

Nigeria: Imperatives for an Egalitarian State

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Abstract

The imperative of an egalitarian state in Nigeria which recognizes the equality of all people is aimed at creating a Nigerian community. This is because the sense of community in Nigeria has shrunk to the size of one ethnic group or religious organization, and for many it is so small as to be limited to family or friends. Ministry in the Church today requires courage and compassion to denounce any act of injustice perpetuated in the society by government or any other institution. For a society or community to be worthy of itself and its people, it has to have a broader understanding of the responsibilities that all have for all. It needs compelling vision that links the future of the society with the care of the whole community of people that comprise it. The sure path to an egalitarian state that leads to development in Nigeria is good governance. Without good governance, no matter our resources, our dreams, our vision, our good will, we cannot achieve anything. With good governance, the Nigerian populace will be given something to hope for and will be ready to rise up to the challenges of the 21st century.

1. Preamble

Egalitarianism is a line of thought that favors equality of some sort. Its general premise is that people should be treated as equals on certain dimensions such as race, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, economic status, social status and cultural heritage. Egalitarian doctrines maintain that all humans are equal in fundamental worth or social status. This is supported by biblical teaching of fundamental equality of women and men of all racial

and ethnic mixes, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. To this effect, Christian thought holds that 'in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, man nor woman', defining all as equal in the sight of God.

Politically, the egalitarian idea is that people, no matter what their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and so on, are all equal in value. Egalitarianism in politics means that both male and female are equally capable of holding an office. For Nigeria to attain these basic imperatives to establish an egalitarian state there has to be an in-house cleaning and establishment of credibility and trust in our leadership. This is so because the leadership of the country has continued to display a high level of dishonesty in the discharge of national duty. One of the problems we have consistently faced is failure of leadership from military through democratic administrations. Instead of displaying a high level of honesty in the discharge of national duty, Nigerian leaders are masters in the art of corruption. This was one the aims of the Human Rights Investigation Commission set up by the Presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo geared toward commitment to transparency, openness, and rule of law. The country is in need of leaders that the citizens can trust for their security and well-being.

Nigeria has all the human and natural resources required to get back on the right track. It is on the basis of this assumption that patriotic Nigerians within and outside should not give up on the country, but continue to utilize their God-given talents, time and treasure for the holistic development of our nation. To achieve our desired objective and vision for a great Nigerian community that we can all be proud of, we must be united in our vision. There is great need to believe in oneself as possessing the ability to achieve greatness.

2. Some Basic Factors

On the religious realm, no matter your religious belief, it is worth understanding that the Mosque or Church does not exist only for

itself but for the world. This is certainly the case for theology either Christian or Islamic as the German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann (1999), argues:

Theology cannot merely be a function of the Church. Like the Church, it has its primary function in relation to the Kingdom of God, and his Kingdom begins here on earth. This is the basic premise of the public character of any theological exposition, and the reason why every theological exegesis must engage in matters that affect the public life. Theology must address modern structures such as globalization, ecology, pluralism, interreligious dialogue, human rights, the relation between political theology and theology of liberation, theology after Auschwitz, the place of theology in the modern university, etc. (p. 47).

His critique of the failures of modernity makes him one of the prophetic voices of religious ministry of our time. The call to be just is not a matter of choice for any religion but it is a responsibility. It is a call to what is most basic to humanity. While frequently supported and called for by religious systems, justice itself is of the nature of humanity. Even the child recognizes what is fair or unfair and rails against those things perceived to be unjust. Reinhold Neibuhr believed that what made it easier for us to be humane to one another was our tendency to establish a we-they dichotomy. If we see ourselves in one reality and the others, "the they, as somehow opposite and possibly antithetical to our good, it is much easier to take very inhumane stances" (Harmer, 1998, p. 4). When we look at the other person as Ibo, Yoruba, Hausa, Birom, Tiv, Jukun, Urhobo, Ikulu, Idoma, Itsekiri, Jaba, and so on, but not as a human person, then the tendency to perpetuate unjust acts becomes prevalent. When this happens, it is then a failure of justice in all its ramifications.

