) Why have our politicians turned politics into a business venture to the detriment of the interests of the masses that elected them? (5) Why are some politicians doing well and others doing badly in the same country? (6) How can our political discourse lead us to a movement that will bring the needed sanity in the whole gamut of Nigeria polity today, so that our nation will be infused with a new moral consciousness that will usher it into the committee of developed nations that are experiencing a renaissance, a new dawn? (7) How can Nigeria, as the proverbial giant, give Nigerians and Africans the country and continent God wants and/or a country and a continent we have all been longing for?<sup>7</sup> These are critical questions to navigate and carefully respond to in our quest for a

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion on how Nigeria has fallen from an American perspective, see Karl Maier, *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Nigeria despite its condition as potentially the richest, and most dangerously dysfunctional nation in Africa, it remains Africa's bellwether. According to the World Bank, "If we talk about growth in Africa, we have to think of Nigeria because it is the largest in Africa. So Africa cannot grow unless Nigeria grows so for us in the World Bank, Nigeria is a very high priority and we want to see how we can support and help the Nigerian economy grow faster and achieve all developmental objectives." For a discussion on the role of Nigeria in the transformation of Africa see, All Africa News, "Africa Cannot Grow Unless Nigeria Grows - World Bank." Cited 3 August 2018. Online: <https://allafrica.com/stories/201808050005.html>. For a discussion on the dysfunctionality of the Nigerian state see, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, *Reforming the Unreformable: Lessons from Nigeria* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012); idem., *Fighting Corruption is Dangerous: The Story Behind the Headlines* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018); Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa and the Trouble with Nigeria* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), Patricia Taft and Nate Haken, *Violence in Nigeria: Patterns and Trends* (New York: Springer, 2015), Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (Rochester NY: University of Rochester Press, 1998). For an insider exploration of the details of hope and ambition and how both gone wrong in the Giant of Africa, Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, see Max Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria's Military Coup Culture (1966–1976)* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009).

better life through the politics of righteousness. But how do we realise the politics of righteousness?

The impression we have is that we often expect people to be automatically righteous because they have believed in Christ Jesus as their Lord and the Lord of all of human social, political and economic life and practice. The complexity of a globalised world makes politics of righteousness extremely difficult to come by. The problem or challenge we face as humans is that our priorities often get distorted to the extent that we pursue life without remembering that we do not exist by our own power. For example, human pursuit of the search for meaning, security, and fulfilment in a world that has continued to be increasingly complex and sophisticated to the extent that politics of righteousness is no longer a simple possibility. The psalmist gives us a clue to the gravity of the challenge when he says,

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.  
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore, pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. (Psalm 73:1-6)

The implicit question in the heart of the psalmist is, why am I good or why do I need righteousness to live in this world? Would righteousness put food on the table? After all, we know of people who got into politics without trusting God, and yet they are making it in life. So, what is the essence of worrying about politics of righteousness? To put it in political context, Olusegun Obasanjo writes, “If a righteous life does not necessarily guarantee health, wealth, power, position, happiness and earthly pleasures, then the logical question is, What is the point in being good and righteous?”<sup>8</sup> When we ask these questions, we have basically failed to recognise the fact that, “The reason for being good is not found in this world alone, because the true meaning and purpose of life, the sources of true happiness and joy do not

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<sup>8</sup> Olusegun Obasanjo, *This Animal Called Man* (Ibadan: ALF Publications, 1998), vii.

reside in man. They are found outside self and outside man [*sic*]. They can only be found in God through faith, obedience, service and worship of Him and in love and service to humanity.”<sup>9</sup> The immediate implication of Obasanjo’s reflection in relation to this article is that the politics of righteousness transcends human explanations. Thus, in what follows, we examine the biblical basis of the politics of righteousness.

## **The Biblical Basis of the Politics of Righteousness**

This topic has a biblical basis. It is based on Proverbs 14:34, which contains a sound political maxim, the simplicity of which is often overlooked: personal righteousness in the population—both in citizens and leaders—is the single most important commodity that any country can possess! This virtue, states Solomon, is preeminent to everything else because: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people.”

The writer of Proverbs was a political leader whose grasp of the principles of righteous politics was incomparably great. No wonder Scripture states that he was the wisest man to ever live. He proclaims in this passage that personal righteousness is the most important ingredient—and should be the focus—in order to achieve the advancement of any nation. Note that Solomon does not say that the presence of natural resources exalts a nation, nor does he say that it is attributable to the excellence of its education system, as important as those are, among other things. Rather, personal righteousness is what is the most important! Next, we clarify some of the concepts in this article as they are used.

