Clerics as Politicians

Introductory Discourse

It is necessary, at the outset, that the reader is informed that the approach adopted here is normative. This is because, the title of this chapter seems more to recoil the mind of the reader and spring disgust on the notion of clerics being tagged politicians or being politicians in the real sense of the word, than it conjures populist acceptance of that notion. Risking being caught in the webs of error of supposing, few individuals today would subscribe to the idea that clerics should poke their nose into politics. A corollary to this is that, perhaps, vast majority savvy politics as a dirty game, the practitioners of which should be closer to hell than the worst of sinners who do not engage in its (politics) praxis. A Canadian theologian, Stackhouse (2015: 1), gave ten reasons why a pastor should avoid politics. He listed them in descending order, thus:

1. Because politics brings out the worst in people, and unless you’re an exception (like Tommy Douglas), politics will bring out the worst in you.

2. Because politics brings out the worst in people, and you’re supposed to bring out the best in people.

3. Because politicians come and go, and you need to reserve the sacred right to comfort whoever is not, or no longer, in power.

4. Because governments come and go, and you need to reserve the sacred right to prophesy to whoever is in power.

5. Because you need to consider the troubling fact that you’re not alienating a considerable part of your constituency, so why is your church so uniform in its politics?

6. Because you’ll alienate a considerable part of your constituency who see political matters differently, and will hold that difference against you, thus losing the benefits of your pastoral care and authority.

7. Because the Scriptures (your main area of intellectual expertise—right?) are, at best, only suggestive and regulative over the field of politics (a quite different area of intellectual expertise—right? See #10 again).

8. Because pastors are supposed to call us toward the ideal and the ultimate, while politicians have to compromise over the real and the immediate.

9. Because no one hired you to get involved with politics. (And if they did, they shouldn’t have: See #10.)

10. Because no one trained you properly to get involved with politics—and a little seminar, however exciting, won’t make up for that yawning deficit. (Do you think politicians can be trained to be pastors by attending a seminar?)
Intuitively, politics conjures manipulation, pretence, betrayal, deception, stealing, looting, brutal use of power, corruption of privilege, killing, exclusive and secret associations and, all activities hidden and involving unpredictable dangers. Some opinions hold that all the above are inescapable in politics but may be made acceptable if they are covered up nicely in religious terms. So, pulpit could be used to mediate politics and to lay a theological foundation for exploitation and repression of individuals’ rights and liberty. Clerics may teach or may be used to teach equation of subservience and docility on the part of citizens, with righteousness, just to ensure that an individual’s lot in the state or other lesser organizations/institutions is obedience to laws notwithstanding the nature of those laws. To hold that “(i)n the struggle for more sustainable, just and democratic societies, we need civil disobedience before obedience and more than ever, we need critical citizens and not just law-abiding ones (Paterson, Doran and Barry 2007:153)” will approximate to heresy and be treated as such.

If clerics’ involvement in politics both as an art and theory, the latter, in this context, being sermons, speeches and theological intellectual writings, fits the foregoing intuitive imageries, those who dread clergies in politics may be justified. However, in many countries, clerics as politicians had been and are still being harbingers of freedom from slavery, oppression, repression, exploitation of the underprivileged mass by the powerful few. While some used their pulpits to attack the exploitative ideology of the state and wrestled freedom from it for their people, some lead and are still leading protest and demonstration against slavery, colonialism, tyranny, authoritarianism, corruption and abuse of power in its minutest manifestation. Where clerics pursue politics as service to humanity, the effect is as powerful as when they do otherwise – people either flourish in freedom or thwarted in oppression, perennially held hostage by politico-ecclesiastical power. Clerics as politicians are powerful and influential. Depending on their choice, they can use the popularity and charisma of Jesus (if we limit our discourse to Christian clergics) to promote freedom, equality and eradication of poverty or advance the course of oppression, corruption and abject poverty of the people, while they grow rich in money and material accumulation. In this chapter, the concept of politics is clarified by identifying some issues that go into defining the concept. To this end, some authoritative and classical definitions of politics are introduced to the reader. Efforts are made to situate the topic in theoretical discourse before running a diagnosis of examples of clerics as politicians, with a view to, in conclusion, posing some questions about prospects and challenges the topic holds in practices.

