

Faith and Citizenship with Reference to Africa:  
(Exploring the Implicit Contours of Catholic Social Teaching)

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**DRAFT**

Given the current historic rise of Christianity in Africa I would like in this presentation to explore a subject that has been of much interest to contemporary scholars concerned with the emerging contours of Christian Africa, namely, the proper relation of Church and society and of Christianity and citizenship. The fundamental questions posed for us include how citizenship relates to religion, and vice versa. What lines can we properly draw between the responsibilities of citizenship and the obligations of faith? Is loyalty divisible between God and Caesar? What weight does political life carry against the claims of moral accountability? Is human identity first and foremost a matter of citizenship or of membership in a community of faith? How is the political community related to the moral community? Can we be good citizens without goodness having a moral foundation? Similarly, can we be religiously faithful without commensurate responsibility for society?

In addition to their urgency in the context of contemporary life in Africa, these questions are complicated by the fact that the secular West has virtually severed the link between Church and state, and, as such, between truth and utility, and left us with the challenge of redefining church-state relations for societies in Africa and elsewhere that remain still deeply religious. The challenge confronting us is that modern Africa has been the bearer of two massive and uneven influences, one secular and the other religious. The secular influence is entrenched in the autonomy of the sovereign nation state, and the religious in the steady expansion of Christianity and Islam on the continent. Both influences have left an enduring legacy, in the one case in a secular elite that maintains, and is in turn maintained by a secular state lumbered with a credibility problem, and, in the other, in ecclesiastical jurisdictions presiding over their teeming flocks. These influences are uneven because the bureaucratic nation state has primacy over the

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ecclesiastical domain, with national sovereignty having legal but not moral priority over religious jurisdiction. This is the post-Enlightenment secular legacy that has competed with religion for the allegiance of Africans; it is with the development and consequences of this uneven legacy, and, for Africans, with its novel character, that this inquiry is concerned.

These ideas have a direct bearing on citizenship because, to take Islam in the first instance, as a believer the citizen is first and foremost answerable to God's sovereign law before all else. In practice God's law is vested in the person of the ruler as figurehead, and in the *'ulama*, the religious scholars, as authoritative interpreters of the *shari'ah*. The believer's standing in the *shari'ah* is defined first of all by duties and obligations, not by rights and entitlements due to a citizen. Muslim religious thought understands the political community primarily as the *ummah*, the faith community, and so does not make any provisions for citizenship as a status derived from membership in a national community. Territory (*watan*) and people (*qawm*) are merely aspects of the *ummah* over which the ruler or the *imam* presides in the capacity of trustee of God's law.

What is so fascinating about modern developments in the Muslim world is that the two fundamental changes that have marked the transition to democracy, namely, sovereignty being vested in the people, and legislation as the instrument of the people's will expressed through their elected representatives – these changes constitute a fundamental departure from the idea of sovereignty as a divine prerogative, and of legislation as subordinate to the revealed law. Abu Bakr, who succeeded Muhammad, is reported to have presented himself to the grieving Muslim community in these words: "Help me, if I am right; set me right if I am in the wrong; truth is a trust; falsehood a treason...Obey me as long as I obey God and His Prophet; when I disobey God and His Prophet, then obey me not." The basis of this appeal is the acceptance of the revealed law as full, final, and complete, with the caliph only as guardian and executive, not as innovator. The qualification adopted in modern Muslim constitutions of requiring all enacted laws to be in compliance with the Qur'an has increasingly come to serve what Walter Bagehot, the English constitutional historian, calls an ornamental purpose. National assemblies are home to elected politicians, and the laws they make are valid and binding, forming the basis of citizenship and of membership in the international community. An important example of the new changes is the enhanced position of women in religion, politics, law, education, and society.

