

Still on Obama and Ghana

Right of Reply By Fr Matthew Hassan Kukah, 08.03.2009

I have read Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi's response to my piece on President Barack Obama's visit to Ghana with very keen interest (THISDAY, July 17th, 2009). I am humbled by the thoughts that Prof. Akinyemi considers writing his response to my article a painful exercise since he, his brother and I are friends. If I deserve such respect for befriending one lay and another ordained set of Anglican brothers, what reward awaits me for befriending the Primate himself, Rev. Peter Akinnola since he and I have been good friends for over 20 years now? Prof. Akinyemi should have spared himself any pain. At the risk of repeating myself, I restate that I do love a good debate because we are all enriched by exploring new frontiers of knowledge and sharing with one another as long as we respect the ground rules.

Neither age, experience, gender, tribe, tongue, faith, nor dogma must stand in the way of public debate among people, especially over issues that we all feel very passionate and strongly about. I think the basic rule of this engagement must be decorum, respect and integrity and quest for knowledge. Most of my best friends are those with whom I have the greatest arguments and it is precisely this quality that I love about them. That is why I will forever mourn my late friend Dr. Tajudeen Abduraheem. I would consider it a mortal sin were I to bow to mere superfluous solidarity or friendship based on contrived respect as an excuse for not stating my disagreement with views I do not share. Many of my parishioners know that I am often very much at home over debates about the quality of my sermons or thoughts on even doctrinal matters if people feel otherwise. On this matter therefore, since I consider Prof. Akinyemi an Anglo-Catholic, if I had the power, I would have granted him some indulgences. The day my article was published, I received about 20 texts messages and from some people I did not know. Except for one, all expressed gratitude and appreciated my comments. My main interest is not the praise, but that people take the time to read and express their minds too, for or against my views.

In the second paragraph of his essay, Prof. Akinyemi argued that my piece was, to quote him, an example of the dangers a priest faces when he strays too far from his calling. Contrary to what he may think, actually this was the most insightful and delightful part of his entire response. Quite frankly, I do firmly believe in straying and I am proud of being considered so. Straying should be in the DNA of every priest who cares about the kingdom of God, the welfare and the rights of God's children. This is the essence of our Christian vocation. This is why the late Pope John Paul II titled one of his books on this topic as, A Sign of Contradiction. Any serious priest who engages the system experiences these contradictions. Under the military, soldiers told me to mind my business as a priest whenever I criticized them. Some timid politicians who had run under the table, waiting for the tide to change occasionally praised me for standing up to power. In exile as a NADECO man, I recall Prof. Akinyemi commending me at a round table in London for our efforts at home for sustaining the struggle. While in power, I am happy that some of yesterday's victims still tell me to mind my business as a priest when I say things that are seemingly unpleasant. Under apartheid, even Pieter Botha told Archbishop Desmond Tutu to mind his business and tell his people how to get to Heaven under apartheid.

Indeed, by deciding to pursue the priesthood against the decision of my mother and some family members, I strayed because all good boys went off, got married and raised a family. Jesus ended up on the cross because according to the Pharisees, Sadducees and the motley crowd, He had strayed. John the Baptist lost his head because in the

eyes of Herod and Herodias, he strayed. The late Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Sin, Archbishop Dennis Hurley, Trevor Huddleston, Oscar Romero, Rev. Martin Luther King, paid the prices of straying. Prof, I am in good company because these are the fathers of our faith who have preceded me. I am still far from the goal posts they set, but I prayerfully look up to them because they have shown some of us the way. In the secular world, I am proud of people who also strayed because as a result of their straying, our lives have changed. When Rosa Parks refused to get off the bus, she strayed. When Steve Biko took on the apartheid regime, telling them, I will Write what I Like, he strayed. And, the greatest strayer of all time is Nelson Mandela. So, to paraphrase the great Ngugi Wa Thiongo, "Every priest or patriot must stray, it only depends on which side you stray!" Are the business schools not teaching all their students to think outside the box? To think outside the box is to stray. Prof. Akinyemi used his fine intellect to become quite a colourful and brilliant Foreign Minister in Nigeria. Is he guilty of straying from his calling as a teacher? Let me now return from straying.

