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Martin Luther  
by Lucas Cranach the Elder circa 1532

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General editor: Michael Parker (Mike.Parker@etsc.org)

Formatter: Haidy Hanna

Translators for this issue are Dina Sohby, Sameh Raheef, and Rita Bahig Sorial.

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# Message from the Editor: Completing the Five *Solas* of the Reformation ... and Other Things

Michael Parker

([mike.parker@etsc.org](mailto:mike.parker@etsc.org))

Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo

In the year 2017, the five-hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo (ETSC) held a series of talks on the famous five *solas* of the Reformation: *Sola Fide* (by faith alone), *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone), *Solus Christus* (through Christ alone), *Sola Gratia* (by grace alone), and *Soli Deo Gloria* (glory to God alone). In the previous volume, the CJT published three of these talks. In volume 5, we complete the set with articles on *Sola Scriptura* and *Sola Fide*, which were presented and written by ETSC's president and its president of the board, Atef Mehany Masaramy and Youssaf Samir, respectively.

A third article was contributed by Benson Ohihon Igboin of the University of South Africa. Igboin writes about the secularization of Africa, which to many readers may seem to be a non sequitur if one begins with the common assumption that Africa is a uniquely religious continent. Yet Igboin makes a good case for why this is so and what should be done about it.

This issue concludes, appropriately, with a book review of Eric Metaxas' recent biography of Martin Luther, which was timed for the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. Metaxas is a well-known author whom many readers may remember for his very popular biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 2011. In his newest work, Metaxas presents a fast-paced biography of Luther in a popular style that will appeal to scholars as well as the laity. Metaxas is particularly concerned to explode the various myths about Luther that have become the conventional wisdom of our time. While Egyptians are often accused of perpetuating myths and legends about their religious past, but Metaxas reminds us that Westerners can be just as guilty of this victimless crime.

## ***Sola Scriptura/ Scripture alone***

**Atef Gendy**

We must remind ourselves that the word *sola* means lone, only, and alone. It was used with five Reformation principles: *Sola Scriptura*, *Solus Christus*, *Sola fide*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*, which indicate that reformers faced many church problems and weaknesses in the Middle Ages for which they tried to find solutions. In the five *solas* we see in a simplified form a number of Reformation principles. For example, we see in them a summary of Luther's 95 theses. Each *sola* formed a solution to the essential challenges that the church faced at the time. For example, the teaching of *Solus Christus* met the challenge that salvation could be achieved by human beings rather than by Christ alone.

I will address in this paper the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*, which means Scripture Alone. This principle stresses the superiority of biblical authority over any other authority. It countered the propaganda of the pope and Catholic clergy that the church's teaching authority reached the level of the infallibility of the pope and the ecumenical councils in whatever they recognized as confessions of faith.

Luther declared clearly at the Diet of Worms in 1521, where he stood to defend himself before the imperial council led by emperor Charles V (1519- 1556), that he was ready to renounce his theses if he was proven wrong from the Bible. Luther asserted in his defense that, in the new ideas he was presenting in his movement of reform, his conscience was bound by his understanding of the Scriptures and the work of the Holy Spirit. According to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, the Bible is the only infallible authority for faith and practice, which of course put it at odds with the ecclesiastical and theological teaching authority of the pope and the Catholic clergy.

### **Historical Background**

The Middle Ages (roughly the years between A.D. 500 and 1500) were characterized by the development of a long and bitter struggle between the civil authority of the state (especially the emperor) and the spiritual authority of the pope and Church. When the state was stronger than the church, the church experienced interference from the emperors in the church's ecumenical councils in theological matters. Though state officials were ignorant of such matters, they contributed to the oppression of some of the church fathers or supported others for political motives, agendas, and goals. In many cases, their efforts led to the success of a particular clergy group for political reasons rather than for the integrity of their ideological positions. When the church became more powerful, some popes interfered with state affairs, opposing kings and emperors, and threatening them with the withholding of pardon for their sins. On occasion, kings had to beg for forgiveness from the popes in ways that were humiliating and unworthy of their rank.

Unfortunately, the Middle Ages witnessed not only a severe deterioration in the relationship between church and state but also between believers and the Bible. The struggle over authority, explained above, may have been a large reason for this. Popes succeeded in justifying their authority from the Bible, and they kept within the

hands of the clergy the authority to teach infallibly in matters of faith and practice. Under their authority, doctrines of confession and forgiveness of sins appeared that were based on the idea that the church was given authority by Christ to “bind” and “loose.” Other doctrines also appeared, such as those affirming purgatory and papal infallibility.

The Roman Catholic Church insisted on limiting access to the Bible to the clergy. It also held that the Bible would only be available in Latin, the formal language of the state as well as the language used for the Catholic liturgy of the Mass. The Bible used by the church was the *Vulgate*, which was a Latin version translated by St. Jerome (347-420) based on the original Hebrew of the Old Testament and Greek of the New Testament. If the priests would have insisted on reading the Bible in its original languages, their position would have been justified and accepted by all. But, instead, they insisted on reading the Bible in a specific Latin translation without allowing its translation into the vernacular languages of the various Christian nations at the time. They were intransigent on this issue, withholding vernacular Bibles from the Christians of that time. Moreover, the clergy explicitly warned the public of the danger of reading the Bible and interpreting it on their own. They held, as a pretext, that the laity was unqualified to read the Bible and that their souls would be endangered by the heretical ideas they might embrace based on their misunderstanding of the Scriptures.

### **The Life of Martin Luther**

To understand the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, we will need to highlight some of the main points in the life of the reformer Martin Luther. Certain events in his life played an important role in the development of his interpretation of the Bible and his formulation of the doctrine of Scripture Alone – that is, the Bible is the Church’s sole authority and is superior to all others.

It is well known that Luther was a student of philosophy at Erfurt University. He also studied law to please his father. Luther experienced some dramatic incidents, dangers and illnesses that influenced his academic life and, for a while, led him in the direction of monasticism. One day while he was traveling on foot from home to the university, he struggled with his fear of death and judgment. At this time it was raining heavily and a lightning bolt struck a huge tree nearby, which threw him to the ground but caused him no harm. At that time, he felt that this incident held the important message that, to please God, he must quit his position at the university and join a local Augustinian monastery. Luther mentions in one of his writings that he didn’t do this because of a love of monasticism but rather because he felt that heaven – through the lightening incident – had called him specifically to this life. He writes, “I received a frightful calling from heaven, so I didn’t become a monk from desire or a love of monasticism.” On July 17, 1505, he sent a letter of resignation to the university, and at the same time he wrote to his father to inform him of his decision to become a monk.

While staying in the monastery, he became sick and almost died. God sent him a spiritual counselor, John Staupitz (1460- 1524), to check on him. Staupitz afforded Luther an opportunity to share with him as a counselor his fears about death and judgment. The monk reminded him of what we say in the profession of faith: “We

believe in the forgiveness of sins ...” Right there, Luther’s eyes could see, for the first time, God the Father as a merciful and graceful father, not just as a judge. He started thinking about Jesus Christ not just as one who condemns but as one who also forgives sin. These incidents in Luther’s life were turning points that led him to his discovery of the principle of justification by faith.