## **Conceptual Clarifications**

We need to clarify what we mean by some terms in this article.

- ***Politics***

The term ‘politics’ has different definitions. It can be seen as the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power. It could be

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

defined as the way countries are governed, and to the ways that government makes rules and laws. Politics is also about making agreements between people so that they can live together in groups such as tribes, cities, or countries. It can also be referred to as the conflicts within organizations over issues of leadership, structures, and policies.

Aristotle once defined politics as the activity of the city. I like this definition because it shows that everybody you find in a city is a politician. We are political animals, so to speak. For if politics is the activity of the city, then none of us is exempted from politics. All we do as individuals, families, communities, and organisational levels, and so on, contribute to the polity of a city or a nation-state. In summary, politics is about the organisation and administration of ourselves, our environment, and the God-given resources in it.

- ***Righteousness***

Righteousness is the quality of being morally right or justifiable. It is also the condition of being in the right relationship with the Lord. Righteousness is all-encompassing. It is relational. According to its Hebrew original meaning, righteousness is relational. Thus, it is about the right living, the right relationship with God, with other fellow humans, and with the environment.

- ***Principles of Politics***

Principles of Politics refers to the underlying logic of political behaviour, collective action, structural, and institutional politics. There are five major principles of politics<sup>10</sup>:

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion on some of these principles see, for example, Joe Oppenheimer, *Principles of Politics: A Rational Choice Theory Guide to Politics and Social Justice* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2012). Cf. John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy with Some of their Applications to Social Philosophy*, edited by Stephen Nathanson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2004).

- i. *The Rationality Principle* holds that all political behaviour has a purpose and that people tend to be goal-oriented in their political activities as they make instrumental choices about how to act.
- ii. *The Structure and Institution Principle* recognises that political institutions provide incentives for political behaviour, thereby shaping and structuring politics.
- iii. *The Collective-Action principle* refers to the idea that, although all politics is collective action, getting people to act in concert is difficult. Thus, political action often involves both formal and informal lobbying, dialoguing, and bargaining along with other efforts to overcome the obstacles to collective action.<sup>11</sup>
- iv. *The Policy Principle* holds that political outcomes are the products of individual preferences and institutional procedures. Combining lessons from the Rationality and Institution principles, we see that individual political actors' personal, electoral, and institutional ambitions are filtered through, and in many ways shaped by, institutional arrangements in politics; and that policy outcomes are the products of the complex intermingling of individual goals and institutions.
- v. *The History Principle* reminds us how we got here matters. Political circumstances and outcomes are understood to be past-dependent (partly determined by past events and choices) and to influence existing rules and procedures, political loyalties and alliances, and political viewpoints and perspectives.

Given the above terms and principles of politics, let's now examine what this politics of righteousness entails.

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<sup>11</sup> For a brief discussion on this principle see, Oppenheimer, *Principles of Politics*, 25-142.



## What Politics of Righteousness Entails

It has been extremely difficult for humans to recognise that politics is both a divine and human affair.<sup>12</sup> Politics across the world has largely been turned to an opportunity for the few who get there to serve their self-interests and their desire and greed to power, wealth and obsession to amass wealth to the detriment of the poor and the least of these.<sup>13</sup> This is why we have given politics a bad name in order to allow politicians to feel that it is okay to ignore the poor, ignore justice, order and freedom or ignore the primary duty of ensuring stability and security. Politics is largely a failure today because we have given politicians a license to feed what Reinhold Niebuhr calls, their “self-interests and the will-to-power.” We are going against the tide of contemporary politics when we talk about politics of righteousness. This is completely a foreign idea. Where and how do we begin to talk of the politics of righteousness?<sup>14</sup> So, politics and governance are God’s ideas for the flourishing of the human race and his entire creation. Humans and all their cultures—politics, economy, art, clothing, dressing, dancing, music, architecture, governance, military, commerce, transportation, to mention a few—are intended for God’s glory, not humans egoistic and selfish glory.

## The Southward Movement of the Church and the Politics of Righteousness

In spite of the global south movement of the gravity of the Christian faith, there is a clear absence of the politics of righteousness in many of the nations of

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<sup>12</sup> See, Miguel Vatter, *Divine Democracy: Political Theology after Carl Schmitt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); J. Robin King, “The Joseph Story and Divine Politics: A Comparative Study of a Biographic Formula from the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 12/106 issue 4 (1987): 577-594.

