

**THE ROLE OF A PROPHETIC CHURCH  
IN THE  
CONTEXT OF POVERTY IN AFRICA**

***DR. JOSIAH KINYUA MURAGE  
KARATINA UNIVERSITY***

KARAKAK UNIVERSITY 17<sup>TH</sup>  
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# Introduction

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It is evident that, the post colonial Africa was engulfed by military coups, civil wars, repressive regimes, and refugee flows, and was suffering from economic stagnation by 1970. This has been seen as a miracle because many African states did not crumble like Somalia- given the extremity of its internal illegitimacy. With the demise of Cold War in late 1980s, obstacles to political transformation on the continent by Cold War protagonists ceased, hence, bringing new hope to Africa.

As many African countries start celebrating the coming of a new liberated Africa, the HIV and AIDS pandemic struck. This means that the HI virus only joined other viruses such as: Poverty, Negative globalization, Debt, SAPS, Tribalism and ethnic wars.

- In the midst of the above calamities, there is interplay between the misuse of power, bad politics, authoritarianism, pseudo-democracies and corruption by the powerful and privileged minority political ruling elites that seems to worsen the dilapidated socio-economic and political structures hence, perpetuating poverty.

# Suffocating space of the betrayed poor

- It is paradoxical to note that even though African countries continued to receive huge sums of money from former colonial masters, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as a way of poverty alleviation, many people are still trapped in a circular space of deprivation. Robert Chambers compares this with a person put on a rubber boat in a crocodile-infested river, without anything to row and being unable to swim

# Dysfunctional governing systems

- While it is true that the alleviation of poverty as a phenomenon in Africa requires a multi- dimension approach, one of the methods proposed in this paper is the liberation of the poor. It is clear that the powerful minority and privileged political elites in many African countries have been identified as predators of development.

- They use their powerful positions to manipulate the systems of government to their advantage. They also introduce corruption in every system of the government, thus weakening the public infrastructure by diverting the public resources into their pockets. And for any project to be initiated kickbacks are introduced into the system. For instance, most of the schools and hospitals in some African countries deteriorate because of a lack of equipments and maintenance, or because they are under- staffed or the equipments has been squandered or stolen.

- When engaging in businesses, getting a permit in some African countries is made almost impossible unless one pays bribes. In the state bureaucracies corruption becomes endemic with regulations put in place to create conducive space for bribery. Such scenario triggers the quest for liberation. Of course it is known that the quest for liberation is triggered by myriad reasons and it takes place when there is convergence of them. This includes class struggles, economic problems, state-sponsored corruption, cronyism and weak public institutions( read North Africa & Middle).

# Transformation as a process of humanization

- From the above it becomes clear that development of the people needs to be embraced in holistic terms if there is any meaningful transformation going to occur. Definitely, transformation add value to development and in Christian sense transformation is part of God's continuing action of redemption in history to restore all creation to God-self and to its rightful purpose and relationships.

- Vices like oppression, injustice, hatred, selfishness, and exploitation places human being in need of God's restoration and transformation. This involves a transformation of the human condition, human relationships, the whole of society and creation; and is applicable to both the poor and the rich. Therefore, there is need for Christian to investigate the root cause of poverty.

- For instance, it is known that in undemocratic countries the poor are deprived of their right to access public facilities such as health care or schools and the powerful political elites promote social and political inequalities, hence increasing poverty to the already marginalised poor people. In such a situation, if any meaningful development is to take place, then there must be a transformation in terms of quality of governance and enhancement of life.

- This transformation as a process of humanisation means liberating the poor masses from powerful political elites who act as predators of development.
- Amartya Sen, the Bangladesh Nobel Prize winning economist, offers a compelling theory of the problem that development faces. He sees liberation as both an end and a means to development because freedom provides people with the opportunity to receive basic primary education and liberty to participate in elections, or public policy making. For him freedom promotes other type of freedom.

- Before Sen was the Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire who affirmed that the obstacle that prevents people from becoming liberated is the “oppressive reality that absorbs” them in such a way that their consciousness is “submerged.” In the quest for liberation, Freire calls for the oppressed to take an active role in their liberation. He insists that: the oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption.

- Essential to Freire is the conviction that all people, especially the oppressed, have the capacity to rise to the challenge of becoming more human by overcoming dehumanisation. However for them to overcome the problem of oppression they need to undertake the process of conscientisation, which includes the arousing of a person's positive self-concept in relation to the environment and society. This is where the church can play a decisive role in empowering the people.

# Space of a prophetic church and a theology of power

- The ancient Greek concepts of space and place, in relation to our being human, are very helpful to our understanding of a theology of power. The ancient Greek refer to space and place respectively as *chora* and *choreo*, which means an open space or land. *Chora* can be interpreted as “to give room”, and in metaphorical language, it can also refer to the intellectual and spiritual capacity of being able “to understand.”

One of the main factors that determine space is power. Many life problems are not so much issues of personality and personality traits or personal characteristic, but reactions and human responses to the power within the systemic space and networking of relationships. Hence, power relations play a paramount role in the formation of human identity. The Christian faith has always attributed power to God, and in this sense, God is seen as omnipotent and almighty.