A Brief Definition of the Term Politics

The concept of politics appears simple but it defies a simple and generally accepted definition. Politics is so elusive that it cannot be pinned down to a single precise explanation. It is exciting that conceptual meanings of politics coincide with the meanings of other concepts such as the State, government, and authority. However defined, politics embodies power, order, justice, regulation, conflict resolution, consensus, compromise, and the operation of the State. At any level, whether in politically organized bodies (such as government, political parties, pressure
groups, unions) or at its micro level (family, church, classroom, football pitch etc) politics is inescapable. As a consequence, Aristotle put forward as a basis for argument the notion that man by nature is a political animal. By this, it is implied that no man can lead a lone life. None, notwithstanding their socio-political and economic status, is beyond the reach of some kinds of political systems – laws, regulations, relationship, associations, regimes, designed formally or not so formally to streamline man’s political behavior. It is this biological vulnerability of man (his being a political animal), that makes politics inescapable. Man is left without choice; even if you are not interested in politics, politics is interested in you! Politics collects your taxes directly (a function of a designated institution) and sets traps for indirect taxes accruable from your tithes and offerings which, it considers amoral to tax directly. It does this by levying church’s institutions and agencies. Wherever human beings gather, politics allocates value, shares prestige, adjudicates dispute, imposes sanctions and dispenses justice.

For many, the question: ‘what is politics?’ deserves an unambiguous and perhaps brief answer. This is because, as citizens, we encounter politics, read, hear, and see the political billboard, articles and debates on daily basis. There are specific areas of our lives that are obviously ‘political’. Current examples of the political include, the emergence of the ruling party: All Progressives Congress (APC), the defection of some of the hitherto ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Governors, Senators, members of House of Representatives to APC, The “Before It Is Too Late” (late 2015) open letter written by the former President Olusegun Obasanjo to the then incumbent President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. There are also debates in the legislature about corrupt practices of Federal ministries, agencies and commissions, public outcries about the outrageous salaries and allowances of the National Assembly members, fuel subsidy scam and so on. Needless to say, politics is exciting and, this excitement according to Heywood (2007), poses many questions: Who should get what? How should power and other resources be distributed? Should society be based on cooperation or conflict? How should collective decisions be made? Who should have a say? How much influence should each person have? These questions and how/who to answer them, among others, inform Aristotle’s description of politics as the “master science: that is nothing less than the activity through which human beings attempt to improve their lives and create the Good Society” (Heywood 2007:1). Yet, it is important to note that politics can be and, indeed should be understood as so much more. To have real meaning, the notion of politics must be understood in much wider terms.

Etymologically, “politics” comes from the Greek word for “city-state” (polis). The Greek political philosopher, Aristotle began his famous book titled Politics with the observation that “man is by nature a political animal.” By this he meant that there is no man who can lead a lone life. Human beings interact, and the essence of social existence is politics. That is to say, two or more men interacting with one another are inevitably involved in a political relationship. Aristotle also meant that, this is natural and inevitable predisposition among men and that very few people prefer an isolated life to one that includes social relationship. He who is unable to live in society or who has no need because he is self-sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or god. Man cannot live without society or state. By nature, he desires to live in society and follow the rules and regulation of the state.

Conceptualizing politics can be elusive, Easton (1957) views politics as the authoritative allocation of value in society. This definition does not only presuppose that, inherent in every
society, are benefits and burdens, it also underscores the centrality of legitimate power (authority) to share the value. The absence of legitimate power in society may breed conflicting interests, each with its own self-aggrandizing formula for sharing society’s benefits and burdens. This may be why politics is conceived by Lasswell (1930) as who gets what, when and how? It might also have informed Merki’s (1967) definition of politics as quest for power, order and justice. In their own view, Lasswell and Kaplan (1950) defined politics as the process of making and execution of governmental decisions or policies. The making of authoritative decisions involves politics being, according to Wright (1955), the art of influencing, manipulating and controlling others. These authoritative decisions are known as public policies, which have the potentials for both latent and manifest consequences. The former, being unintended outcome(s) of public decisions, more often than not may ignite conflict. Politics, at this juncture turns, as Ranny (1975) put it, a process of resolution of conflict in society. There are rival and competing views about how a state or any other group or institution should organize and marshal human and material resource toward actualization of its goals. As a consequence, politics becomes a struggle among actors pursuing conflicting desires on public issues (Dyke 1960). Central to these definitions of politics is power. Dahl, cited by Birch (2007) defined political power as a relationship in which A (being an individual or group) induces B to behave in a way that B would not have chosen without A’s pressure. This underscores Heywood’s (2007; 4) claim that “politics is about power differential.

Who is a Politician?