<sup>13</sup> See, Jason Weeden and Robert Kurzban, *The Hidden Agenda of the Political Mind: How Self-Interest Shapes Our Opinions and Why We Won’t Admit It* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014). Cf. Leif Lewin, *Self-Interest and Public Interest in Western Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> In responding to this pertinent questions, Ananya Vajpeyi situates the quest to ‘the search for the self’ within the context of India. See Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Africa.<sup>15</sup> Nigeria is one of those nations where the lack of politics of righteousness has made it extremely difficult for citizens to be happy with their government, with elected officials, or with the nature of politics at almost all levels. Many countries have embraced modern democracy. Yet those who campaign for elected office often seem to forget or neglect campaign promises after being elected and become self-serving rather than dedicated public servants.

This perennial political situation described above is very pronounced in Nigeria. For example, since the return to democracy in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed phenomenal progress. Yet that progress is a far cry from what would have happened if our socio-political life and socio-economic practices were rooted in love, the fear of God, right living characterised by respect for, promotion of, and defense of human dignity. Many of our politicians, including those who are from the Christian faith, have failed the masses.<sup>16</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>15</sup> Violence is a major case here. See Paul T. Zeleza and A. Nhema (eds), *The Roots of African Conflicts: The Causes and Costs* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007); Monty G. Marshall, *Conflict Trends in Africa, 1946-2004: A Macro-Comparative Perspective* (Arlington: Center for Global Policy, 2005). For a discussion on the New Testament understanding of righteousness see, for example, J. A. Ziesler, *The Meaning of Righteousness in Paul: A Linguistic and Theological Enquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> See analysis in Yusufu Turaki, *Historical Roots of Ethno-Religious Crises & Conflicts in Northern Nigeria* (Jos: Yusufu Turaki Foundation, No Date); Yusufu Turaki, *Tainted legacy: Islam, Colonialism and Slavery in Northern Nigeria* (McLean: Isaac Pubsliding, 2010); Mazi Kanu Oji, *The Nigerian Ethical Revolution 1981-2000 AD* (Lagos: Federal Secret Printers, 1982), Viktor Eke Kalu, *The Nigerian Condition: Arthur Nwankwo's Viewpoints and Blueprints* (Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986), Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa and the Trouble with Nigeria* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), Randee Ijatuyi-Morphé, *Africa's Social and Religious Quest: A Comprehensive Survey and Analysis of the African Situation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2014); Sunday Bobai Agang, *The Impact of Ethnic, Political, and Religious Violence on Northern Nigeria, and a Theological Reflection on Its Healing* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Monographs, 2010). For its extension to African states see, for example, Paul T. Zeleza, "The Causes and Costs of War in Africa: From Liberation Struggles to the 'War on Terror,'" in Paul T. Zeleza and A. Nhema (eds), *The Roots of African Conflicts: The Causes and Costs* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007); Monty G. Marshall, *Conflict Trends in Africa, 1946-2004: A Macro-Comparative Perspective* (Arlington: Center for Global Policy, 2005).

since our polity is profoundly heated up in preparation for 2023 general elections, this consultation is such a relevant and needed conversation. Nigeria is one of the beautiful and richly blessed countries in the world by its Creator, God. Yet, it is pertinent to observe that it can be very depressing and deeply saddening to see how many of the God-given opportunities our political class has had to turn things around for the betterment of our nation, have been abused by some politicians who are obsessed with the desire to amass wealth. For this caliber of politicians, politics of righteousness is nonexistent in their vocabulary. What can this consultation do to change the tide?

## **The Nigerian Socio-political Terrain**

The socio-political climate of Nigeria presents two scenarios. First, Nigerians are capable of doing tremendous good, whether they are Christians or non-Christians. Second, Nigerians are equally capable of doing tremendous evil, whether they are Christians or non-Christians. These two realities have to be kept in proper balance so that the capacity for tremendous evil does not overshadow the fact we have human dignity, to the extent that we dehumanize our brothers and sisters who are in politics. The essential question is where our morality comes from?<sup>17</sup>

We have a socio-political environment that is faced with unimaginable challenges. First and foremost is our way of viewing the political landscape. Our perspective about our nation is defective. We regard the nation as a commodity. Olusegun Obasanjo observes that in Nigeria two ways of seeing are involved. On the one side, Nigerians tend to regard the nation as a commodity belonging to us (politicians). This perception leads us to hurt ourselves and our fellow humans. For instance, he writes, “We misgovern, abuse, misrule, exploit and perpetrate corruption and injustice.” On the other hand, he writes, “When we see the nation as a community to which we belong and our duty as trusteeship responsibility for which account has to be given in meticulous detail, we will begin to govern, rule and act on the basis of justice and fear of the God and love.”<sup>18</sup> So, Matthew Hassan Kukah is right, “We

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on how bad politics and unrighteous use of religion are responsible for dividing people see, for example, Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Obasanjo, *This Animal Called Man*, 201.