Staupitz reminded Luther that God forgives sins and that the biblical words on this subject weren’t just words of condolence. In the midst of Luther’s distress, this was a starting point on an intellectual journey that led to his study of the word of God – especially Paul’s epistle to the Romans – as well as to the writings of Augustine of Hippo. Luther’s journey led to his increasing intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Yet the journey also led him on a downward path that increased his personal sense of sin and worthlessness and to a conviction that his deeds would never measure up to God’s demands. His study confirmed for him that no priest had the power to forgive sins and also that no deeds, practices, or rituals could do this for him. Luther became increasingly convinced that no man could ever grant or withhold God’s forgiveness, nor could a mere man affect the destiny of another. These ideas mingled and merged in his mind as he continued to make discoveries in God’s word and to be influenced by the Holy Spirit. Soon Luther developed new convictions about things like the priesthood, sacraments, good deeds, the merits of saints, the intercession of the saints, and the role of all these things in the forgiveness of sins. Amid great intellectual struggles, Luther developed convictions about church practices and doctrines that he found problematic. But what distinguishes Luther’s new ideas is that they were the outcome of clear answers given in the Bible.

John Staupitz was the dean of the new university at Wittenberg. Upon meeting the monk Luther, he saw not just an anxious young man struggling with intellectual and spiritual problems but a man of intense intelligence, strong opinion, and acute academic skills. Therefore, Staupitz asked the young Luther to leave the Augustinian monastery and come to Wittenberg to tutor students in Aristotle’s philosophy as well as biblical studies while he was completing his doctorate at Erfurt. Luther completed his theological studies with excellence, and soon he became a professor at Wittenberg. This was another turning point in his life, for it brought him closer to the Bible through studying and teaching it. In this next and perhaps most important part of his intellectual life, Luther delved into biblical studies and languages. His studies shaped his thoughts and led directly to his critique of many of the traditional beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church and can even be seen in the spiritual insights of his later more mature writing. Luther had no difficulty in correcting religious concepts he had inherited from the Catholic Church but found to be wanting in the clear light of God’s word. One of the best examples we can see of this is the contrast between his early convictions on salvation and forgiveness of sins that he recorded in his 95 theses and his later convictions on salvation by faith alone that became clear to him only after he did his careful exegesis of Paul’s epistle to the Romans.



### **The Implications of the Doctrine of *Sola Scriptura***

Luther's faith journey cannot be understood without recognizing the Bible's importance in his life. Careful study of the Scriptures led to his discovery of what would later be seen as Reformation concepts about God, Jesus, grace, salvation, and so much more. To summarize the most important theological concepts or outcomes that follow from his belief in biblical authority as expressed in the term *Sola Scriptura*, I list seven key points:

First: The right to make pronouncements on the meaning of the Bible isn't limited to the clergy; rather, any intelligent person can understand the Bible through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Luther put this well when he announced his position at the Diet of Worms: "The God who once spoke through the mouth of an ass to rebuke Balaam is capable of speaking through a pious man [speaking about himself] to rebuke the Pope."

Second: He recognized that every man has a right to read the Bible in his own language. This conviction drove Luther to translate the Bible from the Hebrew and Greek languages into German. He began by singlehandedly translating the New Testament and later, with the help of a team of scholars, translating the Old Testament as well. This was exhausting and some phrases baffled him and his friends for days, but in the end Luther produced a renowned German Bible.

Third: Luther's translation of the Bible into German opened the door to the translation of the Bible into hundreds of languages and dialects, one of the most famous of them being the English King James Version (1611). Because of Luther's work, Bible societies and organizations dedicated to translating the Bible were established, which led to making the Bible accessible to many people all over the world.

Fourth: Luther wrote a book specifically addressing the German nobility, explaining his position on the papacy and his objections. He focused in the book on how he held to the right of every man to read and explain the Bible. Following this, he published a book on doctrinal principles and then several commentaries of the Bible. He even published a book of sermons based on the teaching of the Bible, which presented a marvelous example to the clergy and monks of how to explain and teach the Bible. Furthermore, Luther made a unique contribution by writing hymns based on the book of Psalms, which influenced worship, changed the pattern of the Mass, and made it possible for worshipers to come to a greater appreciation of the words of the Bible by participating in the worship service through singing praises to God.

Fifth: The principle of *Sola Scriptura* had a huge impact on every aspect of the Church's life and doctrines. For Luther this principle was not just a slogan but a core intellectual conviction whose light was intended to shine on every aspect of life. His idea was embraced and intensified by subsequent reformers such as Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox as they interpreted and expounded the Scriptures, wrote hymns, crafted doctrines, taught children and adults, and organized the church in the light of its teachings.



Sixth: When the reformers came to the firm conclusion that the Bible alone was the only infallible standard for Christian faith and practice, they necessarily rejected the authority of tradition, the pope, and the clergy. The value of tradition and all the interpretations and writings through the years by church authorities were of no ultimate value if they were inconsistent with the Bible. Nevertheless, tradition is not without some value as a record of the Church's past thought and understanding of the word of God, but it can never stand alone as an independent source of faith and practice on a level of authority equal to the Bible's.

Seventh: It is clear that Luther and all the reformers focused on the authority of the Bible as the word of God and not on the doctrines of inspiration or the nature of the Bible's infallibility. The reformers simply did not look that far ahead; rather, they were concerned with the immediate need to establish the authority of the Bible over and against the Catholic Church's teachings that they believed were grounded in human tradition – that is, teachings based on the pronouncements of the popes, clergymen, or ecumenical councils. Their focus was the decisive issue of the authority of the Bible as the sole source for the Church's faith and practice. The reformers weren't concerned – as we will see in the confessions of faith produced during the Reformation era – to elaborate a doctrine of inspiration or set clear limits to biblical infallibility.

## **The Bible in the Reformation Era's Confessions of Faith**

### **Geneva Confession of Faith, 1536**

"First we affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other thing which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord."

### **Confession of Faith of the Reformed Church in France, 1559**

"As such this God reveals himself to men; firstly, in his works, in their creation, as well as in their preservation and control. Secondly, and more clearly, in his Word, which was in the beginning revealed through oracles, and which was afterward committed to writing in the books which we call the Holy Scriptures. These Holy Scriptures are comprised in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments ... We know these books to be canonical, and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church, as by the testimony and inward illumination of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we cannot found any articles of faith ... We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from him alone, and not from men. And inasmuch as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels, to add to it, to take away from it, or to change it. Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but, on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them. And therefore we confess the three creeds, to wit: the Apostles', the Nicene, and

the Athanasian, because they are in accordance with the Word of God."

### **The Scots Confession, 1560**

"We believe and confess the Scriptures of God sufficient to instruct and make perfect the man of God, so do we affirm and avow their authority to be from God, and not to depend on men or angels. We affirm, therefore, that those who say the Scriptures have no other authority save that which they have received from the Kirk [Church] are blasphemous against God and injurious to the true Kirk, which always hears and obeys the voice of her own Spouse and Pastor, but takes not upon her to be mistress over the same.

### **Challenges Posed by the Principle of *Sola Scriptura***

Although we find many great benefits from the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, there are also many challenges that arose and still arise from it, suggesting that churches that have sprung from the Reformation need to exercise caution in applying it.

That the Church should neglect tradition was not at all the intention of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation. Their intention was not to abandon church tradition but simply to set the Scriptures above it as an authority by which to judge all human teachings. How Reformation churches deal with tradition remains an extremely sensitive matter. Though the Bible records the life of the Lord Jesus and the early church, its accounts were not written during Christ's life on earth but after his ascension by his disciples who relied to some extent on the faithful preservation of Christ's teachings through an oral tradition. Church tradition includes not only the early history of God's people Israel and the early years of the church of Christ but also the Church's subsequent struggle to understand and interpret the sacred word. The church continues to need to distinguish between what is true and what is false in its own tradition according to the extent to which it is consistent with the Scriptures. So, it is best not to reject tradition but to respect it, read it, study it and benefit from it, examining it at every turn in the light of the Bible and not *vice versa*.

Once again, the best gift we can give the world—often together with education and evangelization—is to make the Bible available to everyone so that all may learn the path of salvation and grow in grace. But at the same time the church must offer help from those skilled in biblical interpretation so that the non-specialized will be protected from misunderstanding. The church should always serve the world in this way and never abandon the pulpit to the uneducated. Sadly, we see this at times in some local churches in which heresies spread and false doctrines are proclaimed concerning Christ, salvation, sanctification, and other subjects.