When the prophet Micah declared to Israel, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice?" he was not imposing on God's people simply and ordinarily an ethical construct. Instead he told them to give each man, woman, and child what is due to each, what every person has a right to demand, because he or she is a human being with rights. People are just when they are in right

relationship with God, with their sisters and brothers, with the whole created reality. When God declared all creation “very good” (Gen. 1: 31), it was because everything was simply in right order, in proper relation: humanity to God, humans among themselves, humans and non human reality toward one another. Living in a chaotic world such as our world today, ministry has to be oriented towards establishing a just community. Ministry for an egalitarian society in our country today cannot opt for anything less than to seek a just society that works towards bringing people together to create the human family where the humanity of all people is recognized and respected.

What has happened over the years in our country is that, the sense of community has shrunk to the size of one's ethnic group or religious organization, and for so many it is so small as to be limited to family or friends. The whole sense of community has been eroded leaving behind the spirit of individualism which is contrary not only to our Christian belief, but our cultural value system. We are called to be neighbors to one another, even to strangers. Taking care of only one's own can be accompanied by a turning of one's back, not only on the values of a nation, but also on the deeper values that go beyond any nation. Those deeper values cut across countries, religions, ethnicities and races. Fundamental to those values are love and compassion, the ability to suffer with others, to have one's heart touched to the point to wanting to do something to relieve that suffering.

There is an urgent need to revive an understanding of community that is bigger than the immediate family or even the neighborhood. We have always cherished the value of community life, but this value is fast disappearing as a result of external cultural influences of individualism. The spirit of capitalism is sweeping across our country and other African nations in the name of globalization. Therefore, at the heart of ministry of the Church in Nigeria today must be the common touch, the washing of the dirty feet, and the idea that one who would be first must be last. Amid the pomp and circumstances of life, what is valued is the cup of cold water, the crust of bread, and the compassionate spirit.

The words of the Catholic bishop of Zanzibar are hauntingly pertinent (Messer, 1989):

You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the tabernacle if you do not pity Jesus in the slum. Now go out into the highways and hedges, and look for Jesus in the ragged and naked, in those who have lost hope, and in those who are struggling to make good. Look for Jesus in them, and when you have found him, gird yourself with his towel of fellowship and wash his feet in the person of his brethren. (p. 74)

The ministry of the Church is about a whole host of social problems that exist all around us, social problems afflicting real people, the hungry, the unemployed, the victims of crime and violence. It is about children who are not taught in schools even the basics and who, after twelve years, are turned out as adult illiterates roaming our streets begging and doing odd jobs to survive. It is about women who are degraded and reduced to second class citizens in our society. It is about widows who are stripped of their rightful belongings and left to suffer humiliation in the name of some culture. It is about civil servants who are victimized by their employers because of their religious beliefs.

There is a great need for a revolution to turn to egalitarianism and to reclaim the essential human elements of compassion, community and justice in our various societies. By doing this, as Harmer (1998) puts it

We commit ourselves, and we find a renewed understanding of what Jesus meant in the beatitudes, what Mohammed meant in the Koran, what Isaiah spoke in the Hebrew Testament. We might have the courage to do what is basically our human responsibility. We might find that we do not have to choose between looking away from the homeless person seeking help. We might find the courage to minister to persons with terminal disease like AIDS. We might find that we can help to make a difference that will turn the lives of people around. Turning from those who suffer, from the poor and oppressed, is a form of violence even if one never raises a hand or a voice. Cutting off funds from needy mothers and children, denying essential

assistance to the elderly; refusing health care to those without insurance, these are all forms of violence. (p. 10).