created most of our mess ourselves and we are the ones who have to clean it up.”<sup>19</sup>

Second, our lack of a sense of human dignity, whose basic idea is rooted in the creation narrative of Genesis 1:26-27 and the incarnation narrative in the Gospel of John 1:1-2, 14., which we will discuss in detail in the paper. We are all created in the image of God to be like God, our Father who is not only in heaven, but also in all spheres of life on planet earth. “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible. But man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary”.<sup>20</sup> Thus, governance is primarily about the protection of human dignity through knowing how to organise the activities of our community, cities, and the entire society to ensure justice, freedom, order and probity. It is also about how to administer ourselves as well as our affairs in harmony with our environment in order to achieve the purpose for which God has created us and the whole gamut of our existence on earth. Our purpose for existence which necessitates the need for freedom, order, and justice (righteousness) is spelt out in these words of St. Paul, “For everything comes from him and exists by his power and is intended for his glory. All glory to him forever! Amen” (Romans 11:36 NLT)

The principle is clear: All humans come from God, exist by his power, and are intended for his glory. All Nigerians are humans, all Nigerians come from God, all Nigerians exist by God’s power and all Nigerians and what they do are intended for God’s glory.

## **The Concept of the Politics of Righteous**

Righteousness is about our ability to relate rightly with our Creator, our fellow humans, and the environment. It is where the idea of being our brother/sister keeper comes from. It is what Jesus means when he asks us to love and treasure God as well as to love and respect our neighbour as ourselves. Thus, Stephen Dawson writes,

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew Hassan Kukah, *Witness to Justice: An Insider Account of Nigeria’s Truth Commission* (Ibadan: Bookcraft, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), xxxii.

Righteousness is divine insofar as it affirms the humanity of all involved. Practicing justice and ethical probity means, for example, to judge fairly under the law, to care for the less fortunate, and to accept refugees and others in need. To be righteous means to affirm the humanity of the criminal in the act of judgment, to affirm the humanity of the poor in the act of bestowing charity, and to affirm the humanity of the refugee in the act of welcoming.<sup>21</sup>

It is about human dignity.<sup>22</sup> Thus, we cannot do well in politics when our understanding of politics is not embodying a good grasp of the biblical concept of human dignity. This is why today our politicians treat human beings created in God's image like votes, people to be deceived, to be misled, and to be exploited or taken advantage of. That is the worldview Paul seeks to correct in Romans 13: 1-4. Paul makes it absolutely clear that God has put the governing authorities in place for a purpose. They are to be the ministers of God like the pastors and priests. Thus, the government is not the invention of power-hungry, self-seeking men and women. The principle here is to recognise that all political philosophies and ideologies, whether Christians or non-Christians are God's ideas. There is no authority except that which He allows, and His intention is that it should serve Him and His vision and purpose: nurturing order, justice, and freedom so that human dignity is nurtured, respected, promoted, protected, or defended. Our politicians are supposed to be His representatives in their God-given nations. They are therefore ultimately accountable to Him. For example, David is said to be "a man after God's heart" because he recognised that the throne he occupied, was God's

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Stephen Dawson, "The Politics of Righteousness Zephaniah 3:14-20," no page. Political Theology. Cited 22 January, 2022. Online:

<https://www.politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-righteousness-zephaniah-314-20/>

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ben C. Dunson, "4 Maccabees and Romans 12:1-21: Reasons and the Righteous Life," in *Reading Romans in Context: Paul and Second Temple Judaism* (ed. Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, and Jason Maston; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). On the concept of human dignity see, Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1985); Jeff Malpas and Norelle Lickiss (eds), *Perspectives on Human Dignity: A Conversation* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007); George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

throne. His son, Solomon also realised that the people he was elected and anointed to rule were God's people and he asked God for wisdom and insight to rule them with justice and in righteousness. The descendant of David, Christ Jesus taught us how to live rightly.