The Bible should bring us closer to each other, unifying those who believe in its authority. Instead, we often see varying biblical interpretations lead to divisions in the church. Yet if we follow enlightened principles of interpretation, we should come to correct conclusions about the Bible and theology, which will lead to Christianity unity.

Sometimes, we are drawn into futile arguments about the nature of inspiration,

which inevitably leads some into a desperate desire to defend the validity and authenticity of every word in the Bible as they imagine that this is the way to apply the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*. In contrast, the approach presented here emphasizes the authority of the sacred word for faith and works, not its inspiration. It follows that the best way to apply the principle of *Sola Scriptura* is to use every possible means to present the teachings of the Bible – in translations, commentaries, and sermons – in ways that are consistent with the best scholarship of our time.

Let the Bible then be used to evangelize the whole world. Let it be taught to young and old in the Church. Let it be obeyed by all believers. But let us refrain from making it the object of philosophical and academic arguments.

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**Dr. Gendy is the President of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo and a professor of New Testament.**

## **Sola Fidei**

### **The Main Principle of the Protestant Reformation**

**Youssef Samir**

The principle of *sola fidei*, “faith alone,” emerged in the history of the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther added the word “alone” to the text of the apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans: “For we maintain that a person is justified by faith [alone] apart from the works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). It is easy to imagine the vociferous attack by the Roman Catholic Church on this audacious Augustinian monk for daring to add a word to the biblical text. Erasmus of Rotterdam, however, came to his defence. Erasmus, a Roman Catholic and renowned humanist scholar, explained that Luther's translation was not contrary to the Bible or the theological intention of the apostle Paul; moreover, it is consistent with other scripture writers who teach that salvation and eternal life are not acquired except through faith alone.<sup>1</sup> The attack on Luther did not abate anytime soon. The Council of Trent (1645-1569), the Catholic Church's most authoritative response to the Protestant Reformation, continued its unyielding opposition to Luther's translation and all of its underlying assumptions. A key passage of the text, written in 1562, is as follows: “If someone says that the faith that justifies is only through trusting in the mercy of God, that iterases sins because of Christ, or that we are justified through that trust alone, let him be proscribed.”<sup>2</sup>

Like so many ideas, philosophies, and movements that have ever appeared in human civilizations, the principle of *faith alone* was a response to controversial doctrines. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, there were three problematic theological ideas that, arguably, distorted biblical faith and confused many simple people. These ideas are the following:

- 1) Pelagianism, which emerged in the fourth and fifth centuries in the time of Augustine of Hippo, asserted that human beings were able by their own efforts to take the first steps towards salvation apart from God's grace. This is based on the questionable idea that human beings are born without original sin – that is, they are born morally immaculate, having no trace of sin at all.<sup>3</sup> Augustine objected to Pelagianism, arguing that salvation is only granted through the presence of the inner grace of God, that the penalty of sin is only mitigated through faith in Christ's atonement, and that a person's ability to do good is only through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> During the Reformation era and in subsequent years, many disagreed with Augustine and Luther. For example, Erasmus expressed his dissent succinctly, writing, “Free will is the power to put one's self in the circle of grace.” Following the Reformation era, such prominent Christian leaders as Jacobus Arminius and John Wesley adopted this idea.

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<sup>1</sup>F. R. Harm, “Solafidianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter E. Elwell (Ada, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 1032.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Awad Samaan, *Faith and Works* (Cairo: Dar el Thaqafa, 1982), 177.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 178.

- 2) Semi Pelagianism is the idea that emerged to reconcile the ideas of Augustine and Pelagius. Its name suggests that salvation is due both to the participation of the human will and the grace of God, a position that was adopted by some of the students and followers of Pelagius.<sup>5</sup> It maintains that Adam's sin affected all humanity, robbing each person of the ability to obey God's law without the divine help that comes from heaven. In this scheme, the process of salvation begins when individuals attempt to overcome their human disability by their own effort, while God steps in to help them to overcome that disability completely. The theology of both Pelagianism and Semi Pelagianism are not consistent with the Bible's teaching on the total inability of human beings to obtain grace on their own and their need, therefore, for help from heaven to obtain redemption. This position was formulated by the Reformers as the doctrine of "Total Depravity," which John Piper has summarized in the following way:

Total Depravity means that our rebellion against God is a complete rebellion. Consequently, all we do in that state is sin, and we are entirely unable to submit ourselves to God to fix ourselves, which is why we deserve eternal punishment.<sup>6</sup>

- 3) Synergism is a Greek word that means "work together." It expresses the essence of the idea that the divine and the human must work together for the renewal of the fallen person who needs salvation. This idea emerged in the sixteenth century in opposition to that of Luther's. Philip Melanchthon, one of Luther's colleagues, elaborates:

In the renewal there are three factors that work together: the word, the Holy Spirit, and the will that isn't completely idle but resists its weakness. As God draws to himself only whom he wants ... as the will is not a deaf statue, and these spiritual feelings don't come to a deaf statue.<sup>7</sup>

And so, the principle of *faith alone* was in opposition to all the tendencies that tried to put the human will in the position of being the main actor in the process of salvation, or to see it as the main engine powering the wheel of salvation in participation with the grace of God.

### **The Interaction between Theology and History**

It is very important when we are facing a historical study and the meaning behind the principle *faith alone* to stop for a while and focus on the interaction between theology and reality. No matter the subject matter – society, politics, an internal church matter, or something else – this interaction can be observed in all eras.

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 178-179.

<sup>6</sup>John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God's Grace*, translation to Arabic by Hamdy Saad (Damasus, Syria: Dar El Fekr Al Engeely, 2017), 35-36.

<sup>7</sup>C. G. Fry, "Synergism" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter E. Elwell (Ada, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 1063.

In his book *The Story of Theology*,<sup>8</sup> R.A Finlayson highlights this idea while tracing the story of the interaction of theological developments with the events of particular periods, beginning with the first Christian era. Similarly, in this paper as I walk the paths of theology that were laid out in past ages, I will comment on the historical contest as we move along.

For example, since the Church first began to develop its doctrine of the divinity of Christ, it has faced the dilemma of reconciling the divine-human nature of Christ with the traditional Hebrew idea that there is one God. Eventually, the Church expressed the three-fold nature of God and the idea that God is one with the word *Trinity*. This doctrine emerged slowly as theologians meditated and reflected on God's revelation as given in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, focusing on those parts that relate to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, and to the relationship between God and the world of human beings.

One of the foremost contributors to the emerging doctrine of the Trinity was Tertullian (ca. 160 – ca. 220), a North African theologian and apologist of the Christian faith who highlighted the idea that the three persons of the Trinity are distinct from one another and yet one God who cannot be divided.

In the years following Tertullian, the Church continued to affirm Jesus as the son of God, but it increasingly saw the need to emphasize and explain how he could be both human and divine. In the early fourth century, Arius (256-336) highlighted the humanity of Christ at the expense of his divinity, probably being influenced by the philosophy of Plato. Athanasius opposed the Arian heresy, believing that Arian ideas were attempting to make Christ only half divine, like a Greek demigod. Athanasius expressed the divinity of Christ in brilliant pictorial words, saying to his contemporaries:

And that is what we could understand from the example of the picture of the emperor, where the emperor's shape and figure are in the picture, and the figure in the picture is that in the emperor, because the features of the emperor are in the picture. It is completely like him so that whoever looks at the picture sees the emperor in it, and whoever sees the emperor realizes that he himself is the one in the picture. And because there is no difference in features, whoever wants to see the emperor after seeing the picture, the picture could tell him that "I and the emperor are one" because I am in the emperor and the emperor is in me. So as the son also is the image of God, then it must be understood that the divinity of the Father is perfectly reflected in the son. The Scriptures support this position (Philippians 2:6 and John 14:10).<sup>9</sup>

In the evolution of the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, questions were quickly raised about Christ's two natures, divine and the human. In the fourth and fifth centuries there were many attempts to express in exact terms the meaning of the two natures. We see this in the church's earliest ecumenical councils: Nicaea (325), (Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451).