The changes the Muslim world has gone through reveal the extent to which *de facto* separation of religion and politics has occurred on an extensive basis, a position modern Muslims have defended for eminently practical reasons, but also for very good religious reasons. One general approach is the distinction Muslims have drawn between doctrinal stipulations and historical circumstances, between the external formulations of the jurists and the reality of lived experience. After all, religious commandments need to become personal commitments to be efficacious, and the translation of injunctions into practice always requires a certain level of adroitness, with a nimble conscience as timely auxiliary. As Gibb noted, "between the real content of Muslim thought and its juristic expression there is a certain dislocation,"<sup>2</sup> preventing us from being able to infer the reality from the outer form. Doctrinal formulation is not so much a historical transcript as a legal, elastic device serving a procedural and contingent purpose. Accordingly, the primacy of *shari'ah* is vested in the custody of jurists, and is the rightful possession of the guild of qualified jurists. The *shari'ah* is valid as normative source without regard to its comprehensive implementation.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is the recognition of the proper sphere of *shari'ah* authority, not its inflexible or consistent application that is at issue. For Muslims *shari'ah* is true because it is God's prescription for the *ummah*, not because all individuals follow it.

For Muslims the public order as the expression of common interest falls under God's jurisdiction because God rules over common interests. The Caliph 'Alí is cited to the effect that "All private matters belong to the human sphere, all concerns of society to the divine."<sup>i</sup> This approach reduces the sphere of the common good to the religious sphere and excludes all private interest in that common good. In that sense anything owned by God belongs to all and must be administered by public authorities on God's behalf; it cannot be taken for individual possession. Al-'Āmiri (d. 992) wrote that religion is established only for collective welfare, never for private benefit or individual advantage.<sup>ii</sup> In the words of Ibn Taymiyya, "Wherever there is a general need, there the obligation is to God."<sup>iii</sup> "In short, it was by recourse to God that one created a

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<sup>2</sup> Gibb, *Studies*, 1962, 148f.

<sup>3</sup>See W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Political Thought: The Basic Concepts*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1968, 102-3.

public sphere.”<sup>iv</sup> It affirms a common humanity as the structure of society and safeguard of our individuality. The *mu'min*, believer, is the lynchpin.

This helps clarify two types of responsibility concerning power as a common good for society. First is religious responsibility that has the burden of preventing power from becoming a theocracy, and the second is the political challenge of preventing power from growing into the Leviathan. Religious fundamentalism and secular fundamentalism are two sides of the same coin: both are unscriptural and undesirable. Though necessary, checks and balances by themselves are not adequate; there has to be a prevailing shared cultural conviction of mutual forbearance based on allegiance to a common Creator to make the safeguards at all effective – an idea echoed in the Virginia Declaration of Rights (# XVI). By the same token, however, religious truth-claims have to pass the test of canonical soundness and the general welfare to be credible and wholesome. It suggests that the religious responsibility for limited power has much more profound implications for society as one of mutual charity and forbearance than the responsibility based solely on calculations of gaining power as an end in itself. In their time the caliphate and the imamate served that qualifying function where they existed at all; for the clerics the structures of peaceful propagation and the influence of moral values fulfill that role.

Concerning the two areas of state and society the Qur'an provides a model only for society, leading a Muslim scholar to say that it gives Muslims freedom in state-building: there is no Scriptural blueprint to tie the hands of Muslims. It makes for a flexible religious response to historical experience and ethical challenge.<sup>v</sup> Society generates the state necessary for it rather than the state preceding the society of its jurisdiction. Accordingly, believers are free to create the political structure that best reflects their values and needs. Meanwhile, religion impinges on practical affairs by virtue of religion's place in society; religion rejects power without ethical constraint. Religious teaching makes the distinction without stumbling into the trap that religion has to be either politically useful, compliant, or privatized to be acceptable. The real force of the religious insight is that politics does not qualify religion nor is it determinative of it; rather, religion constrains politics and is required for it.

### Bounds of Sovereignty

The Muslim idea of divine sovereignty and the obligations of citizenship have lessons for Christians, to shift to that side of the subject now. Christian life and institutions took hold and

developed in the West, from where in more recent times they were taken to much of the rest of the world following the establishment of the secular colonial state. That left an impact on contemporary expressions of religion. In new environments, however, transplant ideas and values tend to sit awkwardly: they become exaggerated, like a bridge over troubled waters, leaving little clue about how to engage the realities on the ground. In the process these transplant ideas and institutions bring to the surface submerged attitudes concerning claims about their original purpose. In its expansion abroad the secular state has shown this exaggeration and thus revealed, even in cases of rare success, basic limitations in its nature. In Africa with its sprawling tribal and ethnic boundaries, we find gaps in the operation of the nation state, raising questions about its effectiveness as the arbiter of human identity and value. The closeness of religion and politics in practical situations means we cannot separate the two, but nor can we mix them uncritically. We need to distinguish between them in order to ensure that political expedience does not overthrow moral obligations, which would turn the state tyrannical and make faith merely an opinion. Ideally, there are as sound religious grounds as there are pragmatic ones for not confusing religion and politics, though in practice it is risky to attempt splitting the two. Cross-cultural and inter-religious issues and reflections in Africa and among Muslims are necessary to shed light on the proper relation of religion and politics and thus help deepen our grasp of vital ground in the encounter between the two.

