

THE PARTICIPATION OF THE CHURCH IN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The Christian faith is living; it transcends worship and the issuing of doctrinal statements and veers into socio-political domains. In this paper, the author reflects on Kwesi Yirenkyi's work, "The Role of Christian Churches in National Politics: Reflections from Laity and Clergy in Ghana;" and also works of the Christian Council of Ghana and the Catholic Bishops' Conference; and reiterates the position that, the Church has been playing its prophetic role, not only as a social critic but also in political education, motivating its members to participate in the democratic process. The Church has played this role actively in Ghana since the 1980s. Even though it has generally been non-partisan in politics, the Church has every right to participate in the political process and to make her voice heard on social policies.

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Introduction

The topic one is about to reflect on assumes that the Christian Faith is living; that the Christian faith transcends, worship and the issuing of doctrinal statements. The challenge is for Christians to live out their faith in Christ in socio-political arena. In this article we shall, using Kwasi Yirenkyi's study: *"The Role of Christian Churches in National Politics: Reflections from Laity and Clergy in Ghana,"* as a major source, attempt to present what one considers to be the churches' participation in the socio-political issues of our country as can be gathered mainly from the works of the Christian Council of Ghana (C.C.G) and the Catholic Bishops' Conference (CBC).

The Christian Council of Ghana (CCG), recognizing the role of the Church as a major social partner, has since its establishment sought an increased engagement between its churches and affiliated groups with local and national government on social and economic practices that impact human welfare and development.

Through its collaborative work with other Christian bodies and civil society organizations, the Council, has from time to time provided fora for joint action on issues of common interest, the intent of which is to advocate for the voiceless in the Ghanaian society. Through to its objectives, the Council has over the years proven to be the voice of the voiceless in society.

National Politics

In the year 2000 Kwasi Yirenkyi, A Ghanaian Sociologist whose specialty is Sociology of Religion conducted a research on "The Role of Christian Churches in National Politics: Reflections from Laity and Clergy in Ghana." The research drew on various forms of data: a 1994 survey questionnaire, in-depth interviews and content analysis of existing data, involving the responses of 335 surveyed individuals, 110 in-depth interviewed individuals, drawn from the Protestant and Catholic churches who were interviewed on a variety of church and political issues.

The study concluded that since the 1980s, Ghanaian Christians have been actively involved in politics than ever before. These findings, according to the study, have important implications for the role religion plays in the political development of Ghana. The study noted that in the absence of viable structures for justice in many African countries that are struggling to evolve new democratic systems, the church claims to speak for the silent majority.

A review of the literature on religion and politics in Ghana reveals that since the 1980s, the church has taken a more activist role in national politics than at any other time in its history. Much of the church's political activity was initiated collectively under the umbrella of the CCG, the CBC with its related body, the National Catholic Secretariat (NCS). Church leaders have in their writings and speeches constantly advocated the church's political participation. For example, in analyzing the church's socio-ethical and historical role in Ghanaian politics, Kudadjie and Aboagye Mensah stated that "the church has a valid case to be involved in the affairs of the state in all aspects including national politics."²

In the second volume of their work, Kudadjie and Aboagye Mensah described the Church as "moral conscience" of the nation, a claim the Christian Council of Ghana constantly made in a number of Pronouncements and Memoranda they issued years before Ghana's Independence. For example, in August 1949 shortly after the Coussey Committee had submitted its proposals for preparing the country for self-government, the Christian Council issued a public statement under the title: *Christianity and Political Development*. This statement, which was signed by fifteen members of the Council's executive Committee including the General Secretary, Revds J. Bardsley, Prof Christian Baeta, M. B. Taylor and Dr Eugene Grau read as follows:

² Joshua N. Kudadjie, and R.K. Aboagye-Mensah, *The Christian and National Politics* Vol. 1 (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1991), 3.

We the undersigned are convinced that the political issues of the present time cannot be rightly understood without reference to the moral and spiritual principles underlying them. We therefore call upon all men and women of goodwill to give their assent to the following principles as being in accordance with the Christian faith and to be guided by them in their thinking, speaking and action:

- 1. We recognize that the Gold Coast, like any other country, has a natural right to self-government. It is the will of God that this country should enjoy good governance, that it should have a government, which finds out, so far as it can, the real will of the people, protects the freedom and rights of conscience of minorities, secures freedom of worship, makes justice available for all, promotes the physical and moral welfare of the people by efficient planning and administration.*
- 2. Good government requires that there should be sufficient men of ability and integrity for the control of the administration at the top for the execution of its orders at other levels.*
- 3. Bribery and corruption should be banished by the vigilance of the authorities, influence of the church, and the absolute refusal of all citizens to take or offer bribes . . .*
- 4. All races are equal before God and have the right to the same respect and to fair and just treatment. The law of Christ condemns all racial or colour discrimination whether aimed against Africans or non-Africans.*
- 5. The church consists of people of goodwill who hold different views on the affairs of their country and support different political, economic and social programmes. The church, therefore,*

cannot be identified with any particular party or programme.