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<sup>8</sup> R. A. Finlayson, *The Story of Theology* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1969), 19- 47.

<sup>9</sup> St. Athanasius, *Third Article against Arians*, translated to Arabic by Magdy and Heba and Noshay Abd el Shaheed (Cairo: St. Anthony Organization, Center of Fathers Studies, November 1994), 16-17.



After focusing on what is relative to God, the focus shifted to expressing the relationship between God and man, especially regarding the topic of salvation. This discussion reached its peak in the era of Augustine's lifetime (354-430) and the period immediately following. Augustine summarized the thinking of the church on this subject, emphasizing humanity inability and its need of divine grace. Memorably, he once prayed: "Bless us with what you command, and command us with what you want."

St. Anselm (1109-1033), continuing the Augustinian tradition, highlighted the features of the doctrine of redemption in the Middle Ages. He was the first to discuss the idea of Christ making satisfaction to God for humanity's sins, thus enabling human beings to gain an undeserved salvation through his redemptive work.

In the context of the Protestant Reformation, the principle of *faith alone* appeared as a defiant response to the medieval theology of the Roman Catholic Church. Some of the things said about this doctrine would be further developed in later periods of the Protestant tradition.

John Calvin, a second generation reformer, gave clear expression to the authority of Scripture, which clearly contains the principle of *faith alone* in contrast to the emphasis on ritual and works that the Roman Catholic tradition called for in this era. Calvin's theological project was to a great extent concerned with pointing to the authority of the word from which we derive all the key ideas that form the Protestant tradition – for example, the role of the Holy Spirit in understanding the Word. For Calvin, it is the Word and Spirit that establish the authority of divine revelation. The Word is the divine revelation while the Spirit is the one who reveals that Word. Together they persuade the human soul of the authority of revelation over human thought and behavior.

From that historical review we come to the understanding that God did not leave himself without a witness in any era; rather, in each age and with every need he raised a person or many persons who took up the burden of expressing theological truth in updated language, rephrasing the traditional language of the faith so that it would speak afresh to new generations. We see this in Tertullian's fresh language regarding the Trinity, in Athanasius' on Christology, in Augustine on soteriology, in Anselm on the doctrine of redemption, in Luther on the doctrine of justification through faith, and in Calvin and the doctrine of revelation.

### **Martin Luther and the Emergence of the Idea of Justification through Faith Alone**

The social, political, and religious context of the Middle Ages played an important role in preparing and leading the church to reaching many points of theology that were posited in the Protestant Reformation. During the centuries prior to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church deviated from many basic biblical doctrines, most importantly the doctrine of justification that had been one of the theological constants in the church since its earliest centuries. In fact, Luther was not the first to discover or advocate the doctrine of justification through faith as if it were a new idea in the history of the church; rather, he was preceded by many church fathers and theologians who had similar thoughts. For example, Clement of Rome once wrote: "As we are called by the will of God in Jesus Christ, we are not justified



through ourselves or our wisdom or our acumen or the purity of our works that we have made with sacred hearts, but through faith, faith through which the mighty God justifies every flesh.”<sup>10</sup> Also, Augustine of Hippo wrote, “People are not saved through good works or the free insistence of their personal will, but through the grace of God through faith... and the sinful man needs a mediator and that mediator is Jesus Christ...”<sup>11</sup>

And it must be pointed that the Catholic Church had a complete theological order to be followed in how human beings were to experience justification and salvation, which we shall examine only briefly. For nearly 800 years, the Roman Catholic Church maintained the necessity of the presence of human works before and after justification. Before justification, theologians asserted, human beings must have a time of preparation, which includes fostering, in addition to faith, fear of divine justice, hope in God’s mercy for the sake of the benefits of Christ, the beginning in God’s love, hating sin and healing from its effects, accepting baptism, and starting a new life. All these spiritual works and preparations were referred to with the term *meritumcongrui*.<sup>12</sup> Alister McGrath indicates that these types of benefits, according to the prevailing theological thought back then, were weak because they came before acquiring saving grace. Nonetheless, they had value and made a difference; hence, God kept them in mind.<sup>13</sup>

After obtaining justifying grace, a Christian is renewed in spirit, becomes a partaker in the divine nature, and therefore begins to do good works. These works after salvation are referred to as *meritum condign* (condign merit, or works that afford formal merit).<sup>14</sup> Such works prepare a person to obtain the heavenly prize of eternal life, and they are considered to be a type of satisfaction and to have a higher value because they came after faith in Christ. But because the church tended to exaggerate the value and the effect of these works and connected them to receiving eternal life, over time they led to the doctrines of purgatory and the value associated with the relics of the saints. Martin Luther would come to reject this entire system of condign merits and the merits of the saints, which made up a big part of his well-known *Ninety-Five Theses*.

The ruling religious thought in that era was how a person could get rid of the burden of sin and unrighteousness. During this time, the leadership of the Catholic Church amplified the problem. By stressing the sinfulness of people, the church deepened people’s feelings of guilt and helplessness so that the religious leadership could dominate them. The reasons for this were at least in part financial. Both

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<sup>10</sup>Finlayson, 42-43.

<sup>11</sup>Kenneth Howes, “The ‘Solas’ of the Reformation,” *Table Talk*, 13, no. (November 2006).

<sup>12</sup>Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, Fourth Edition, trans. James Bastible (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1960), 252-253, quoted in Kenneth Howes, “The ‘Solas’ of the Reformation.”

<sup>13</sup>Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 201), 169.

<sup>14</sup>Ott, 256- 257. Condign merit (*meritum de condign*) is an aspect of Roman Catholic theology signifying merit with the dignity of Christ. A person born again in Christ does not merit his own virtue but the virtues of Christ are applied to his work. Therefore, it is God crowning his works. Congruent merit is the equivalent of condign merit but, but the latter are applied to an unregenerate person by the goodness of God.

Catholic and Protestant historians believe that the pope of Rome used indulgences to gain financial support from the people in order to build the new St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. In popular belief, indulgences guaranteed forgiveness of sins in the past, present, and future; also, they could reach beyond this life to affect the dead in purgatory. The church taught that the excess good works of some people could be counted in the interest of those in purgatory to reduce their stay there. In this scheme, indulgences were the way to transfer good deeds from one account to another.<sup>15</sup> The theology of indulgences affected not only individuals but also the politics within the church and between the church and secular authorities. Roland Bainton tells the story of how indulgences were the issues that sparked the Reformation. It began when Albert of Brandenburg became the bishop of two dioceses, though he had not yet reached the legal age needed to be a bishop. Nonetheless, Albert sought a third bishopric, and the pope agreed on the condition that Albert would present twelve thousand golden coins for the twelve apostles. Instead, Albert offered seven thousand golden coins according for the seven deadly sins. They compromised on ten thousand golden coins! But Albert didn't possess that amount, so the Pope agreed that Albert could sell indulgences to obtain the needed money, giving half of what he obtained to the pope to be used to finish building St. Peter's Basilica.<sup>16</sup>

European society in the late Middle Ages was emerging from many long years of ignorance and darkness in the church. Many people had an excessive fear of God and his judgment. They were fixated on God's wrath and the punishment that awaits many in either purgatory or hell. In this context, many people's biggest concern was how to please God. To this end, many sought forgiveness by buying indulgences, self-flagellation, or going on pilgrimage to Rome to ascend the famous twenty-eight steps of the Scala Sancta (Holy Stairs).<sup>17</sup>

Martin Luther was not of course an exception in this climate of fear and superstition. He was born in the year 1483, studied in a grammar school, and then continued on to university. During his years as a student, he often suffered from a deep spiritual trepidation. A fear of the wrath of God had taken hold of him. It was like a dark cloud that hung over his head. He was terrified that death would come early to him, that God would then pour out his wrath on him, and that his soul would then be eternally lost. This feeling grew stronger when he saw one of his friends die because of a lightning bolt that hit him. The Reverend Menese Abd El Noor describes this period in Luther's life:

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<sup>15</sup> Abd El Maseeh Estefanos, *The Evangelicals: Names and Concepts* (Cairo: Publications of the First Christian Middle East Center, Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, 2014), 41-42.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Bainton, *Horizon History of Christianity*, translated to Arabic by Abd El Noor Michail (Cairo: Dar el Thaqafa, 1978), 108.