Despite everything that Prof. Akinyemi said in his response, I stand by my position not because it is necessarily the correct one. The Professor did not avail either my humble self or the reader with any new knowledge beyond sticking to what I consider to be a few straws of insinuations. My position then as now which I will back up with at least some evidence is that President Obama came in pursuit of American national strategic self interests. Unlike us, these interests dovetail into a seamless garment between the state and the corporate wings. This garment is dyed oil. I believe also that had Ghana conducted the worst elections, the Americans would have found their ways to these new oil fields. Can Prof. Akinyemi and his Obama-snubbed-us-because-of-elections square this circle? Kosmos Energy is an oil behemoth from Texas. It has outflanked other oil giants and has captured what is known as the Jubilee fields which have about 1.2 billion barrels of oil around West Africa. Is it an accident that Kosmos Energy closed its bids on July 17th, 2009, exactly one week after Obama left? The witch cried last night and now the baby is dead. Let us wait until the oil starts to come out and we shall see how Ghana will remain the model of democracy. Or, imagine if the Chinese upstaged Kosmos Energy, you will see the fate of darling Ghana. Indeed, I even suspect that had China not run European and American Oil companies out of Sudan, President Umar al-Bashir (whom I cannot stand) would probably not be in the dilemma he is in now. Prof. Akinyemi summons CNN to his defence in gauging how Africans responded to the visit. Wish he had tried Al Jazeera or looked up what African scholars across the world were lamenting on the internet hours after the speech. After practising Asalama laikum for his Cairo speech, President Obama could not even manage an Akwaaba to Ghanaians! An article in the influential Foreign Policy Magazine by an Ugandan, Andrew Mwenda, titled "Obama Has Missed the Mark", concluded that: "The lesson for Obama is that Africa is likely to get better with less meddling in its affairs by the west, not more, whether that meddling is through aid, peace-keeping or well written speeches. Africa needs space to make mistakes and learn from them." I am more persuaded by this line of thinking than the calls for western endorsement as conditions for measuring our progress as Prof. Akinyemi seems to imply.

Prof. Akinyemi was quite upbeat about what he calls Nigeria's preeminent position during the Murtala-Obasanjo regime. He presents President Jimmy Carter's visit as the climax and affirmation of that position. I hold a slightly modified view but it also reinforces my thesis. At that time, we had muscle in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) because oil supplies were at the highest in the 70s. And, if Prof. Akinyemi believes his own argument, why did the same west conspire to kill Murtala the moment he nationalized our oil industry and wanted Africa to take its destiny in its hands? We do not need to summon Alhaji M. D Yusuf, Prof. Wimot or raise Bala Usman from his grave to appreciate where Murtala was taking Nigeria and Africa to in those

days. Has Prof. Akinyemi forgotten the stories of leaders who have tried to endanger foreign interests and investments of western nations? Who has lived to tell the stories?

For example, when John Stockwell resigned from the CIA in the late 80s, he published his book, *In Search of Enemies*, detailing the atrocities that the CIA perpetrated on behalf of America. He narrated his role in the killing of Patrice Lumumba and how he carried the corpse in the boot of his car around Kinshasa. Barely three years ago, the New York Times revealed that CIA Desk officers in developing countries had full responsibilities for organizing the elimination of Heads of State whose philosophies endangered American interests. Will Saddam Hussein not be alive today and sitting pretty had he not turned his back on America? In his book, *My American Journey*, General Colin Powell tells the story of the clash of interests between the United States and Manuel Noriega when he sought to nationalize the Panama Canal and in the process endangered American interests. He speaks of the role he played in the search for Noriega's replacement. For some 20 or so years now, President Noriega whom President Bush (Snr) as Head of the CIA allowed to run drugs as President of Panama has remained in prison in the US. He was jailed by the same President Bush as punishment. Further back and here in Africa, on July 26th, 1956, Abdel Nasser, the charismatic Egyptian President, declared to a stunned world: Today, in the name of the people, I am taking over the Suez National Canal Company. Tonight, our Egyptian canal will be run by Egyptians. Anthony Eden, the British Prime Minister declared that Britain could not tolerate having Nasser's thumb on her wind pipe. We know what followed next.

At the height of his brutality, the Americans supported Sergeant Doe and even when he conducted elections that were far worse than what we experienced here in Nigeria, given the massive killings, Mr. Chester Crocker, President Reagan's point man in Africa, still praised the elections because, as a Senior Policy maker in the US later said: "All our interests were impeccably protected by Doe. We weren't paying a penny for US installations." In his fascinating book, *The Fate of Africa, A History of Fifty Years of Independence*, Martin Meredith details many of the sins and crimes that Europe and America have visited on Africans.

These thoughts sometimes bring tears to my eyes. I therefore fail to understand why a man of such brilliance and experience like Prof. Akinyemi will miss these connections and suggest that we should simply be asking Obama, how far should we jump, Massa? The years of servitude for Africa are over. Our ancestors have paid the prize. It is time for us to live unencumbered lives at our own pace. If there are any lessons for us to learn, they lie in the fact that national interests and their pursuit are neither missionary journeys nor prayer sessions. We must fix our elections by all means necessary. But for goodness sake, we should not be stampeded into thinking that this must happen because it is one of President Obama's four-point agenda for Africa. We must tidy up our act because it is in our personal national interests to do so, not because we want to become a poster child in the Oval Office. Finally, Prof. Akinyemi recommended that we should all read the Book of Lamentation as a solution to our problems. He said: "I expected Msgr Kukah to join those who love this country in lamenting the situation in our country. Prof, you accused me of straying, now you are lying on your own sword. Should I ask you to stick with Foreign Affairs then? We Christians are children of the Resurrection. Christ is risen. We are an Alleluia people and we have no business with the Book of Lamentation within this context. These dry bones of Nigeria shall rise again. I know that will happen, sooner than later, without President Obama.

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