From the Old and New Testament narratives of God's calling upon the human race, particularly the leaders of the people, political leaders are expected to be healers. For example, Jesus gave the apostles power and authority over all demons, diseases, to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (Luke 9:1-2). One of Nigeria's political legends, Obafemi Awolowo of blessed memory, has delineated four examples that affirm my assertion.<sup>23</sup> First, he noted that one of the aims of religion is to teach a man [human] to love his neighbour as himself and to do unto others as he would like them to do unto him. Without this perspective carried into the political vision of a nation and its players, the nation will not experience healing. Politics of righteousness is the recognition that God is no respecter of human. All are equal before Him. Thus, Awolowo argues that the recognition of the equality of all men and women before the righteous eyes of God is a fundamental principle and an accepted practice under a good government that all citizens are equal in the eye of the law, enjoying and rendering reciprocal rights and duties. This awareness informs why every citizen is negatively forbidden, under pain of legal sanctions, from so conducting his affairs that he becomes a nuisance or a menace to his neighbours. Positively, under law they must so live their life that they are at peace at all times with their fellow men and women. Second, Awolowo asserts that in all great religions, women are treated on the basis of equality with men. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour modelled this for us. He is the most outstanding exemplar in this respect. Today, politicians that focus on the politics of righteousness who are found all over the civilised world are eloquent in their advocacy for equal treatment for all persons irrespective of sex or gender. In so doing, they are merely reflecting in public life the incomparably great example of our Lord. Third, politics of righteousness is not far-fetched because, as Awolowo rightly pointed out, many of the fundamental human

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<sup>23</sup> Obafemi Awolowo, "Politics and Religion" Being text of a lecture given by the late sage, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, to students at the Adventist College of West Africa, Ilishan-Remo, on January 27, 1961, published in *Today's Challenge* Vol. 18 No. 5 May 2022 and continued in Vol. 18. No. 6 June 2022, pp.20-21; 41-42.

rights, particularly the three freedoms of conscience, of association and of speech, are rooted or ingrained in the Judaeo-Christian religions. Many prophets, saints and evangelists have suffered pain or even death because they understood and dared to exercise their freedom of conscience and of expression. For example, in the New Testament, it was for this noble and imperishable cause that John the Baptist was executed, that our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, and Mohammed for a while fled his home in Mecca. In our modern era, it was for this same cause that Martin Luther King Jr, was assassinated, that Nelson Mandela was thrown into prison for decades. Of course, many great names in politics prior to those we have mentioned here, drawing their inspiration from religion also suffered or even died for the same cause. It was for this cause that Socrates was sentenced to drink the hemlock and to death. Finally, Awolowo argues that, the humanly speaking, the best politics which could be said to be close to the politics rooted in righteousness and justice as well as best suited for humankind is democratic socialism. This is because it is founded, among others, on the principles of the well-being of the individual, and brotherhood among all humans irrespective of creed, colour and race (or ethnicity). The four points delineated by Awolowo are clear demonstration of the fact that for politics to be beneficial to the common good of all humans and their environment the workings of its system has to be derive its strength from the tenets and practices of the great revelatory religion, particularly the Christian faith. So, the church is an epitome of the politics of righteousness.

## **The Church as an Epitome of the Politics Righteousness**

The Church is Christ's body. It is instituted on earth to infuse moral and ethical consciousness in the entire society.<sup>24</sup> The Church is where the idea of the kingdom of God, the reign or rule of God, is sown into the consciousness of men and women. It is where men and women are equipped with the ideas of

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, edited by R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the Kingdom of God to help them know that they are an embodiment of God's will, which should be done on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>25</sup>

So, politics is not outside the inaugural kingdom of God. Rather, it is within the confines of the activities of the Kingdom of God.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Christianity is defined as a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interpret and respond to what they feel is sacred and usually supernatural as well. So, there should be a variety of ways in which Christianity is related to the institution of politics. For instance, if one looks at the concept of "theocracy", it means "rule by God". Thus, Christian leaders are seen as ruling the society in God's Name and obviously according to His wishes. When it comes to Christian involvement in politics, our goals should not be to impose our views on everyone else and turn our nation into a theocracy that is going to achieve nothing but hostility.<sup>27</sup> Our goal should be to ensure that biblical principles of love, right living, justice, freedom, order, hard work, faithfulness, truth-telling, honesty, integrity and so on, are adhered to in all spheres of life.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For a detail comprehensive discussion on the kingdom of God from a Christian perspective see the excellent work of George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002). Cf. R. Alan Street, *Heaven on Earth: Experiencing the Kingdom of God Here and Now* (Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2013); Jonathan Sacks, *Faith in the Future* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995), and especially Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (trans. Margaret Kohl; SCM Press Ltd, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> See, Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960); Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2004); David Gooding and John Lennox, *The Definition of Christianity* (Coleraine: The Myrtlefield Trust, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944); Bruce Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> For discussion on this subject see, for example, Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), Richard A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman*



## Involvement in Politics is Ingrained in God's Two Commands

Politics is God's idea. God created the world out of love. He is love, just and righteous. So, he created the world out of love with the desire to see righteousness, justice, peace, order, stability, security, development, and so on, thrive. Therefore, the primary aim of governance as instituted by our Creator is for humans to demonstrate how much they know, understand, and appreciate God's love, treasure and respect him, who is the Creator of human dignity. In governance humans are called by their Creator to the awesome task of loving, respecting, promoting, and defending the sanctity of human life, theirs and that of their fellow citizens. Therefore, governance is a command from God.