<sup>17</sup> A. Morrison described these stairs, saying, "It consisted of 28 steps on top of each were pointed nails. And Catholics thought that ascending these stairs is the biggest religious act that could be done. They claimed that it creates a new nature in the human being that carries righteousness and holiness and a confirmation of the forgiveness of sins... that made hundreds of people from all over the world ascend them on their knees. And the Pope "Leo the fourth" in the ninth century has promised to grant forgiveness for a duration of nine years for each step that anyone ascends on their knees, on the condition that they repeat specific prayers on each step." A. Morrison, *Martin Luther: The Great Reformer*, translated to Arabic by Baky Sadaka (Cairo: The Christian Dar el Thaqafa, 1977), 31.

Martin Luther was always posing questions about things related to death. He was pursued by the idea of death, which seemed at times to overcome his feelings and conscience. When one of his friends died due to a deadly disease and then another was killed mysteriously, Martin Luther wondered: what would happen if I were one of these two friends who suddenly had to meet face-to-face with God? Two days after Easter in the year 1503 when Martin Luther was on his way to his father's house in Mansfield with a friend, a hole in the ground suddenly appeared in front of him. He tried to avoid it but he fell in anyway and suffered a deep cut. His friend helped him home, but Luther bled all and way and so lost much blood. During that frightening experience, Luther wondered: What would be my fate if I had to face God at this moment?<sup>18</sup>

Things for Luther became worse when an epidemic in one German village soon spread to other villages and then to the cities. Many people died because of it, which deepened Luther's depression. Consequently, he decided to take a break by returning to his family home. When he was on his way back to the university, a terrible storm arose that changed his life. <sup>19</sup>Luther was positive that God spoke to him through the storm. As a result of the storm and the other accumulating incidents already described, Luther concluded that he must seek his salvation in a new way. Due to the general spiritual ignorance that existed then, which is largely attributable to the teaching of the Catholic Church, Luther believed that the safest way for him to avoid a worldly life would be to immerse himself in the spiritual world of the monastery. Therefore, he decided to join the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt, a city in Germany. About a year later, on April 4, 1507, he was ordained a priest.<sup>20</sup>

Luther was committed to the monastic life. He said, "I was a good monk, and if any monk ever went to heaven because of his monkishness, it would have been me."<sup>21</sup> Despite this devotion to monastic duties, his mind continued to be filled with a sense of impurity and unworthiness. He believed that, despite his many good works, he was still not acceptable in the eyes of God. He said of himself at this time, "What good works could come out of a heart like mine, and how could I stand in front of the judge with impure works from an impure source?"

During these years, Luther was sent on a mission to meet the pope of Rome. He thought that this visit would have a good effect on his spiritual life because he was going to the capital of Christianity where he expected to see marvelous examples of chastity and piety. Instead, he was shocked by the evil, foolishness, and immorality that he saw. In despair he commented, "If there is a hell, Rome is built upon it."<sup>22</sup> It was during this visit that Luther decided to climb the twenty-eight steps of the Scala

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<sup>18</sup>MeneseAbd El Noor, "Justification by Faith," *Huda Magazine*, 864, no. 74 (February 1984):9.

<sup>19</sup>Lots of people see this incident that almost took away Luther's life, and his survival from the weather strike that almost hit him as the main reason behind his decision to join monasticism, and as result of that in one of his speeches dated 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1519 he wrote saying that the lightning destined his future. Hanna Girgis El Khodary, *Martin Luther* (Cairo: Dar El Thaqafa, 1983), 36.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>21</sup>John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, translated to Arabic by Nicholas Nessim (Cairo: Episcopal Publication House, 2010), 119.

<sup>22</sup>Morrison, 30.

Sancta. He did this on his knees while repeating the Lord's Prayer on each step. In this way he sought God's forgiveness. Yet, when he was finished he did not feel any better about his spiritual state. Reverend Doctor Fayez Fares describes that historical moment in these words:

And in front of the church of Rome there were the sacred stairs that were known as Pilate's stairs, with its twenty-eight steps... and having ascended the steps, Luther later commented: "I wanted to save my grandfather from purgatory, so I ascended Pilate's stairs and said on each step the Lord's Prayer, but as I reached the top I wondered to myself: Who knows if it is true?"<sup>23</sup>

According to some traditions, Luther in that moment heard a voice say to him "The just shall live by faith." Though the story is no doubt apocryphal, it is certain that in the year 1503 Luther made, as Thomas Carlyle puts it, one of his "most blessed discoveries." Luther at this time was studying the epistles of the apostle Paul. Previously he had been avoiding Paul's writings because the topics of righteousness and condemnation terrified him. Nevertheless, he studied Paul, especially his epistles to the Romans and Galatians. The fruit of his study was the main impetus behind the Protestant Reformation. This was his discovery of the principle of justification by faith alone.

Though Luther was the first to proclaim the principle of justification by faith, it appears that the idea at this time was taking shape in the minds of many of his contemporaries. One of these was Johann von Staupitz, the General Deputy of the Augustinian monks. He believed that there was no salvation through works, but perhaps he did not publically assert this principle for fear of losing his position or because he wanted it to be presented in a pacific manner that would not draw too much attention to him. Luther said of the typical Christian of the time, "If they do not find in themselves any good works by which they can stand before the wrath of God and His judgment, they resort to the death of Christ and His sufferings for them and get saved through this simple faith..."

And as a final and inevitable result of all Luther's internal conflicts, visions, studies, and insights, which seemed to have assailed him from all directions, this Augustinian monk took the courageous and revolutionary step of tacking *his Ninety-Five Theses* on the church door of Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, the day before All Saints' Day. This document included lots of intimations of the principle of justification through faith without announcing it explicitly. One indication of Luther's thinking is found in the sixth thesis of his document: "The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring and showing that it has been remitted by God; or, to be sure, by remitting guilt in cases reserved to his judgment. If his right to grant remission in these cases were disregarded, the guilt would certainly remain unforgiven."

In Luther's view, a person seeking absolution should be very careful about any doubt that God has forgiven his sins; however, if he is forced to abide by another man's judgment, he must be certain that his belief in his forgiveness is not based on the word of a bishop or priest. It must be based on the word of Christ, who never lies.

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<sup>23</sup>Fayez Fares, "Martin Luther: A Reformation's Spark that lit Thinking and History," *Huda Magazine*, 762, no. 73 (December 1983):24.