6. We believe that peaceful means of effecting political change are still available in this country and that this being so, violent revolution should not be resorted to.

7. Christians are to the world what the soul is to the body. They should be the best citizens of the state, because they pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven.”³

In 1960 the Council issued a memorandum reaffirming its position promulgated in the 1940s and 50s. The said memorandum read in part as follows:

. . . . To determine the role of the Christian Council in a modern state, it is necessary to ask: Is it operating in a free country or not? Where there is real freedom, the church rejoices in it and accepts the wider responsibility such freedom brings . . . If the government of Ghana welcomes criticism, it becomes our duty, as a free association in a free country to take the government at its word, and express our mind to it frankly, not because we are so arrogant as to think we are always right, but because it is of the very nature and health and well-being of a free community that men should speak their mind freely and it is the special duty of the church to seek to bring to the scrutiny of

³ James Anquandah, *Agenda Extraordinaire, 70 Years of The Christian Council of Ghana 1929 – 2009* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2007), 113-114.

*public affairs a mind and conscience
illuminated by the Spirit of God.*⁴

At no time in the history of the Christian Council has it shirked its political responsibility to the country. The Council opposed the dreaded Preventive Detention Act, which empowered the government to hold some citizens in detention for long periods without trial.

During the military regime of the “National Redemption Council” and “Supreme Military Council”, the Christian Council and the National Catholic Secretariat issued a joint memorandum to the Supreme Military Council (SMC) ¹ expressing grave concern at the atrocities and abuse of freedom of expression associated with the Union Government campaign.

On June 12, 1979, eight days after the overthrow of the SMC ² and the establishment of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) chaired by the Flt Lt J. J. Rawlings, the Christian Council and the NCS issued a joint memorandum to the AFRC protesting against the violence and bloodshed that had characterized the revolution. The memorandum raised serious grievous issues including the following:

- *We regret that there has been so much violence in what we believe was intended to be a bloodless takeover.*
- *We understand that the national house-cleaning should be seen as only part of the serious political and economic problems that need to be tackled. We are glad to learn that it is the intention of the Armed Forces not to cling to power; and we hope that the AFRC would make a public commitment on a firm date for return to constitutional rule, because such a commitment is*

⁴ Anquandah, *Agenda Extraordinaire*, 115.

*necessary to win for us the international sympathy without which our efforts at rebuilding our shattered economy will be virtually impossible.*⁵

Under the Provisional National Democratic Council (PNDC) regime, the Council issued a memorandum, which was read in the member churches. The memorandum signed by the Council's Chairman, the late Rev N. K. Dzobo read as follows:

*In our pastoral letter to you dated 12th January, 1982, after the 31st December Revolution, we drew your attention to some of the negative aspects of our lives that had brought about the need for a change but definitely not the type of change we see today: a change characterized by violence, intimidation, divisiveness, indiscipline, lawlessness and insecurity. As servants of God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot sit down unconcerned to see our country torn apart – we owe a duty to our compatriots and to posterity. As your leaders we call on you to join us in asking the PNDC to consider handing over power to a well constituted national government to save our dear country from further destruction. Our call for the PNDC government to hand over power is not out of malice or hatred but purely from a genuine concern and love for our country.*⁶

The above memorandum to the member churches was followed up by another to the PNDC noting with deep concern the following, which had become painfully evident in the country under the PNDC: Firstly, the lack of peace, tranquility and stability in the land and the lack of confidence in Ghana's

⁵ Aquandah, *Agenda Extraordinaire*, 117.

⁶ Aquandah, *Agenda Extraordinaire* 118-119.

economic future on the basis of which concerns the PNDC was urged to hand over power. The memorandum read as follows:

Before the year 1982 ends, we would like to have peace in the country. The country belongs to all of us, both old and young. As a result, we the Christians are calling for an immediate dialogue between the PNDC and organizations, market women organizations, professional bodies, farmers and fishermen's organizations, artisans, commercial and industrial organizations, elder statesmen, heads of educational institutions, press representatives, students' representatives, teachers, ex-servicemen, etc. In line with our objective of seeking peace and reconciliation, we call upon the PNDC, as soon as arrangements can be made, to hand over the administration of the country to a Government of National Reconciliation composed of all shades of opinion, including identifiable groups, so as to salvage the economy and bring discipline, law and order to the system and prepare country for a popularly-elected government in 1983. We reiterate that this is not out of hostility to the PNDC but out of love for Ghana.⁷

The Most Rev. Peter Akwasi Sarpong, the Archbishop Emeritus of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, in support of Christian participation in the socio-political issues of the country noted as follows: "Christ wants his church not to be

⁷ Aquandah, *Agenda Extraordinaire*, 120.

meaningless in society or to be pushed to the periphery . . . [but] to be right at the centre of things, right where the action is.”⁸

There is no doubt that the generality of the Ghanaian Christian leadership, as can be seen from the writings of individual Christian leaders, synodical and Conference statements, pronouncements and communiqué, has not only called on the faithful to be actively involved in socio-political issues but has addressed such issues with a view to ensuring justice and peace in the country. The question is, are Ghanaian Christians listening to the call of the Christian leadership? Should the clergy or the church be involved in politics and does the laity support the clergy in respect of their involvement in politics?

Studies by Kwasi Yirenkyi indicates that the laity is evenly divided (41.6%, yes; and 43.3%, no) on the issue of clergy’s active involvement in politics. 14% were not sure and a paltry 1.1% had no strong opinion on the issue of clergy’s involvement in politics. Those who, on the one hand, held the view that it was alright for the clergy to be involved in politics explained their position in terms of the conviction that the clergy constitute a class of people who could not easily be intimidated by any government. They held the view that the clergy were insulated from the risks individual laypersons might face from brutal regimes. Those who had no problems with the clergy getting involved in politics were of the view that the clergy had a moral obligation to be involved in the political process.

Those who, on the other hand did not think that the clergy should be involved in politics did so from a variety of perspectives. One of their explanations is that scripture is at best ambiguous about Christian participation in politics. They also pointed to the variety of theological positions that appear to be irreconcilable with political participation, and to the difficulty associated with their own involvement in politics. For instance,

⁸ Peter K. Sarpong, “What Church, What Priesthood for Africa?” in *Theological Education in Africa: Quo Vadimus?* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), 9.

they pointed out that politics stirs a lot of emotions and the minister has to learn to walk a tight line to avoid offending a segment of the congregants, thereby dividing his/her congregation and the larger society in the process.

The fact is there is conflicting expectation when it comes to the clergy involvement in politics. A segment of the congregation and the larger society, including various military regimes and governments, expect the clergy to get involved in politics, so long as this involvement does not include criticism of the political parties or social policies they support. When the clergy criticize a government, which has support from the majority of the congregants, they are reminded that their duty is to preach the gospel. Thus, on one hand, the clergy are criticized for getting involved.

On the other hand, if they do not get involved, they are told that their indifference reflects a lack of concern for nation-building. These unflinching expectations in the political arena serve to intimidate some clergy. The unflinching expectations, notwithstanding, extensive calling for Christian participation in the political issues and the ongoing Christian political activities clergy indicate active Christian participation in local and national politics. Many of the current parliamentarians and some of the cabinet ministers claim to be Christians and regularly attend church.

On the question as to whether the pulpit should be used to address specific political issues, 62.4% of the laity respondents wanted the clergy to use the pulpit to address specific political issues, whereas 50% of the clergy supported that position.

The clergy involvement in politics and the use of the pulpit for political discourse have always been controversial issues in many church denominations. There is always the need to weigh one's options and the practical consequences of one's actions.

One agrees with the position on involvement with socio-political issues. However, one would worry that pastors who actively get themselves involved in socio-political issues must note that they may not be able to satisfy everyone in the congregation when they speak out.

Yirenkyi's study⁹, which serves as a major source of this work, indicates: "*it is only in political education that more clergy than laity support church involvement.*" Yirenkye further notes: "nearly three quarters (73.5 percent) of the clergy and 60.7 percent of the laity [surveyed] believe that their churches should be responsible for political education".

Consequently, the church has been actively involved in political education. The church's political education has a twofold objective. The first, as rightly noted by Yirenkyi, "is to prepare Christian for national elections, make them aware of their civil rights, and educate them about government policies and programmes."