1. It is a command from God for His People to be involved in acts and lifestyles that reposition and transform nation-states to a humane society. The Word of God commands humans to rule and have dominion over creation under heaven – Genesis 1: 26; Psalm 24.
2. Also, God commands the believers to be involved in The Great Commission, which involves discipling nations to observe all that Christ has commanded (Matthew 28: 19-20). From the above, it is impossible to fulfil these two tasks effectively without being involved in this world. Believers should understand that government is of God. Government exists to serve its citizens by ensuring equitable distributions of God-given resources as well as encourage the realisation of every human potential, and the interests and wishes of the citizens of nation-state. The citizens of any country are looking for government officials who promote, protect, and defend their human dignity by ensuring accountability,

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*Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997); Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation: Essays in Honour of Krister Stendahl* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000); Richard A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2004); Richard A Horsley, "By the Finger of God': Jesus and Imperial Violence" in *Violence in the New Testament* (ed. Shelly Matthews and E. Leigh Gibson; New York and London: T&T Clark, 2005).

adequate security, good legal system, equity, probity, offering service to the citizens with integrity, honesty, and transparency.

3. To have a governmental institution that stays afloat above corruption of any form, can only be possible through a godly government that makes the politics of righteous, love, and justice for all a watchword.

## **Contemporary Examples of the Practice of Politics of Righteousness in Nigeria and/or Africa**

Politics is variously defined as the ideas and activities involved in getting power in a country or over a particular area of the world. It is also a belief and attitude about how government should work (Macmillan 2007:1148). It can also be said that politics is the science and art of government, political activities, beliefs or affairs, factional scheming for power (Ceddes and Crosset 2011). However, politics has been observed in human group interactions, including corporate, academic, and religious institutions. It consists of social relations involving authority and power and refers to the regulation of a political unit. It also refers to the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply policy (Anifowose Remi 2005).

Today in Nigeria, most of the politicians are Muslims and traditional worshippers simply because Christians do not think it's their responsibility to partake in politics or involve themselves in things or activities that pertains to governing this country. However, most of them practice politics in their place of work, in their homes, and also in their churches. Nowadays, ministers of God tend to look for churches with the highest paying salaries and work their ways there. They sometimes bribe the people in power just to get to the post and position they want.

But regardless of that, there are Christians who actually practice politics of righteousness in all sense of it. They make laws and rules to govern the church or ministry and carry everyone along. They elect people that will help oversee the different departments and units of the church. They make agreements with the members in order to have a great relationship and not compromise anyone's belief, so that peace can reign.

Often times, when the time for election comes Christians exercise their rights by voting the candidates they have in mind. They understand that it is their God-given right to partake in anything that will move the country forward. They are interested in doing things for the betterment of the country.

Politics of righteousness is the watch word of the present Rwandan President, Paul Kagame. He came into power and refused to allow ethnicity and religion to divide the Rwandans: There is neither Hutsi nor Tutsi, we are all Rwandans, he argued. That is an excellent example of righteousness politics. In Nigeria we can look at the example of our former President, Olusegun Obasanjo. When Obasanjo came into power, he introduced the policy of making sure an environment was created for the private sector to thrive. He selected fifty (50) entrepreneurs and gave them the enabling economic environment that would help them to succeed and become the economic engine of the nation. According to Aliko Dangote, Obasanjo succeeded in getting thirty (30) successful entrepreneurs that are today helping our economy to stabilise, of whom, he, Aliko Dangote, is one of them.

## **Christians' Political Responsibility to Society**

Many people have a wrong perception of politics. They see it as being a dirty game. Consequently, many Christians forget the fact that it is their right to pray and also partake in politics through their lifestyles, commitment to love, integrity, hard work, truth-telling, diligence, honesty, fidelity, and so on, in the public sphere.

With the high percentage of Christians in the public sphere, if they were to consciously carry their moral and ethical vision to the public sphere, a lot of the corruption cases or challenges that confront our country will be minimized. The point is, Christians are knowledgeable about the things acceptable by Christ and the things that are abominable to Him. If only Christians will accept their responsibilities and get themselves involved in the political affairs of this nation, the government will be able to suppress evil, stand against corruption, money laundering, killing, kidnapping, thuggery, and many other moral excesses devastating our nation today. The needy are out there with no hope of a better tomorrow all because some of the leaders we have only care about their selfish desires, interest and not those of their masses. We need Christians

who are willing to cater for the needs of everyone to get involved in politics, business, buying and selling, farming, schooling, entrepreneurship, and all of life.