It was Christ who said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). The faith that comes from this word is what inspires peace because the priest grants absolution only according to the word of Christ. All those who seek peace in some another way, for example, by way of public recognition or even by obtaining a million pardons from the pope himself, are testing God, and they will not know inner peace until they believe in the promise of the one who said, "Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Christ gives us peace but only through faith. To support this point, Luther gave the example of Simon, the pharisee who invited Jesus to his house, and a sinful woman, who may have been Mary Magdalene. Jesus said to Simon, "I have forgiven her many sins," and certainly he meant that she had received forgiveness through God's grace. Yet prior to this she had not experienced the grace of God because there was no peace in her life until Jesus said to her "yours sins are forgiven" and "your faith has saved you, go in peace" (Luke 7: 48 and 50). Jesus was saying that her faith and trust in Him resulted in the forgiveness of her sins. Similarly, in the Old Testament, people obtained the forgiveness of their sins because God had appeared to them in visions, revelations, burning sacrifices, and the cloud that settled on Mount Sinai. God indicated through these things that he was satisfied with their offerings; also, he promised to continue to forgive their sins through the ministry of Israel's priests.

Similarly, God's people in Luther's time could be confident that their sins could be forgiven through the ministry of Roman Catholic priests, for Jesus said, "Whatever you loose..." (Matthew 16: 19). It follows that when people lack confidence, their sins will not be forgiven, and in the end they will perish. Therefore, divine forgiveness produces grace, and the priest's forgiveness provides peace, both of which are gifts from God because it is faith that lies in the core of both forgiveness and grace.

Naturally, all reformers agreed that salvation is by grace, not works. John Calvin wrote in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "Faith is sufficient in itself, meaning that there is no dual basis of faith and good works, as we lean on God's love and his mercy alone."<sup>24</sup>

### Necessary Clarification

That doctrine of *justification by faith alone* is one that all the Reformers affirmed. And those who have subsequently embraced the Protestant Reformation have never disputed it. The apostle Paul clearly proclaimed it in his epistle to the Ephesians: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and *this is* not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (italics mine, Ephesians 2:8-9). The words in this verse "*this is*," which I have italicized, are a translation of the Greek word *τοῦτο*. In the context of the verse and in its neuter form, this word points to both grace and the faith together as a gift from God. Hence, faith is also a gift that God gives to man for his salvation. Yet it would be unbiblical to argue that

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<sup>24</sup>John Calvin, *The Christianity of the Bible: A Simple Summary for the Book of the Christian Institutes*, translated to Arabic by Abd El Kareem Kirolos (Cairo: The Middle East Reformed Fellowship, 2002), 86.



human beings have no role at all in their own salvation. The Scriptures clearly teach that human beings have a role in believing in Christ, for it is individuals who believe, takes steps of faith, use God's gifts, and put their trust in what Christ has done. Yes, God is the founder of faith from beginning to end, but human beings must decide either to accept that salvation through faith given to them from God or to reject it and remain trapped in their old lives of sin. That's what we call "human responsibility, which is something that cannot be set aside because the Scriptures assert that God created human beings free, having been created in God's image. Hence, Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Galatians 3:6). Also, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved" (Romans 10: 9-10).

### **Practical and Pastoral Issues**

- (1) The principle of "faith alone" puts before us the necessity of thinking once again about the theology of the Reformation. The church should only reform itself based on its own best principles. It should never subject itself to teachings that are opposed to the teachings of the Bible. Reform should also be undertaken in a humble spirit and openness to accept change for the better. Martin Luther believed as a matter of principle that human beings are justified and sinful at the same time: *simul justus et peccator* (Latin for "at once justified and a sinner). Therefore, Christian should be willing to continue reforming the church as long as reformation in undertaken with a humble spirit and in submission and reverence to God.
- (2) The principle of "faith alone" places before us the issue of the ethical and behavioral integrity of the servants of God. The Protestant Reformation was necessary because the medieval church had deviated from the truth by its willingness subvert biblical commands to serve worldly interests. Erasmus, one of the pioneers of the Reformation, described the ethical deviations of the church in this way: "The war that was waged by the popes against those who took over their land was opposed to the spirit of Christ, for Christ, who came to bring peace to the earth, does not need unethical defenders. How angry would He be to see guns carried in the names of His saints Paul and Peter."<sup>25</sup>
- (3) The principle of "faith alone" helps us to reconsider worship in the contemporary church. Christ is supposed to be the center of worship because it is only through faith in Him that human beings can receive salvation, yet this is not always true. If the church followed this principle today, it would reform its worship practices so that all worship would revolve around Him. We see this practice in the New Testament in which all the worship songs of the early church revolved around the work and the character of Christ and not around anything or anyone else. (For examples see Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1: 15-23, 1 Timothy 3: 16, Hebrews 1:1-3, and Revelation 5: 6-14).
- (4) The principle of "faith alone" brings us back once more to the need for preaching salvation in our worship programs. Luther, while a dedicated monk, lacked a

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<sup>25</sup>Bainton, 104.

heartfelt relationship with God through faith. How many people attend our worship services without enjoying Christ's salvation and his redemptive work? In fact, it is very dangerous to think that all those who attend church, especially those who have been attendees of the church for a long time, are people who have experienced faith and renewal through Christ's work. Pastors, therefore, need to add the message of salvation as a regular theme of their sermons.

- (5) The principle of "faith alone" should affect the way that Christians relate to one another. I have often observed that how Christians treat one another tends to be based on the principle of works rather than the principle of grace. This suggests that there are many standards – perhaps unconsciously assumed – for accepting people in the church community that are more worldly than Christian. These can include social standards, financial contributions, practical accomplishments in ministry, family history, and standing with the pastor. Such things can become the conditions upon which we decide to accept, love, and serve other people. But the principle of "faith alone" recalls us to the biblical principle of *agape* love, the unconditional love of God in His dealing with us.
- (6) The principle of "faith alone" extends to cover all the struggles that a believer goes through in life. Amid all the circumstances of life, we as pastors need to contend for the importance of faith – faith understood as loyalty and faithfulness to God. Such faith does not insist that God will remove all of the difficult circumstances in our lives; rather it maintains that God will be present with us in every situation, and conversely, it holds on to God and remains faithful to him in good times and in bad.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.... Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. (Hebrews 10: 19-23, 32-36.)



**The Reverend Youssef Samir is the chairman of the board of the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo and the pastor of the Heliopolis Evangelical Church, Cairo, Egypt**

## **Christianity and the Secularization of Africa**

**Benson Ohihon Igboin**

Christian missionaries to Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, believing that traditional African religions were demonic, sought to de-spiritualize the African space of its spiritual resources and re-sacralize it through Christian spirituality. According to scholars of secularization in Africa, including Herman Paul, Abel Ngarsouledé, Dick Seed, and Benno van den Toren, the unintended consequence of the missionaries' approach was the gradual secularization of African communities. Today, ironically, the process of secularization even extends to Christianity itself, which seems to be reaping a secular harvest from the very seeds missionaries sowed. This paper will briefly discuss secularization theory, review the arguments of Toren, Paul, Ngarsouledé, and Seed on secularization in Africa, and conclude with an analysis of the implications of secularization in Africa.

### **Conceptualizing Secularization**

At this point readers might well be scratching their heads. How can Africa be considered a secular continent? Isn't it the most religious region of the world? Might it not also be said that secularization is not even an African concept but a term imported from the West? Isn't it likely, therefore, that secularization in Africa will have distinctive features to the extent that one should not even speak of African secularization?

The term secularism has continued to stimulate controversies and conflict in both global and local contexts just as its meanings have continued to evolve. Peter Beyer, for instance, views secularization in terms of "de-institutionalisation of church religion."<sup>26</sup> According to him, secularization can be regarded as a differentiation between the religious and non-religious and a "decline of individual religious consciousness and performance of religion."<sup>27</sup> Although it is common in the West to talk about decline in religious demography, it is not so when individual commitment is measured. In such situations, it becomes clear that there is a shift from "believing and belonging" to "believing without belonging" and finally to "belonging without believing."<sup>28</sup>

Tariq Modood says that ideally secularism is a total separation between the religious and the political so that they do not interference in each other's activities.