In Nigeria today, we need a compassionate Church, for its importance cannot be over-emphasized in a fragmented society. An individual without compassion is always cold, hard, and without feeling. Such cannot feel with others, or understand what is happening within them or to them. To be without compassion is to carry self-centeredness and selfishness to an extreme which has become the bane of the political class. It is compassion which makes it possible to come to touch with the other, to feel with the other. It involves the ability to imagine the reality and situation of the other. This may be what is needed to bring about a renewal of the community elements so needed today. In a rebirth of a sense of the community there could re-emerge a humane political order. What we are being asked to be, by all our religions, by all of our theologies, by our entire ministry, can be captured in the one call of Jesus to all of us, an immensely simple and yet incredibly difficult call: "Be compassionate as God is compassionate." (Lk. 6:3).

Davis (1999) writes that:

The Jesus of the Gospel is truly a man for others. He demonstrates throughout his ministry the importance of taking seriously the poor, the marginalized, the suffering, the hopeless, the homeless, the broken, the unlettered and the despised. In other words, the way of compassion is significantly the way of salvation for the world. It means suffering with others, entering unconditionally into their pain and brokenness... Our compassion requires strength of will, consistency of vision, sensitivity of heart and firmness of spirit. Our Christian habits must include a fresh and daily outpouring of Christ-like compassion, especially for those who are broken and torn by the vulnerabilities of life, or by the harsh realities of injustice in our societies. We rob ourselves of a great deal of our own humanity when we wait for crises to erupt before we reach out to people in Christ-like compassion. (p. 57).

Ministry in the Church today requires courage and compassion

to denounce any act of injustice perpetuated in society by government or any other institution. To feed the hungry is to give them what is their right. A just society is one which recognizes certain basic rights and in justice sees that they are shared by all. To act justly is the characteristic of the good person as well as the good society. The just person is concerned about the larger community, which can extend to the whole world. The challenge is to live justly. Justice requires us to do all that we can no matter the cost. It is a necessary quality in good institutions, in good systems, and in good governments.

The society that is unjust to some part of itself ends up eventually paying for the injustice. History is filled with the stories of revolutions that came about when the injustices grew so blatant that people could no longer tolerate them. The French revolution came about when the discrepancies between the majority who were poor and the few who were incredibly rich became so offensive that the people rose up in anger. No society can survive when the injustices become so great. The recent revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia are glaring to us. Most societies may come to a more just system, not because of their belief, but because the number of those who suffer injustices is growing. Our Nigerian story is not much different, as the breakdown in political, ethnic and religious violence in the country manifests. As Kukah (2001) puts it:

Whether it is the most visible manifestation of North versus South, whether is an alignment between Igbos, Yorubas against the North (cast as Christians versus Muslims) or between Igbos and Yorubas themselves (cast as ethnic tussle), the essence is the same... On the religious plane, there is the conflict that results from the breakdown of trust among the various faiths. Within Christianity we have the tensions between the traditional Churches and the Pentecostal, that between the Muslims themselves manifest itself in tensions between the Sunni and Brotherhood etc. These tensions do exist and they occasionally manifest themselves when very minor issues tend to lead to very serious and grievous crises that go beyond the immediate causes... From the numerous religious riots in the north, the violence in Ogoni, the Ilajes, the Ijaws, the Ifes, the

Modakekes, the Aguleris, the Umuleris, the Tivs and Jukuns, and so on, the stories are basically the same.

All these crises are responses to a growing number of perceived injustices in the Country and are indications that the major religions have an important role to play.

3. The Way Forward

The time of entrusting everything to traditional rulers to make decisions on behalf of their people without consultations is over. This is true of groups who have experienced powerlessness in the past, or have believed that nothing would ever work. Today, the importance that involvement of the community be real and not simply a façade is widely recognized; we are living in a democratic dispensation. Such consultative practice is equally a requirement of religious bodies since decisions affect the human existence of all their members. If a religious organization is to be the voice of the voiceless in society, it must lead the way by putting into action what it preaches. It is rather unfortunate that in the Christian religious cycle, many Church organizations do not involve the lay faithful in decision making on issues that affect their existence.