It is also the responsibility of Christians to raise Godly families. People who would make the society a better place and not become a menace to it. When a leader lives in alignment with God's character, he or she places themselves in a position to be blessed by God, whereas unrighteous leaders are never in a place or position wherein God can extend them His divine favour in as gracious a proportion.

## **Biblical Examples of the Politics of Righteousness**

Often, we think that being right and being righteous are always the same thing. While most of the time there is a difference between being in right standing in the eyes of God and being politically correct. Let's look at three Biblical examples of righteous men who were righteous even though they were not politically correct.

### ***Abraham vs. Lot***

In Genesis 13:7 we see a family feud between the two enterprises of Abraham and Lot: "and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land." As a result of the argument, Abraham and Lot decide to split the land accordingly. Peculiarly, Abraham gives Lot the first pick.

Was Abraham politically right to take the second draft pick? No. The promise of the land was given to him, not Lot. But because Abraham was a righteous man, He chose to value his relationships more than the material possession.

### ***David vs. Saul***

The story of King Saul and the young David is like a political conspiracy theory movie. A corrupt politician sees the threat a young rising leader poses to his rule and tries to kill him. On two occasions David gets the opportunity to kill his enemy but refuses to do so. "I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord's anointed," said David (1 Samuel 24:10). Was it the right

thing to do? Not unless you wanted to live another five years running away. But was it the righteous thing to do? We all know it was.

### ***Jesus vs. Humanity***

The most history-shaking decision ever made was for Jesus to decide to die on a cross for the sins of humankind. Was it right to crucify an innocent man? No. Was it right for Jesus to not stand up for His own rights? No. But because He knew the bigger plan and the bigger picture, he chose to be wrongly accused and to be perceived as politically wrong in order that we will all be spiritually and politically right.

Righteousness and being correct aren't always the same thing. When faced with a scenario where you have to choose between the two, which would you go for?

## **The Cultural Lenses through which We Process Politics**

We often process our political ideas through the lenses of culture. We have three cultural lenses that we face as individuals:

### ***a) Our Tribal or Ethnic Culture***

We cannot separate ourselves from our culture. Culture is everything about who we are and what we do. Politics is part and parcel of our culture. For instance, our religion, social life, art and music, agriculture, science, medicine, dance and drama, religion, politics, dressing and clothing style, eating habits, building habits and so on are all ingrained in our cultural world. Everything in our culture is dynamic and changes. But the worst thing that resists change in culture is our religious beliefs. So, the politicisation of religion in Nigeria has corrupted our political principles and way of life to the extent that our ability to recognise human dignity and build our political activities and actions

on that basis has become extremely difficult.<sup>29</sup> We now have a situation whereby we largely have religiosity without morality.

### **b) Our Christian Culture**

Christian history, tradition, worldview, experience and so on are imbedded in the Christian culture. The written revelation of God brings to us the biblical worldview, which the Indian born philosopher, turned biblical theologian, Vishal Mangalwadi (2011) says, "The Bible is the only force known to history that has freed entire nations from corruption while simultaneously giving them political freedom." The Christians culture brings God into the equation when discussing politics, organising the society, and administering it according to the perception of biblical love and justice. Bible helps us to grasp the fact that politics is God's idea, not humans. The writer of Genesis and of the Gospel of John both tell us something significantly important about what politics entails. The Bible says humans do not come from apes, but from God. It says, God is love, just and righteous. God is independent of what he has created. He is independent of time and space. So, we read, "In the beginning God created." He created all there is and out of love He created humans in his image to be like him. He intended all things for his glory. Paul draws our attention to the fact that, "Everything comes from God, everything exists by his power and everything is intended for his glory" (Romans 11:36 NLT). Over and above everything we get from the Christian culture is the fact that we have human dignity because God so loved us and created us in his image to be his image bearers in the world that he has equally created out of love.

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<sup>29</sup> Although not a perfect example, Nigeria can learn from India and how they are navigating around their religious plurality. For a discussion on this subject see, for example, Mithi Mukherjee, "Transcending Identity: Gandhi, Nonviolence, and the Pursuit of a 'Different' Freedom in Modern India," *American Historical Review* 115 (April 2010): 453-473; Pantham, Thomas, "Religious Diversity and National Unity: The Gandhian and Hindutva Visions." In V. R. Mehta and Thomas Pantham, eds., *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 221-237; Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, Translated by Georgia Albert (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999 [1994]).