By the Aristotelian thesis about the nature of man as a political animal, there is a sense in which one is justified to claim that every human being is a politician. However, from the above definitions, politics cut both ways - theory and praxis, and also because individuals engaged in their theory are mistaken for those in their praxis, we must attempt to organize understanding of politics into two categories, viz: politics as an academic endeavour and politics as an art.

Politics as an academic field entails the study of power and its socio-political and economic ramifications, structures, locations and applications. It studies the state, its formation, its government, its form of government, its functions, how its relations with other states on the international stage is mediated through diplomacy, its relations with her citizens, and the processes leading to the occupation of its offices. It studies conflicts – both domestic and international - either arising from the way the state performs her functions or the way it relates internationally. The branch of knowledge the foregoing constitutes is known as Political Science. Those who teach, attain certificate(s) or conduct research into this branch of knowledge are called Political Scientists.

However, people who engage in political activities are politicians. These activities include but not limited to electioneering campaigns, competition for elective or appointive offices (public or private, in church, mosque, unions, associations, clubs etc), political party financing and all forms of allegiance to institutions through which individuals ascend to power or positions of leadership. In other words, those who practically engage in the exercise of control within society, institution or organization through the making and enforcement of collective decisions (Heywood 2007), are politicians. For instance, officers of churches, occupying either elective or appointive positions, are politicians in this context.
Political Theory of Liberation Theology

The effort here is to find theoretical grounds for this discourse. The chapter adopts the Political Theory of Liberation Theology. The theory emerged from the Catholic Church in the late 1960s. By its fundamental constituents – its European origin and its Latin American revolutionary fervor – it was reductionist, holding little prospects of transcending the Roman Catholic Church. However, like an idea whose time has come, it has since become, as Rhodes (1994) puts, a family of theologies with strong appeal to the Latin American, Black and feminist varieties. Each of these expresses some form of oppression: Latin American liberation theologians hold that poverty-stricken people have been oppressed and exploited by rich, capitalist nations. Black liberation theologians argue that their people have suffered oppression at the hands of racist whites. Feminist liberation theologians lay heavy emphasis upon the status and liberation of women in a male-dominated society. Liberation Theology is based on the message that Jesus was and is a liberator. It brings “the good news of liberation” from unjust social structures, the power of fate, and the burden of personal sin and guilt through divine mercy and the action of people to transform their own lives. It requires commitment from its adherents to the effort to prepare the way, and it brings hope that the Kingdom of God can be created on earth (Sergent 2009). To the extent that Marxism shed a great light on the position of the poor and class domination by the capitalist, Marx influenced Liberation Theory. In addition to Marx, one of the most important nontheological sources of Liberation Theology is the work of the Brazilian Paulo Freire…, particularly his Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). Freire advocated what he called conscientization, or consciousness-raising…, a process in which the oppressed become aware of their oppression through participation in group discussion with others in similar circumstances (Sergent 2009:264). While Liberation Theology developed from the writings of theologians notable among whom are: Jurgen Moltman, Johannes Baptist Metz, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer Rhodes (1994), According to Sargent (2009), Gustavo Gutiérrez’s Theology of Liberation (1928, 1971,1973) was the first work to bring together the elements of Liberation Theology. Some tenets of Liberation Theology were gleaned from the writings of the above theologians by Rhodes (1994):

- The coming kingdom gives the church a society-transforming vision of reality as opposed to a merely private vision of personal salvation.
- There is a political dimension to faith.
- The church must be an institution of social criticism.
- A call to redefine religion in a secular context.
- A theology that emphasizes human responsibility toward others.
- The value of seeing the world with "the view from below" - the perspective of the poor and oppressed.

In line with the foregoing, Torres (1971) (cited in Sergent 2009: 265) outlined the view of Liberation Theology as follows:

- The church should be concerned with poverty.
- The church should be concerned with political repression.
- The church should be concerned with economic repression.
- Priests should become actively involved in trying to solve these problems.
- Priests should move beyond general activity to direct political action.
• Direct involvement in attempts to change political and economic systems, even by actual participation in revolutionary activity.

Based on the foregoing, there is a sense in which one may be justified to hold that politics is unavoidable to clergy who recoils at any form of oppression. The desire to secure some form of liberation for the people may precipitate pastors to think that they may serve people better as politicians than as priests. Ordained ministers across continents have responded to and advanced as reasons for joining politics, the issues of slave trade and slavery, colonialism, apartheid, poverty, class exploitation, poor working condition, poor and inadequate medical care, discriminate electricity supply, and low and discriminate standard of education.