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<sup>26</sup>Peter Beyer, "Socially Engaged Religion in a Post-Westphalian Global Context: Remolding the Secular//Religious Distinction," *Sociology of Religion*, 73:2 (Summer 2012): 109-129, 119.

<sup>27</sup>Beyer, 119.

<sup>28</sup>Beyer, 120.

This is a popular view that Modood puts succinctly: “non-domination of political authority by religious authority.”<sup>29</sup> Concentrating on Western Europe, Modood observes that post-secularist literature continues to emphasize that secularism has lost its grip on Western society and is now waning; moreover, the growing de-secularization across the globe testifies to the validity of post-secular arguments.<sup>30</sup> Clearly, he writes, “religion has [not] disappeared or is about to, but for many, it has become more in the form of ‘belief without belonging.’”<sup>31</sup> This state of religion in Western Europe, Modood explains, is “highly compatible with political secularism if not scientism or other rationalistic philosophies. Whether the decline of traditional religion is being replaced by no religion or new ways of being religious or spiritual, neither is creating a challenge to political secularism.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, Modood prefers to speak of a post-secular Western Europe.

Bigger questions are raised here. Though many scholars speak of secularization in Africa, when did it start and why is Africa still in the era of secularization when Western Europe has moved on to a post-secular period? These questions are critical because Africa has been described as the most religious continent in the world. The reports of a WIN/Gallup International survey in 2015 show that more than eight out of ten people in Africa confess to being religious.<sup>33</sup> How then can Africa be considered as secular when there seems to be no diminishment of religiosity on the continent? While the West and America are talking about resurgence, re-sacralization, re-institutionalization, re-churching, and desecularization, Africa is still simply described as religious.

Jonathan Fox sees secularism from the political dimension. He argues that secularism could be absolute or near-absolute depending on the constitution of the state in question. He acknowledges the fact that separationism – the principle of separation of church and state – is central to the doctrine of secularism in political and religious discourse. Fox says that separationism at

its most basic level, constitutes a state neutrality toward religion where the state, at least officially, gives preference to no particular religion but does not restrict the presence of religion in the public sphere; in contrast the secularist–laicist model specifically declares that not only does the state not support any religion, it also restricts the presence of religion in the public sphere. These restrictions can include restrictions on public religious activities and on religious institutions.<sup>34</sup>

Fox’s thesis is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where there is currently much

<sup>29</sup> Tariq Modood, “Is there a Crisis of Secularism in Western Europe?” *Sociology of Religion*, 73:2 (Summer 2012):130-149, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Modood, 131.

<sup>31</sup> Modood, 132.

<sup>32</sup> Modood, 132-133.

<sup>33</sup> See <http://m.mgafrica.com/article/2015-04-13-no-surprises-here-africa-is-the-most-religious-continent-but-who-isnt-is> accessed 19th July, 2016; See also Richard Allen Greene, “Africans among World’s most religious people, study finds” <http://edition.cnn.com/2010-WORLD/africa/04/15/africa.religion/> accessed 19th July, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Fox, “Separation of Religion and State and Secularism in Theory and in Practice,” *Religion, State and Society*, 39:4 (2011): 384-401, 385.

controversy about the religious status of the country in academia. While many Christians believe that Nigeria is a secular country, most Muslims maintain that Nigeria it is a multi-religious state. Both sides of the divide have recourse to the constitution to back up their positions. Christians, both in academia and elsewhere, observe that the constitution provides that no religion should be adopted by the state; hence the nation *de jure* is a secular state. For Muslims, however, Nigeria is best seen as a multi-religious state because secularism suggests the absence of God. In fact, a constitution that recognizes and provides for *sharia* courts up to the appellate level cannot be said to be secular; or it may be a special kind of secularity. Unexpressed in this argument is the reality that Nigeria is tilting towards becoming an Islamic state. While debatable in theory, it nonetheless is a demonstrable fact at both governmental and personal levels.<sup>35</sup> As Fox observes, the wording of a constitution is not always operationalized since at the federal level the constitution may seem to be observed but the case may actually be different at both state and local government levels. According to him, “even when national governments respect their constitutions, local governments often do not. For example, Nigeria’s 1999 constitution bans both national and local governments from adopting ‘any religion as [the] state religion,’ but from 2000 many of Nigeria’s Muslim-majority states began adopting aspects of *sharia* (Muslim religious) law as state law.”<sup>36</sup>

The bone of contention here is the meaning of secularity. The Christians believe that being secular does not necessarily mean being godless or the absence of private spirituality. For them religion and state are separate but can intervene in each other’s spheres for the purpose of national development. Muslims, in contrast, believe that being secular is to eject God from the realm of human affairs, which is preposterous to Muslims. For them the state and religion do not necessarily have to be separated; in fact, the state, according to some, should be controlled by religious laws. Finally, from the perspective of a Western scholar, Charles Taylor argues that religion should be removed from the public space,<sup>37</sup> and Jan Weiland argues that the thrust of secularization is the complete obliteration of “the triune God.”<sup>38</sup> The clear implication of this position is that secularization is purposefully against Christianity.

Another level of debate on secularism has to do with the relationship or interaction between Christianity and African Traditional Religion or what some scholars are now simply referring to as African Religion or AFREL.<sup>39</sup> African Religion has had its own position on the status of secularity on the continent. From this perspective, religious space is composite as both the sacred and profane are

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<sup>35</sup> Benson O. Igboin, “‘The President of Nigeria has no final say’: Sharia law Controversies and Implications for Nigeria,” *Politics and Religion*, 8/2 (Autumn 2014): 265-290.

<sup>36</sup> Fox, 395.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 424.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Ngarsouledé, 89.

<sup>39</sup> Ade P. Dopamu is a proponent of this approach. See Ade P. Dopamu, “African Religion (Afrel) and National Security in Yoruba Perspective,” M. A. Folorunsho, et al. eds. *Religion and National Security*, Ijebu—Ode: Alamek Press Ltd, 2006; Ade Dopamu, “The Yoruba Religious System,” *Africa Update*, 6/3 (Summer 1999) available at <http://web.ccsu.edu/afstudy/supdt99.htm> see also Akiti G. Alamu, “Exploring Indigenous Religious Tenets for Democratic Sustainability in Contemporary Nigerian Society,” Munyaradzi Mawere and Tendai R. Mwanaka, *Democracy, Good Governance and Development in Africa*, Bamenda: Langa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2015, 215.

within the control of God. The ancestors played key roles in maintaining the harmony of the space, which is occupied by both animate and inanimate beings. But the concept did not go unchallenged by Christians who condemned and even demonized many religious practices in Africa in the process of evangelization. Consequently, Christianity has not been able to fully penetrate the African consciousness or root out the traditional African beliefs that it abhorred. More importantly, as Christianity struggled for dominance in Africa, Christians learned that their religion was more superficial, materialistic, and secular than they had thought possible. To be sure, Christians thought that they had a more deeply spiritual religion than the African Religion that they encountered, but the modern resurgence of African Religion and its syncretism with Christianity starkly demonstrates that Christians may not have succeeded as much as they had imaged.

### **Scholars of Secularization**

A number of recent scholars have studied the gradual secularization of African communities that resulted from Africa's encounter with the West, especially Western missionaries. This article will examine the thought of four of them: Herman Paul, Abel Ngarsouledé, Dick Seed, and Benno van den Toren.