For any society or community to be worthy of itself and its people, it has to have a broad understanding of the responsibilities that all have for all. It needs a compelling vision that links the future of the society with the care of and for the whole community of people who make up that community. In the growing search of spirituality in our age, there is an emerging vision of a better and more compassionate and just community. The Book of Proverbs reminds us that “where there is no vision the people perish” (29:18). The leaders of the emerging future in our country will be, undoubtedly, the ordinary people who make up our villages and cities. These ordinary people will have an extraordinary sense of commitment if there is a vision. They will be those who see the concern for others as a normal part of life and of the human journey when given the right atmosphere.

The country and its people have cycled many times through good and bad times, through good and bad ideas. We need a revolution in commitment, in creativity, in caring, if we are to change what seems to be an ever downward spiral. We have the ingredients for a better life for all, not the lofty Better Life Program (BLP) of late Mariam Babangida of Blessed Memory, or the Family Support Program of Miriam Abacha. We have many different and successful approaches to the problems which plague our country if only we have the good will and determination to transform our society. What is necessary is the will to go in a different direction, to try something that involves the good of all people without depending on one or the other agency or organization. The Church in particular has to do more, and step up in her responsibility to humanity. The Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) which has been politicized should undergo some drastic changes to embark on more concrete programs aimed at enhancing the lives of ordinary Nigerians. We need to look at how groups, peoples and organizations can move in collaborative ways to make a new and different country. The country in which we live and function is the responsibility of all of us. Just as the African proverbs says, 'it takes a whole village to raise a child', so too it takes a whole country to make a better life for everyone.

The challenge for the Church in Nigeria is to influence the government and collaborate with non-governmental organizations to create a new environment where preventable diseases and illnesses are eliminated. We can do more than just having charitable organizations in our Churches. There is so much that the Church, in collaboration with adherents of other religions, can do to enforce the implementation of programs that all people will benefit from in a society that functions justly. Such a society would experience a major reduction in conflict and corruption. This can only be achieved through the improvement of the lives of the people suffering from poverty, unemployment, and poor education and the involvement of all in policy and decision-making that affects their existence. Such a society would work to achieve better systems where the needs of all are cared for, and where people experience what is meant to be fully

human in a world that was created good in all ramifications.

The sure path to an egalitarian state that leads to development in Nigeria is good governance. Without good governance, no matter our resources, our dreams, our vision, our good will, we cannot achieve anything. With good governance in place that gives Nigerians something to hope for, the Nigerian populace will be ready to rise up to the challenges of the 21st century. The people have the constitutional and fundamental right to insist on what they believe constitutes good governance that will better their lives. In the quest for good governance, corruption which has become endemic in our Nigerian society must be fought tooth and nail at all levels until the battle is defeated and won. In addition, Nigerians must be ready to eschew themselves from religious fanaticism and ethnic differences and come together as a family to establish our dream community.

Developing a common vision will be a source of inspiration especially for those who have lost hope in the leadership of the country. Once there is a vision to establish a just Nigerian community that provides freedom and security of molestation, all will do whatever is required to make that vision reality. There are millions of Nigerians who have not given up hope, despite all that has happened in the distant and the recent past. They believe we have a future to hope for, a country to dream about and a vision to share. All that is required is for both government and religious organizations to inspire these people. Simple programs for rural development should be seen to be implemented. Political rhetoric is not what people want. Nigerians want to see their religious and political leaders doing something concretely to better their deplorable living conditions. This will serve as panacea for the urban drift which accounts to a large extent for many of the problems with which our country is faced today.

I conclude with the words of an American journalist, Thomas Friedman (2000):

Any society that wants to thrive economically today must constantly be trying to build a better lexus and driving it out into the world. But no one should have any illusions that

merely participating in the global economy will make a country healthy. If participation comes at a price of a country's identity, individuals will have their olive tree crushed, or washed out by this global system, those olive tree roots will rebel. They will rise up and strangle the process... A country without healthy olive trees will never feel rooted or secure enough to open up fully to the world and reach out to it. But a country that is only olive trees, that has only roots, and has no lexis, will never go, or grow very far. Keeping the two in balance is a constant struggle (p. 34).

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