Clerics as Politicians

So far, it has been established that man is political; politics itself is inescapable. Both its influence and interest defy boundaries, cultures and religions. All activities, through which individuals attempt to improve their lives and forge good society, are political. In this section, discussion is on some notable clerics who engaged in politics as an activity and tried to glean reasons for their decisions. We must begin with William Wilberforce, an evangelical Christian (1759-1833), for his significant role in social reform. It is interesting to note that Wilberforce’s interest in politics was not precipitated by “filthy lucre” (Titus, 1:11), as his father was a wealthy merchant. He sought a political office and was elected to become a member of parliament representing Hull, and later Yorkshire. His Christian faith was said to have prompted him to become interested in social reform, particularly the improvement of factory conditions in Britain. He and others were campaigning for an end to the trade in which British ships were carrying black slaves from Africa, in terrible conditions, to the West Indies as goods to be bought and sold. Wilberforce was persuaded to lobby for the abolition of the slave trade and for 18 years he regularly introduced anti-slavery motions in parliament. The campaign was supported by many members of the Clapham Sect and other abolitionists who raised public awareness of their cause with pamphlets, books, rallies and petitions (BBC 2014). As a cleric-politician, and given his wealthy background before he joined politics, his interest in social reform: improvement of factory-workers’ condition, abolition of slave trade and slavery, must have been stimulated by Isaiah 1: 17, “learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, and plead the case of the widow”.

During the 114th Congress in the United States of America, which lasted till early 2017, there were seven ordained ministers holding seats, as Congressmen. This number only increased by one when compared with six American clerics who held seats in the first U. S. Congress (1789-1791), (Pew Research Center 2015). This is not to say that the number of ordained pastors in American politics is not more than this. Pew Research Center, posits thus:

There is no authoritative count of the total number of clergy who have ever served in Congress. But it appears that all the ordained clergy who have served in Congress over the past 225 years have been Christians, and almost all of them have been Protestants. The first speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives – Frederick Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania – was a Lutheran minister. Muhlenberg, who served in Congress from 1789-1797, was one of at least nine ministers or pastors to serve in the Continental Congress. The others were Benjamin Contee of Maryland, Abiel Foster of New Hampshire, James Manning of Rhode Island, Joseph Montgomery of

From the foregoing, it is evident that ordained pastors have been entrenched in politics in the United States of America, from its inception to the contemporary time. Their roles transcend using sermons to call citizens towards the ideal and the ultimate; they engage in electioneering campaigns, presenting their programs and manifestoes to the electorate in a bid to win political seats.

Like Wilberforce, Tommy Douglas (1904-1986), a Baptist minister, found politics as a veritable ground for social reform. While factory condition, slave trade and slavery were the issues Wilberforce used politics, as a member of the British Parliament, to fight to atrophy, Douglas confronted great human suffering arising from the Great Depression of 1930s in Canada. As a Member of Parliament and later Premier of Saskatchewan, he ensured social justice by advocating accessible medical care and electricity to family farms. Advancing the course of social justice, Douglas believed that he could do more as a politician than as a priest. Babaluk (2010:1) captures Douglas’ political orientation and career, succinctly thus:

Douglas witnesses great human suffering first hand. Seeing farmers unable to afford medical care for their families, he joins the Saskatchewan Labour Party in 1932, believing he could do more as a politician than as a priest. The SLP forms the backbone for the creation of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. Three years later, Douglas becomes one of the first CCF Members of Parliament, the beginning of a nine-year run as an MP. The fiery debates of Parliament give him a chance to polish his oratory skills that had served him in the pulpit. The CCF is constantly in conflict with the established Liberal and Conservative parties and Douglas dives into these debates headfirst. With the leadership of the Saskatchewan provincial CCF vacant, Douglas returns home in 1942 to lead the party. He leads the CCF to a resounding victory in the 1944 provincial election, kicking off five terms as Premier of Saskatchewan. His government is the first social democratic government elected in North America. The opposition derides him as a communist or worse, but Douglas sets out modernized rural Saskatchewan. He brings electricity to family farms and provides a much needed expansion of health care in the province.

According to Babaluk (2010), on November 29, 2004, Tommy Douglas is named The Greatest Canadian of all time by voters across Canada. Douglas’ social democratic legacy is widely appreciated by people from coast to coast and his legacy can be seen in the social and medical programs that serve Canadians.