The big challenge of Christianity in Africa is to resist the temptation of fragmenting into rancorous little sects and instead to aspire to the level of a civilization, of a commonwealth that embraces the family as the lynchpin of the social order, with differences reinforcing the sense of unity and a vision of a good and caring God. To know the truth about ourselves brings us close to our Creator, and to live in communities brings us close to one another: both are God's will for our wellbeing. The will of God is for our imperfect nature to benefit from mutual correction, thus improving our value for society. The grace given to us is able to transform us in stages and make us fit to live in communities. St Paul dwells at length on the body of the believer as a moral metaphor for society, with the many diverse parts and functions serving one common object, all of that gathered and consecrated in service to God and to our fellow human beings.<sup>4</sup> Like the family, society flourishes by virtue of its uneven, unequal, and diverse character, not in spite of it, in order that we should have the same care for one another, as St. Paul admonishes. Believers

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<sup>4</sup> Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12: 4-31.

should be of one mind where it concerns the example of Jesus. “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”<sup>5</sup> The tendency toward individual self-exaltation requires the corrective of our mutual need and obligation founded on a common Creator. As the attribute of God, freedom is social in character; it expands and flourishes by the duty we owe to our Creator and to our fellow citizens as made in the image and likeness of God. Our standing as Christian citizens is founded on our status as stewards and pilgrims of life.

In this regard, the words of William Ernest Hocking, the American philosopher, are apt. In his book, *The Coming World Civilization*, he points to the great shibboleth of our age. “We rely,” he points out, “on the political community to do its part in the making of men, but first of all to furnish the conditions under which men can make themselves.”<sup>6</sup> But he goes on to say that “the state, purely as secular, comes to be regarded as capable of civilizing the human being, and in doing so of remaking him, training his will, moralizing him.”<sup>7</sup> Yet the political community is inherently deficient in enabling human beings to mature fully as moral agents. Loving God and our neighbor, giving ourselves for the care of the weak and vulnerable, inspiring and inculcating virtue, and fostering acts of altruism – for these and more we need another and a higher realm of reality:

Human nature has indeed another mirror, and therewith another source of self-training. It is often the religious community--let us call it in all its forms “the church”--which has promised to give the human individual the most complete view of his destiny and of himself. It projects that destiny beyond the range of human history...It provides standards of self-judgment not alone in terms of behavior, as does the law, but also in terms of motive and principle--of the inner man which the state cannot reach.<sup>8</sup>

Hocking contends we are unwilling to see the state as a partial mirror of truth, being inclined instead to concur when the state

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<sup>5</sup> Phil. 2: 4.

<sup>6</sup> William Ernest Hocking, *The Coming World Civilization*, New York: Harper, 1956.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

regards itself as the more reliable interpreter of human nature--dealing as it does solely with verifiable experience--and as a sufficient interpreter...Outside the Marxist orbit, the prevalent disposition of the secular state in recent years has been less to combat the church than to carry on a slow empirical demonstration of the state's full equivalence in picturing the attainable good life, and its superior pertinence to actual issues. As this demonstration gains force the expectation grows that it will be the church, not the state, that will wither away.<sup>9</sup>

William Esuman-Gwira Sekyi (1892-1956) of Ghana, also known as Kobina Sekyi, expressed the continuity between religion and political affairs. Writing in 1925, Sekyi quoted an Akan proverb as follows, *Oman si ho na posuban sim*, "The Company fence stands only so long as the state exists." He comments: "Now, our ancestors were above all things a religious people, with whom religion was no mere matter of form or weekly ceremony. Religion with our ancestors was interwoven with the whole fabric of their daily life; and therefore when the company system was established among them it was not without its religious concomitants."<sup>10</sup> Sekyi affirmed that religious loyalty was fundamental for state effectiveness without implying religion has only expedient political value. Another wise saying of the Akan is, *Aban wo twuw n'dazi; wo nnsua no*, "too often heavily weighted with power, governments are to be pulled along the ground but not to be carried."<sup>11</sup> This suggests a need for a radical reappraisal of the church-state theme that goes beyond instrumental definition of public and personal conduct. It justifies understanding citizenship as a necessary moral constraint on state power.

#### *Citizenship in Church and Society:*

The West is skeptical about the Muslim view of Shari'ah as a pillar of the public order. The West views religion as a private matter, and religious groups must organize on the principle

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> Kobina Sekyi, *The Parting of the Ways*, rep. in J. Ayodele Langley, *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa, 1856-1970*, London: R. Collins, 1979, 251-52.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in F.L. Bartels, *The Roots of Ghana Methodism*, Accra: Methodist Book Depot; London: Cambridge University Press, 1965, 241-42.

of free association without public sanction or public merit. This arrangement has allowed the flourishing of religious groups whose members value the freedom it gives them from political interference. In theory, privatization of religion has removed the kind of debilitating political deadlock that long bedeviled early modern Europe. Separation of Church and state solved the twin problem of political despotism and sectarian intolerance, leaving society protected from the menace of the subversion of doctrinal disagreements. No religious test for political office also means no political reward or reprisal for religion.

Believers who are such by conviction have welcomed this distinction between these two great spheres of life. In reality, however, the matter is a lot more complex than that simple formula may suggest. Believers are also citizens. While accepting the obligations of citizenship believers also recognize the duties they owe to their Creator, indicating a double responsibility. For believers, citizenship is not simply a question of political calculation; it is a matter of moral responsibility concerned with service for the common good. For the believer the citizen is no other than the person created in the image and resemblance of God, already endowed by the Creator with the dignity of inalienable rights and equipped for the pursuit of righteousness. The public order is not only about political jurisdiction; it is also about civic righteousness, about mutual aid and succor. It is the answer to the question: who is my neighbor? The wall of separation cannot divide us here. The obligations of our membership in the religious community anticipate and extend our obligations as citizens. We are members one of another (Eph. 4:25). Our dual citizenship stems from our dual role as believers and citizens, with freedom linking the two. We worship God freely because truth is worthy of devotion; we obey lawful authority because the common good warrants it and our Creator intends it. Scripture enjoins us to honor our rulers and our fellow human beings without ceasing to serve and to fear God (1 Pet. 2: 16-17). In so far as it is the attribute of the free conscience, freedom of religion belongs with the freedoms of the public order. The consent of the free citizen is prior to the political compact but not to the moral conscience. We are moral beings, and that means we are more than political animals. The community is far more than an aggregate of individual interests, and citizenship more than a question of political obligation. We are subject to lawful authority by the moral analogy of our being subject to divine sovereignty. Religious freedom is inseparable from issues of citizenship and government; privatization of religion is not adequate to the demands of the common good or to the truth and reality of our dual responsibility as believers and citizens.



Freedom is not freedom just to do nothing or anything. It demands moral choice and discipline. Freedom is more than a political concept. It is at the core of knowledge and worship of God, and at the root of love of neighbor and of what makes us moral persons fit for society. In the same vein, liberty of person and of property is integral to our membership in Church, state, and society. When as believers we appeal to persuasion and conscience in our relationship with our Creator and with our neighbors we indicate by that the rejection of coercion and repression in matters of religion, political affiliation, and personal choice. Because it is not value-free, freedom is not free, and as believers and citizens we accept the intervening responsibility and reciprocal duties it demands of us. In this regard, the love of God and of neighbor is the well-spring of civic virtue, the safety net alike of orphan, widow, outcast, and stranger; such ethical commitment is the basis of service in Church, state, and society.

These ideas were the subject of a conference convened in Accra at which, among others, both Archbishop (later Cardinal) John Onaiyekan and Bishop Matthew Kuka participated. It led to the promulgation of the *Accra Charter on Freedom of Religion and Citizenship*, published in 2012. Here is a summary of the Charter:

As citizens and believers we acknowledge that religion as the duty we owe to our Creator as well as the manner of discharging that duty demands the repudiation of force or violence, and the recognition that all citizens are entitled to the free exercise of religion guided by the dictates of conscience (Jn. 4: 24). Government may not impose or forbid, favor or impede, the establishment of religion.