- Equally, the biblical tradition perceives power as that which is derived from God and the history of Israel is viewed as beginning with the experience of liberation from Egypt (Ex 15:3-19). Indeed, Israel met the power of God in this liberation experience. Bonino insists that human power is relative in contrast to this absolute power, which is true of our power over nature as well as of political power.

- It is our assertion that the eradication of unjust structures should compel the church to take power “not as a club to be used in the service of personal enhancement but rather as a gift in the service of the community and spiritual fulfillment of all people, especially the powerless.

- Faith communities are obliged to use power in the service of God and for the common good of all. As such, the power of God is seen as that which brings freedom rather than enslavement. In fact religions are at their most powerful, and simultaneously, at their most distinctive, when they operate in the realm of intimacy. Moreover, religions have operated all types of power; therefore, the power in religion can be used either negatively or positively. In other words, such power can be either a source of domination or a source of renewal and transformation.

- In her prophetic role, the church is obliged to use her power for the wellbeing of the society and the environment, thus, working to liberate the weak and the vulnerable. Louw (2008:77) explains that empowering people deals with the issues, which are “related to power and all the abuse of power.” The purpose of this gesture is to confront powerful institutions and to expose their abuse of power.

# Prophetic church in democratisation process

- The challenge facing the faith communities in Africa is how to educate society fully to be responsible citizens and fight for democracy. This is because a responsible society is one that creates an environment that is conducive and provides opportunities for all, including the vulnerable.

- Therefore, working for democracy should be the concern for a prophetic church in Africa; and as a community of faith, the church should be concerned not only with electoral matters, but also with the socio-economic and political conditions of the poor. This is because the church has a major social responsibility in democracy as a vision, the basic elements of which are freedom, equality, justice, and fullness of life.

## The task of a prophetic church in the face of structural poverty

- While it is true that many church denominations engage in poverty alleviation programmes as a way of averting the suffering of the poor, it is noted that most of them seems to focus on Christian charity and ignore to address systemic or structural poverty. It is noted that where individual pastors or theologians attempt to address systemic injustice that creates structural poverty -some church denominations tend to ignore them.

- Yet by engaging in the democratisation process, the church or individual pastors would be carrying out their prophetic task. The prophets of the Old Testament clearly condemned the kings when they engaged in systemic injustices. This is why the church, which keeps silent and refuses to participate in the democratic process when the vulnerable are suffering due to unjust political systems, is said to be ignoring her prophetic role. The challenge for the prophetic church is to be a strong leader in the fight against dehumanizing structures.

- The task of such church in Africa include: addressing exploitation of people and natural resources, low wages, child labour, and corruption. It should also seek to challenge all types of economic, religious and political structures that contribute to the suffering of the poor. The prophetic church in her advocacy ministry is capable of involving herself in challenging the above deprivation; for the church has the machinery –people at the grassroots - to challenge the government policies that directly or indirectly perpetuate poverty and injustice against the poor.

- Furthermore, the best way to make a defiant government pay attention to the plight of the vulnerable poor is through advocacy and lobbying. Steve De Gruchy cautions that when the church focuses on the ultimate, that is, the coming of the kingdom (eternal life) and refuses to participate in the pre-ultimate (this present world); she does not understand her purpose on earth.

- This is because the mission of the church is a multifaceted ministry, which includes many activities such as pastoral care, counselling, witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting and contextualisation. In fact the ministry of Jesus is depicted in the New Testament as that of crushing the chains of slavery, thereby freeing humanity from ungodly principalities and powers that hinder their relationship with God and others human beings.

- Jesus defined the nature of his ministry as that of preaching the good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19). Hence, through Christ the poor are offered freedom to rebel against every oppressing structure. The above theological understanding of the work of the church in the context of poverty is important, for it is based on the notion that poverty is a socio-economic and political problem.

# Constructive dialogue as a model for intervention

- In a climate where there is an extensive official violence, systematic torture, surveillance, censorship, abductions, detentions without trial, and the deadly use of police and armed forces, the ability of any organisation to rise against such regime is severely limited. As a result, the church becomes the only remaining and available channel for expressing the people's discontent and the desire for change in the country

- The notion of world church leaders fighting the state's injustices is well represented in the works of David Gitari Mukuba, Henry Okullu, Muge, Timothy Murere Njoya, Dom Helder Camara, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Maximilian Kolbe, Oscar Romeo, Maria Skobtsova and Martin Luther King Jr. among others. Although some like Muge, Bonhoeffer, Kolbe, Romeo, and King Jr died in their activism, their death was interpreted by the church as martyrdom.

# Conclusion

- During his time, King Jr. taught the church the art of persuading the opponents (state) even though the rival (state) was turning violent. When the church fights injustice in the society, the battle is between the forces of light *vis-à-vis* the forces of darkness. In fact the church has three distinct, mutually exclusive options: (a) to speak out and expect to be criticized by government for doing so; (b) to publicly keep quiet, but seek to change government policy by persuasion (behind the scenes); or

- (c) to refuse to engage the regime in direct public confrontation. However, the best option is for the church to speak out and engage the state in constructive dialogue as a method of intervention. In this approach, the church in her prophetic ministry should become critical of the state's injustices and contribute constructively to the socio-economic and political issues.

**THE END**