Through the temptation that our parents Adam and Eve fell into we sinned, and we got corrupted, depraved to the extent that we have all fallen short of God's glory. We became depraved to the extent that we could not save ourselves. But because God is love, and it was love that made Him choose to create everything there is, He refused to give up on us even after He had judged the human race, the world, and punished it because of its sin. Yet love will not let Him go to sleep and leave us. Consequently, He came down to save us through God the Son, Christ Jesus. Christ's incarnation, as recorded in John 1:1-2, 14, further revealed to humans that by God creating them in His image it means they actually have God-given dignity, which is why He instituted politics in the beginning. He created us so that we will protect each other's dignity and dignity of the environment, the creation. To confirm the hidden treasure, we have—human dignity— because God created us in His image, Jesus took on human flesh; in order to save us from our sins and from the blindness brought about by the sin factor, where we no longer realise our human dignity. This important worldview was kept hidden to the extent that no civilisation—Greek and the Islamic—ever discovered that secret.

However, in God's providence, in the Christian tradition and history, we have it that it was the monks in the Middle Ages, through the careful reading and use of their mental faculty, that they were able to bring together what God's Word wanted us to learn from the creation narrative in Genesis 1:27-28 and the incarnation narrative in John 1:1-2, 14. Prior to this time, Jesus had talked about the fact that we humans are more important than the Sabbath, the birds and the lilies of the fields, etc. But God's people were not able to make sense of that until the Holy Spirit—The Spirit of Truth—guided and led the monks to their epiphany. The monks were using their minds to seek the truth of God. They used faith, reason, and logic in studying the Word of God. Consequently, when the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth chose to guide and lead them to the truth in the Middle Ages, they were able to reason and logically conclude that humans have dignity. They also concluded that if God, who is independent used the material things to create humans in his image, it means that humans can equally create things that will promote, protect, and defend their human dignity.

To the monks that means that they do not have to use their muscles to do everything. Rather, God has given them the ability to transfer their thinking ability to create things using the material things. That is, they believe that God has given them the ability to transfer the power of their muscles into material things so that those material things can work for them. It was from the monks' discovered idea of human dignity that humans were ushered into a technological age and eventually into the industrial revolution. That is to say that from then onward everything else humans do, including politics, technology, science, religion and so on are to have one goal: the respect, protection, promotion and the defence of human dignity and the environment where humans live, walk, and have their beings.

### ***c) Our Blended Societal and Global Culture***

Today, Western civilisation and politics have given rise to globalisation of culture.

Our world is interconnected by reason of the digital, internet or electronic media revolution. Today, we are in what is best described as the age of digital economy. We are living in a global village. Today, humans have enhanced technology by harnessing the power of fire and using it to build computers, bridges, internets, transportation, industrialisation, and so on. Our political culture has become sophisticated and complicated. The result is the corruption of everything humans touch, including politics. However, like John Stott would say, humans are still capable of tremendous good and equally capable of tremendous evil (Agang 2016).

## **Conclusion**

Christians should enter into politics and point to God's righteous laws that can bring good benefit for the populace and lasting happiness as well. In the heart of a public servant, there must be regard for the human dignity of others whom you serve as being more important than yourself. God requires that leaders whom He appoints to govern a country, His ordained institution of the state, be a blessing to the people they serve. Ecclesiastes 8:9 specifically speaks to the degree of selflessness a leader must possess in his job: "A man has



exercised authority over another man to his hurt.” This is a powerful way of putting it: *a leader is to be so selfless that it hurts his own interests!* It is only from this biblical theology, the ensuing knowledge of this biblical theology, his understanding of this biblical theology, and his submission to this biblical theology that one can possibly possess the realisation that God has called him or her to office to serve in this way, to this degree; it must cost him or her something; it must mean personal sacrifice of self-interest and the will to lord it over others! Only then can selfish motives possibly be eradicated and replaced by the *righteous* motives of love, justice and selfless service commanded of us in Scripture!

Our pastors need to be reoriented towards looking at their members as people who have all the potential to be in all works of life and equip them for a way of life that makes it possible for them to grasp the public implication of their faith, which includes, among other things, recognising God as the Creator of all there is, recognising our creation in the image of God, and recognising the Fall of humanity, which have both created a situation whereby humans are not only capable of doing tremendous good, but equally capable of doing tremendous evil. And this includes every aspect of human activities. Our churches are supposed to be where men and women are infused with moral consciousness that enable them to stay afloat wherever they find themselves in life, private or public, politics or no politics. So, the assumption we have whenever we read Proverbs 14:38 is that it is talking about the righteousness of the leaders. As such, it becomes apparent that righteousness is only expected when a Christian gets into a political leadership position.

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