We affirm that our oneness in God is blessed and enriched by our diversity; that we are fellow human beings, even if not of one tribe, ethnicity, race, nationality, creed, or fellowship; and that we are bound to one another in our joys and afflictions, even though our situation and circumstances may be vastly different (Acts 17: 24-28).

We uphold freedom of religion not as an excuse to divide, split, and exploit, but as reason to summon the conscience in the name of the mutual duty of believer and citizen alike to exercise forbearance, charity, and regard for one another (1 Cor. 3: 10; 1 Cor. 7: 21-24; 1 Pet. 3: 8-9). In that way the spirit of benevolence can be stirred to move and elevate society in the work of civic righteousness. We are accountable to our Creator and to our fellow human beings for nothing less than that (Phil. 1: 9-11).

### ***Temporal & Spiritual:***

Two worlds are ours, the temporal and the spiritual (Rom. 12: 1-2), with a common foundation in the moral obligation of the pursuit of love of God and of neighbor. Temporal authority vested in government is entitled to our support and prayers as believers. While on our earthly pilgrimage to the City of God in the life beyond this one (Heb. 13: 14) our obedience to God requires us in service to others to promote works of civic righteousness.

Whether as believers or as citizens we cannot ignore the limitations of our finite nature, as well as of natural endowment, which offer instructive lesson for the perils of limitless power and of the sin of self-worship (Is. 13: 11; Matt. 20: 25-28; Col. 3: 12; 1 Pet. 5: 5-6; James 4: 6). Nations serve God's purpose when they advance the welfare of the human family, but they can also hinder that purpose when they trample on the honor and dignity of human beings. When that fundamental right is violated good governance suffers, and society with it. It is worth recalling John Stuart Mill's argument that a state that dwarfs its citizens to make them docile instruments even for beneficial purposes will discover that not much can be accomplished with small people. Religious teaching about persons bearing the *imago Dei* makes it a prerequisite of democratic society. When you cripple the moral power of persons you give them over to cynicism and resignation, which makes it hard to inspire in people a noble spirit.

Let me recapitulate the central affirmations of the dual heritage we share as believers and citizens:

- We are cognizant of the means God provides for our flourishing, including parents who brought us to life and who nurtured and protected us.
- The lessons we learned at home of sharing and mutual interdependence in family provide concrete shape and content to our personality.
- The training and idioms of home, school, and neighborhood fill our minds with all that belongs early with our knowing and our sharing.
- We acknowledge the role of the social events of birth, rites of passage and incorporation, marriage, end of life rituals and anniversaries, as well as the relationships and friendships that sustain us as individuals and as communities.
- We embrace the liberty inscribed in our social and moral nature as constituting the basis of civic righteousness and responsible government.

- We acknowledge the common foundation of freedom in our standing as believers and citizens.
- We affirm our place in the purpose of God for all creation, and our solidarity with our fellow human beings.
- We uphold government under law for the purposes of our common security and protection.
- We embrace the family and the civic virtues of home and society as a foundation of enterprise, community, and the common good.
- We affirm our dual citizenship under the divine providence, and the temporal and spiritual privileges and duties that belong with our roots in time and eternity.

Shari'ah is too arbitrary and too drastic a prescription for the public order, because it's reason for being is to deal with our relationship with God and with one another. For Christians faith belongs with the Creator's design for our life together and individually. The outline I have given here of our dual heritage as believers and citizens draws on the heritage of Catholic social teaching to offer a role in worldly affairs for religion and politics, for Church and society, and for faith and citizenship as distinct spheres of activity.

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<sup>i</sup> Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam, Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 394.

<sup>ii</sup> Crone, *God's Rule*, 2004, 393.

<sup>iii</sup> Crone, *God's Rule*, 2004, 394.

<sup>iv</sup> Crone, loc. cit.

<sup>v</sup> Qamaruddin Khan, *Al-Mawardi's Theory of the State*, Lahore: Bazm-i-Iqbal, n.d., 4. This source is cited with approval by Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Islamic State*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House PVT Ltd., 1994, 35.