Perhaps, what one would consider a sharp contrast to the foregoing is how Don Meredith, a Pentecostal minister, turned Senator, left the Red Chamber of Canada in 2017. The allegation of sexual relationship with a teenager, which was published in the Toronto Star on June 17, 2015, and brought against him by Senator Housakos, was established and found to have “breached subsections 7.1(1) and 7.1(2)” of the Ethics and Conflict of Interest Code for Senators (Ricard, 2017:30). Meredith admitted the report of the inquiry conducted by the Office of the Senate
Ethics Officer and, undertook remedial procedures in a bid to secure his seat. However, according to Lyse Ricard – Canadian Senate Ethics Officer, “…the remedial measures…[did] not remedy the harm that his actions have caused to the office of Senator and the institution of the Senate” (Ricard 2017:30). He therefore had to forfeit his office.

The list of ordained ministers in politics extends to Africa too. The first President of Zimbabwe, a theologian, Canaan Banana (1936-2003) was a united Methodist minister. He took active part in the transnational black liberation ideo-religious movement, which wrested independence for Zimbabwe from the white supremacist regime of Ian Smith, and was appointed the first President of independent Zimbabwe in 1980-1987. “But his years in office, as well as his important earlier contribution to the struggle…[for independence] were overshadowed by the scandal that engulfed his final years: his trial and conviction on charges of homosexual sodomy which ended his career, destroyed his marriage, and ruined his reputation” (Cornwell 2003: 1).

There are prominent ordained ministers who, though have not held any elective political office, are opinion leaders, activists and forces to reckon with in politics in some African countries. In this regard, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, comes to mind. Having been exposed to the oppressive regime in early age, his mind was prepared for espousing equality and freedom. His first move was quitting his high school teaching job in protest against deterioration of black education, exemplified by overcrowded classes, gross underfunding, inequality, and servitude-promoting curriculum. Stewart (2016:2) captures Tutu’s decision thus:

Tutu became increasingly frustrated with the racism corrupting all aspects of South African life under apartheid. In 1948, the National Party won control of the government and codified the nation's long-present segregation and inequality into the official, rigid policy of apartheid. In 1953, the government passed the Bantu Education Act, a law that lowered the standards of education for black South Africans to ensure that they only learned what was necessary for a life of servitude. The government spent one-tenth as much money on the education of a black student as on the education of a white one, and Tutu's classes were highly overcrowded. No longer willing to participate in an educational system explicitly designed to promote inequality, he quit teaching in 1957.

He decided to take degrees in theology. In 1976, shortly after he was appointed Bishop of Lesotho, Tutu wrote a letter to the South African prime minister warning him that a failure to quickly redress racial inequality could have dire consequences, but his letter was ignored. In 1978, Tutu was selected as the general secretary of the South African Council of Churches, again becoming the first black citizen appointed to the position, and he continued to use his elevated position in the South African religious hierarchy to advocate for an end to apartheid (Stewart 2016).

There are many pastors, whose sermons, speeches and interviews tilt or sway politics in Nigeria. Some of them are Enoch Adeboye, Reverend Ejike Mbaka, Tunde Bakare and Yemi Osinbajo, an ordained Pentecostal pastor of The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), who was elected Vice President in 2015, on the platform of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC). Before his emergence as Vice President, he had held an appointive political office as the Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice of Lagos State from 1999-2003. Pastor Tunde Bakare, of the Latter Rain Assembly, was the first pastor to seek election into the office of the
Vice President of Nigeria. He contested and lost election on the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) joint ticket with General Muhammadu Buhari (rtd), in 2011. While Pastor Adeboye, General Overseer of RCCG, has been seen to be popular with the political directorate (the elites) and feature on the television to promote tax for Lagos State government, Reverend Ejike Mbaka, a Roman Catholic priest, has remained the most controversial – albeit in the recent years – in his prophesies and sermons about either who would or would not win the 2015 presidential election.

In conclusion, it is hoped that readers will reflect carefully on the prospects and challenges that politics holds. This chapter has given examples of ordained ministers who engaged in politics as an activity in order to ameliorate the conditions of their people. Reader can also see some pastor-politicians who lost their political offices in somewhat ignoble way. Should clerics avoid politics? Are there more effective ways by which pastors can pursue and realize social justice, than being politicians? Are there reasons why ordained ministers may feel politics provides a veritable platform through which people are better reached body, spirit and soul? All these questions and many more must continually be answered with a view to installing responsible and accountable politicians. We must think about the society in which we want to live. We must ask ourselves in what ways are we affected by idea of clerics in politics?
References:


