

Research Article

The Christian Scholar and Political Dynamics

Reuben Turbi Luka* 

Theology Department, Evangelical Church Winning All (ECWA) Theological Seminary, Jos, Nigeria

Abstract

In a global world characterized by a polarized and pluralized political landscape, the critical intersection of faith and politics presents not just a challenge but opportunities for the Christian scholar. This study answers the question, how can Christian scholarship, founded on justice, integrity and compassion, influence the Nigerian politics? The problem this paper explores is the increasing absence of moral clarity and ethical leadership. Against this backdrop, the article examines the potential of Christian scholarship to transform political discourse through the influencing power of a faith-based ethics and history. The study proposes a framework for political engagement in Nigeria through the ever-transforming biblical principles and historical events. Through a qualitative methodology, the paper examines biblical texts and historical events, provides a searchlight that would influence and impact the political terrain, and drives the cause for compassion, integrity, and justice as a model to current political discourse. The paper thus elucidates unique insights that will help towards navigating complex political terrain, emphasizing the ingredients of advocacy, discernment, and wisdom. By constructing a nuanced framework for a faith-based political engagement, this article positions Christian scholars as reformers, bridge-builders and leaders that can influence, engage and transform the political terrain without compromising their faith. Ultimately, the article advocates faith-based political approach which can promote compassionate and just systems, bridge the divides among a people group, and cause reforms for the common good.

Keywords

Christian, Scholar, Faith-based Advocacy, Justice, Integrity

1. Introduction

The intersection of politics and faith possesses a challenge and also an opportunity for transformation for Christian scholars, especially because the current Nigerian political terrain is becoming increasingly secular and polarized by the day. As a matter of fact, the prevalent ideological divides suggest that Christian involvement is important, timely and can be transformative. For instance, in the National Assembly, having the two houses: House of Representatives and the Senate, a heated debate ensued last year 2024 [1] titled, “An Act to Alter the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) to Review the Description of Islamic

Law in the Constitution and for Related Matters (HB 1502),” introduced by Hon. Aliyu Bappa Missau. This bill, billed to delete the term ‘Personal’ from Sections 24, 262, 277, and 288 of the Constitution would imply the inclusion of full-scale Islamic Law to stand alongside but independently within Nigerian legal framework. This implies among other things that it aims to deny religious freedom of other religions and runs the risk of Islamizing non-Muslims in Nigeria. This bill was turned down because of the presence of politicians from other faiths in the house. This rejection establishes the fact that there is everything wrong in upgrading the Sharia Law

*Corresponding author: reuben.turbi@jets.edu.ng (Reuben Turbi Luka)

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status in the Nigerian Constitution above other beliefs that co-exist in a secular state that preaches tolerance and equality of her subject insofar as there is no corresponding Law that accommodates and gives other religious traditions bargain and religious freedom. The decision arrived at by non-Muslims in the house to turn down this bill is in tandem with Pandang Yamsat [2] stance. For him, democracy gives citizens the right to, “Speak against any move or bill that is in contradiction to that freedom and they (emphasizes mine) have the constitutional right to seek appropriate steps to stop the National Assembly or any power from enacting a law that would marginalise a certain group of people on the grounds of creed or ethnicity.” Categorically, this paper demonstrates that a faith-based approach to political engagement goes beyond advocating for a just cause; it includes an ethical leadership that is focused on compassion, upholding justice and maintaining the cohesive unifying force of the society. Fortunately, because of the foundation of Christian scholarship (academic integrity, and an integral biblical principle) and a commitment to justice and faith, the Christian scholar is well prepared and better placed to influence the needed change in the Nigerian political terrain. This perfectly resonates with Zamani Buki Kafang’s [3] assertion who called on Christian politicians to, “See that, in Christ, believers have been called to bring every thought, every activity, and every responsibility captive to Christ.”

James K. A. Smith [4] argues in the same vein when he noted that “The witnessing nature of the Christian is not just limited to the ideological, much more than this, it is about the influencing the public square with the kingdom values of justice and peace.” Kafang [3] also corroborates, “The Beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 5-7 are keys to how a Christian can maintain his/her integrity in any circumstance s/he finds herself/himself and not only in a politicized society.”

This thus, suggests an active role as agents of change that bridges the several divides while leveraging on the unique distinctive of a people group. Thus, this article explores the influencing potential of Christian scholars in the Nigerian political terrain despite the prevailing times of uncertainty and division. By exploring biblical principles and historical events, the article contributes to current discussion in the political terrain by providing a suitable framework for a transformative political engagement in Nigeria.

2. Biblical Foundations for Political Engagement

The core of the Christian political engagement is the sole commitment to the biblical principles of peace, compassion and justice because they are the fulcrum that drives a political engagement whose aim is to influence a responsible and ethical politics in a specific terrain. While Prophet Micah thus situates the foundation for political engagement, arguing that “He [YHWH] has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And

what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God,” (Micah 6: 8), Yamsat [2] gives the theological justification for Christian involvement pointing that “The Holy Bible does not leave us in doubt about the nature of Church involvement in political governance. It need not be over-emphasized that freedom or democratic rights originates from God, it is in his creation, right back to the origin of creation, as we read in Genesis 1: 28.” Furthermore, Yamsat [2] notes, “We read that democratic governance yielded dividends for the early Church. It made it possible for Paul to appeal to Caesar when he felt there was injustice in his trial and it made it possible for his appeal to be granted.”

This sets a background to a working framework that Christian scholars can suggest for political engagement for political leaders. Similarly, it elucidates the fact that authorities/leadership positions are ordained by God, and should be stewarded to enact justice and equity among the people (Romans 13). Also, we have the case of Daniel, a civil servant in Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon, who demonstrated competence, incorruptibility, efficiency and faithfulness in the conduct of his official and personal affairs. And we must not forget about Joseph, a prisoner who became prime minister in Egypt, and through astute administrative wisdom was able to save Egypt the world of his time from famine and starvation.

Following biblical principles thought leaders among Christians have leveraged on biblical principles towards navigating the intricacies and complexities of the political terrain. Miroslav Volf [5] explained how this was done when he opined that “Contrary to the use of power in political terrain, Christian political engagement is different because it is via the biblical principles of reconciliation and restorative justice.”

First, this elaborates the uniqueness of Christian political engagement as much as it informs the Christian scholar about the transformative opportunities of biblical principles in politics. Second, it provides a faith-based approach for Christian scholars where they can influence unity, transformation and moral responsibility rather than power or dominance. These principles, position Christian scholars as advocates for and create a transformative governing structure.

Similarly, N. T. Wright [6] elaborates on the characteristics of a political engagement that is done via the lenses of biblical principles when he argued robustly, “Mercy and justice are the heartbeat of the gospel and the heart of any Christian engagement in a society.”

Wright significantly emphasizes that political engagement that is influenced or founded on biblical principles advocates for a reconciliation and fairness in a world whose political character is about complex identities, ideologies and political divides. Thus, from Wright, Christian Scholars are provided with a transformative political framework which influence policies that compassionate and just for the society.

Also, Luke Bretherton [7] explores Jesus Christ’s teaching as the foundation for a Christian political engagement that

promotes integrity and compassion, against secular politics that is driven by “Utilitarian calculus.”

Bretherton [7] notes further that “Jesus’s teaching on sacrificial service and the love of one’s neighbor should be the vision for a moral society which promotes reconciliation and love.” This biblical principles urges Christian scholars to challenge and advocate for political reforms where neighborly love and sacrificial service are lacking against the presences of hatred and strife in a society. Thus, the opinions of Bretherton and Wright emphasize that Christian scholars, equipped with biblical principles of political engagement that bring transformation, can navigate political terrain and engage in politics with the biblical principles of peace, moral responsibility and equity.

Emmanuel Oladipo [8] has chronicled in his timeless classic a condensed biographies of some top Nigerian Christians, across different denominations and from all parts of Nigeria, who served creditably in the public sphere as politicians, traditional rulers, in the military, in Board rooms of business corporations, as judges, etc, thus demonstrating that it is possible to successfully apply Christian principles in public service. This same perspective is championed by Cephas Tushima [9]. In his, *Integrity Matters: Men of Honour in the Public Square*, Tushima revealed how General Martin Luther Agwai, Bulus Dogara Amise, Prof. Ishaya Audu, Porf. Adamu Baike, Dr. Stephen Dunn, Evangelist Paul Gidiri, Dr. David Tor Iordaah, Engr. Ezekiel Ezuogu, Dr. Christopher Kolade, Jonathan Onigbinde, Hon. Justice James O. Ogebe, Engr. Samuel S. L. Salifu, and Engr. John Ykema who were flawless in their service to the Nigerian and African continent as Christian men of inestimable characters.¹

3. Political Dynamics and the Transforming Role of the Christian Scholar

The Christian scholar has a place in the political discourse as it contributes significantly by providing ethical principles and a commitment to a flourishing community, all of which are influenced by biblical principles. This is made possible because of the dual identity of the Christian scholar; the academic insight and a vision that is transformative, which is capable of ensuring justice, promoting reconciliation and moral integrity. Therefore, Christian scholars can salvage a political fragmentation and complex social issues as they engage the political terrain by bridging the political divide.

To this end, Public Theologian Stanley Hauerwas [10] argues unwaveringly that “The role of the Christian scholar is not just to tell the true story about what the world is, but it also includes imagining and enumerating what the world should be.” In the light of this, the role of the Christian scholar is

about showcasing kingdom-based ethics in politics in a political world that is characterized by partisanship. Similarly Christian scholars, following Hauerwas argument, can question unjust policies and systems as much as promote policies, support and advocate for systems that work for the common good.

Christian scholars also bring to the political discourse, an ethical lens that is founded on Christian principles, informing the principles of dignity and pragmatism. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff [11] is absolutely right to posit that “The political engagement of Christians should be backed with the moral vision which informs the dignity of every individual.”

Wolterstorff’s position is the basis for the drive of Christian scholars to advocating and calling for the freedom of the oppressed and marginalized, thereby influencing governmental authorities and systems to uphold fairness, justices and human dignity for one and all.

Supporting the perspective of Wolterstorff, Theologian Richard Mouw [12] had maintained staunchly, “The Christian scholar’s call is that of an agent of change; this person upholds and is highly committed to impacting the political terrain with the biblical values of peace that covers justice, reconciliation, and a flourishing society for all.” Mouw’s positional concept of peace covers relationships, economic and societal dimensions, against the absences of war, conflict or terrorism. Following this, the role of the Christian scholar is that of the biblical salt of the earth, which preserves the goodness (as obtainable in God’s kingdom) and protects against corruption that comes with evil political systems (Matt 5: 13-16).

4. How Christian Scholars Can Navigate Political Context with Integrity

Integrity in the political square is a crucial matter, more so for the Christian scholar, this is crucial because one of the characteristics of a Christian scholar is integrity. In the political world, ethical challenges and compromises have become a norm, more so, suspicion is the game of the day as actions and motives are always under the beam light, with several agendas in play. Called to a higher standard, the Christian scholar is expected to not just have integrity in academics and moral principles. Hence, integrity can serve as a tool for witnessing and an amour to safeguard the Christian scholar from the tempting whims of power, pride, lack of integrity and selfishness.

Contributing to ethical debates in political dynamics, Political Philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain [13] opines clearly that “The character of the Christian in politics should be that of a consistency in ethics such that when faced with difficult and compromising situations, Christian scholars are to stand true and unwavering upholding their faith.”

This perspective emphasizes that while the Christians scholar seeks to engage the political terrain, there is a dire need to be rooted in the faith, and built up in biblical principle

¹ For a detailed discussion on the lives and services of the Christian generals in Tushima’s Book, see: Cephas T. A. Tushima, “*Integrity Matters: Men of Honour in the Public Square* (Jos: Fab Anieh Nigeria Limited, 2013).

of integrity, in preparation to face the uncivil and unchristian world of politics. When the Christian scholar engages the political terrain with the biblical principle of integrity, s/he does not only model a political engagement that prioritizes principles over political or self-gain, but also positions biblical integrity as an anchor that keeps the Christian scholar in faith in a polarized political world.

In same vein, Hauerwas [10] justifies the rationale for this. For him, “The Christian scholar must guard against the idolatry of state alongside supporting partisan or nationalistic agendas at the expense of their responsible to be witnesses of truth.” This can only be done with the gift of discernment which is necessary to identifying the golden line that cuts between political agenda that may conflict the Christian’s commitment to compassion, truth, and justice. Thus, in my view Hauerwas’s opinion emphasizes that the Christian scholar need to maintain moral courage in a political terrain that tempts with fleeting political agendas, by pledging allegiances to God’s authority and biblical principles of leadership instead of man-made principles that may not be in tandem with those of Yahweh.

Further, Volf [5], proposes what he calls an objectiveness and humility in political engagement. To that end, he notes that the, “Christian scholar does not have to lose his/her position or belief because he/she wants to be objective and respectful of other people’s opinion.” In fact, Volf [5] notes aptly that “It is possible for a Christian scholar to hold on to his/her belief while being respectful to the opinions of other and being open to dialogues.” Instead of being overtly insular or dogmatic, this perspective encourages and teaches Christian scholars how to navigate political dynamics by advocating for equal hearing and fairness in politics. Similarly, this perspective encourages constructive engagement of political opponents, culminating in bringing a balance between humility and conviction, without an alienation of others because of their differing opinions.

5. Faith-Based Scholarship: A Panacea for Bridging Ideological Divides

In a highly polarized political context characterized by dividing ideologies, the Christian scholar is a bridge builder who promotes objectivity and dialogue, alongside a drive to address divides with empathy and compassion through the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5: 17-20). This is in line with the opinion of David Kyozi [14] who noted that “The Christian scholar’s job is to bridge ideological divides, while advocating for the common good, against loyalties to political agenda.”

This perspective encourages Christian scholars to advocate and promotes human dignity and respect against partisanship.

Contributing on the kind of character and acceptable life style of the Christian scholar in politics, Volf [5] posits that the,

“Christian scholar should engage politics with humility and grace.” In his argument, Volf [5] underscores that “Public faith shares the faith and invites others to dine in the vision of world that thrives on hope and love, instead of imposing an opinion on other.” This stance promotes a collaborative approach and suggests that Christian scholars encourage dialogue, and be willing to sacrifice their views while respecting the views of their opponents. This does positions the Christian scholar as a provider of unique models of respective political engagement that prioritizes the good of both sides.

Finally, as it concerns witnessing without succumbing to political pressures, John Inazu [15] advocates that “Christian scholars can hold on to their opinions while respecting the rights of their opinions to hold different views.” According to what Inazu [15] calls, “Confident pluralism,” though it possesses a challenge to the believer to witness without succumbing to political pressures,” nevertheless, it is worth doing as it places the scholar in the strategic position of being opened and accessing other options in the political terrain. This for Inazu [15], as for me, is, “An ideal model that Christian scholars can employ in navigating the prevalent diverse ideologies in the political terrain.”

Both of Inazu’s position emphasizes the biblical calling of the Christian scholar in the pursuit of civility and truth, thereby contributing a model for Christian scholars towards a productive discourse in a highly complex political terrain.

6. Conclusion

This study enumerates the role of the Christian scholar in advocating for compassionate, ethical and just politics in Nigeria. The article presents a model that is committed to advancing common good and integrity through framework founded on biblical principles and historical precedents. By practicing moral courage, integrity, discernment, advocacy amongst others, the Nigerian Christian scholar is positioned as a bridge-builder who can navigate the complexities of the Nigerian politics and contributes models of political engagement for the common good. Ultimately the study proposes a faith-based approach to political engagement that ensures reforms, prioritizes peace, justice, unity and human dignity in the Nigerian political context.

Author Contributions

Reuben Turbi Luka is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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