"The second," as noted by Yirenkyi "is to act as the moral conscience of the society." Thus "apart from participating in the electoral processes, the churches led by the CCG and NCS with the parent body of CBC have organized numerous educational seminars on a variety of sociopolitical and economic issues at the local, regional and national levels." After these seminars the Christian institutions produced literature in the form of pamphlets to address key socio-political "issues such as the role of the church in the promotion of ecumenism and a democratic culture, individual and other human rights, gender issues, the role of the Christian in the socio-political and economic development of the nation, and the role of the media in a democracy."

Recently, the CCG and National Pentecostal Council as well as the Catholic Secretariat have been involved in the oil and gas issues. A number of sensitization workshops have been held on oil and gas; to build capacity of constituents on the impact and effects of the oil gas production and manage expectations.

⁹ Kwasi Yirenkye "The Role of Christian Churches in National Politics: Reflection from Laity and Clergy in Ghana." <https://www.findarticles.com> Published: 01 October 2000. Accessed 2014.

As a moral conscience of society, the church through its bodies, CCG, NCS, Ghana Bishop's Conference (GBC) and Ghana Pentecostal Council (GPC) spoke and continues to speak against the evils of the government and the nation. "They took steps to educate the people and the government on the issues at stake; ... they discouraged violence, chaos and bitterness."¹⁰

Yirenkyi refers to a paper: "The Church and State: Christian Council and National Affairs."¹¹ In this paper, the CCG has presented its moral and prophetic role on some specific sociopolitical issues from 1941-1994. In 1979, for example, the CCG submitted two memoranda urging the government, during the heavy days of political upheaval in the country, to "exercise justice, fair play, and respect for human rights" and also advised against "arbitrary death sentences."¹² In the second memorandum, the Council expressed grave concern about executions and insisted that arrested persons should be given the opportunity of public trial.¹³ A number of such memoranda and pastoral letters touching on a variety of issues were sent in subsequent years aimed at addressing concerns about justice, insecurity coupled with frustration of citizens, socio-economic deterioration, education, and attacks on churches. As observed by Yirenkyi between 1941-1994 about sixty of such letters were issued. Forty of the said sixty were submitted in the 1980s alone. The frequency and the sheer number of these memoranda and pastoral letters served to indicate the seriousness with which the church viewed the political violence against Ghanaians of which the church was hardly spared. The Christian Council's Pastoral letter to Ghanaian Christians regarding attacks on the Methodist Church Ghana, 25th November, 1982; Joint Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Hierarchy of Ghana, 1990, Joint Pastoral Letters, 10th Anniversary, 1980-

¹⁰ John S. Pobee, *Religion and Politics in Ghana* (Accra Asempa Publishers, 1991), 72.

¹¹ A Call to Citizen 1992; Communiqué, 1994, 1993, 1991.

¹² CCG and GBC Pastoral letters, 12, 22 June 1979.

¹³ CCG and GBC Pastoral Letters, 26 June, 1979.

1990 attest to the attack on the church. “These letters affirm the church’s self-assertion as the “moral conscience of the society.”

One agrees with Professor John Pobee in his assertion that “the historic churches have continued to be the voice of the voiceless; the champion of freedom, integrity, and fair play in natural politics.”¹⁴ Pobee further asserts that “the churches stood guard over human dignity and justice with a human face.... It was a courageous stand to take in a context of immense violence, intolerance, and recklessness of soldiers.”¹⁵ The imminent Ghanaian Sociologist, Professor Max Assimeng had noted earlier: “The act of brutality that intimidated the masses led the church to act collectively.”¹⁶ He further observed:

*Leading Christians have been quite vocal in their assessment of the Rawlings regimes... the terror inherent in their regimes has been such that only established bodies such as the Christian Council, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference, and the Association of Professional Bodies, have been capable of Collectively expressing condemnation of the regimes.*¹⁷

Conclusion

It is important for us to understand that religion in general has a double function of legitimating both the status quo and protest. Studies in respect of the church’s participation in socio-political issues, have clearly indicated that the Church has creditably undertook this dual responsibility. The church has insisted on its prophetic role as a social critic in the political arena and challenged unparallel politico-military violence. This Ghanaian

¹⁴Pobee, Religion and Politics in Ghana, 59.

¹⁵Pobee, Religion and Politics in Ghana, 62.

¹⁷Assimeng, Religion and Social Change in West Africa,242.

Christian political participation has primary been based on social justice issues. The church also educated Christian about their civil rights and motivated them to participate in the democratic process. In fulfilling this educational objective, the generality of the church stayed clear of partisan politics. The church has every right to participate in the political process and to make her voice heard on social policies.

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