Herman Paul believes that the concept of secularization was forced upon Africa as a result of its interaction with the West. He recalls that when the Roman Catholic Secretariat published the proceedings of a conference on "Secularisation in Africa" in 1973, a time when secularization theory was already rife in the West, almost all discussions in that conference were Western-based. This suggests that secularization might not have been an issue in Africa then. The conversation included such themes as religious belonging, church attendance, and church membership. It was these Western paradigms that were used as yardsticks to measure Christianity and secularization in Africa. Yet even today these paradigms cannot be used to adequately discuss secularization in most African countries as they still can be in the West. For instance, while church attendance is dwindling in the West, the proliferation of well-attended churches in Africa does not alleviate fears of a deeper secularization. In other words, it is counterproductive to apply the same conceptual understandings and measuring tools for secularization in the West as in Africa.

It is important to note that predictions of secularization in the West have proven to be overstated. Paul argues that among Western academics secularization "has fallen in disgrace"<sup>40</sup> because the predictions of such secular prophets as Peter Berger, Harvey Cox and others have fallen ridiculously short. Though they argued that the number of Christians in the twenty-first century would be so insignificant that they would not be able to resist a global secular campaign, the reality has been a religious resurgence of global proportion, and today scholars speak of a post-secular West.

Paul observes that a different set of questions should be applied to the West and Africa when addressing the issue of secularization. According to his analysis, the West has much to learn and appropriate from Africa in re-sacralizing Christianity in

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<sup>40</sup>Herman Paul, "Secularization in Africa: A Research Desideratum," *Cairo Journal of Theology*, 2 (2015): 67-75, 69; <http://journal.etsc.org>.

the West and escaping from the consequences of the “eschatology of decline.”<sup>41</sup> As for Africa, Paul draws attention to the secularizing contents of Christian practice on the continent. Rather than focus on the spiritual, many of these practices suggest a here-and-now interest, which can be described as “eschatopraxis” – that is, rehearsing the heavenly future in the present.<sup>42</sup>

Abel Ngarsouledé’s sociological and theological insights into secularization in Africa are a good place to start to appreciate the definitional possibilities of secularization. For him, the core appeal of secularism in the West is that rationalism has taken over the explanatory place in society that was traditionally reserved for religion. Now almost everything can be explained rationally or naturalistically without recourse to religion. This has led to the abandonment of religious belief and a decrease in the influence that religion wields in the public square. But, according to Ngarsouledé, such a definitional stricture cannot be sustained as secularization “is both a process and an outcome.”<sup>43</sup> He posits that secularization is “the process by which a society transitions from a close identification of religion and the state to one of near total separation.”<sup>44</sup>

Ngarsouledé argues that Africa as a whole is as secularized as Europe. He hinges this assertion on the features of secularization observable in both continents, which include disenchantment, desacralization of power, deliberate emancipation from religion, acceptance of secularity, social transformation, decline of religion, rationalization, pluralization, privatization, atomization, and more. What all these aspects of secularization have in common is the rejection or abandonment of religion in human affairs. As God and religion are demythologized and demystified, he explains, they become at best only one part of the human rational enterprise. However, as interesting as Ngarsouledé insights may be, it is difficult to ascertain whether they are all applicable in Africa. In fact, as he himself recognizes, “Kenya is the only African country that shares with the West a decline of religion. In addition to what is shared by both continents, the re-enchantment and alternation of beliefs appear to be unique aspects of secularization in sub-Saharan Africa.”<sup>45</sup>

The problem here is that Kenya cannot be used in a sweeping way as a representative of the whole of the continent. Not only does Kenya have a more sizable European population than most African countries, its Christians tend to be highly elitist. The social status or class differentiation that Kenyan Christians introduced into the church inexorably discouraged the masses from church attendance. Thus Christianity in Kenya is regarded as a privileged faith. In reality, church attendance by the affluent is not primarily for spiritual self-development but for self-justification as congregants are treated to sermons propounding an “economic rationalism” that ultimately favors them. Consequently, youth decide to patronize spaces that Christians

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<sup>41</sup> Paul, 71.

<sup>42</sup> Ted Peters, *God – The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> Ngarsouledé, 89.

<sup>44</sup> Ngarsouledé, 89.

<sup>45</sup> Ngarsouledé, 92.

ordinarily demonize such as clubs, cinemas, discos, and similar venues.<sup>46</sup> This has certainly helped to foster Kenya's religious decline, but extrapolating from Kenya's growing secularity to the whole of Africa would be mistaken.

Ngarsouledé explains the implications of secularization in Africa to include the absence, silence, impotence, indifference, or injustice of God. These thoughts are echoed by Kenya's intellectuals, students, and business persons. According to Ngarsouledé, the theological consequences of secularization in Africa as in Europe are critical to the Christian faith. Whether or not intellectuals are caught between rationalism and tradition, several studies have shown that those whose commitment to Christianity has been lost in the labyrinth of life often have recourse to African Religion.<sup>47</sup> In such cases, Christianity's loss is pluralism's gain. As a Christian, Ngarsouledé is seeking ways to re-mystify Christianity in face of the trend toward secularization in Africa. This can be achieved, he believes, through the development of a more holistic theology, one that embraces our entire humanity.

Dick Seed looks at the problem from a different perspective. The question he asks is how Africans, who have been described as "incurably" and "notoriously" religious, can now be regarded as secular, as people without God? This paradox may be more apparent than real as the description of Africans as notoriously religious is a matter of debate.<sup>48</sup> Even though this is not the place to pursue the various threads of this debate, it is important to note that it is an exaggeration to assert that all Africans are incurably religious. Be that as it may, it is also plausible, as Seed argues, that most Africans are indeed religious. The level of their religiosity may be arguable but the fact that religion plays critical roles in the lives of most of them can be safely assumed.

Seed argues that the communal and cosmic structure of traditional African religion provides a sound philosophical template to discuss its religiosity. The symbiotic relationship between the mundane and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, and the roles that ancestors play in it give a clear impression of a religionized space. According to him, in Africa "existence is viewed in terms of an integrated and indivisible whole. All human beings and nature are animated by a basic 'vital force.' Human beings and nature are bound together in a symbiotic relationship. This relationship extends to the spiritual world."<sup>49</sup> In this composite relationship, the ancestors mediate between the physical and the supersensible world. This suggests, therefore, that there is a thin line between "the sacred and the secular."<sup>50</sup>

Seed contends that it is difficult to view traditional Africa as secular. The elements of secularization observable in Africa today can be traced to modernization, globalization, and technology; and to a large extent they have been mediated to

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<sup>46</sup> Jan Platvoet & Henk van Rinsum, "Is Africa Incurably Religious?" *Exchange* (January 2003): 21 DOI: 10.1163/157254303X00190

<sup>47</sup> Ngarsouledé, 97.

<sup>48</sup> Platvoet and Van Rinsum, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Dick Seed, "Western Secularism, African Worldviews, and the Church," *Cairo Journal of Theology*, 2 (2015): 76-87, 78; <http://journal.etsc.org>

<sup>50</sup> Seed, 79.



Africans through the educational system bequeathed by the West that is humanist in origin, orientation, and content. Seed argues that John Dewey played a significant role in developing this secularized or humanist educational system, a system that colonized Africans “innocuously” imbibed. The inability of Africans to reverse or reject this secularization and establish an educational system based on their own cultural and religious thinking and context is easily understood by their awe of the West’s intellectual and technological prowess. In addition, Western aid was largely tied to secular philosophy or demands, which once accepted fostered the acceptance of secular ideologies.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, Benno van den Toren challenges the religious notoriety and incurability thesis from the perspective of African neo-Pentecostalism, which seems to have assumed the face of African religiosity. While agreeing that modernity may not necessarily lead to secularization as the growth of African neo-Pentecostalism critically shows, he posits that the relationship between neo-Pentecostalism and secularization is more intricate than many have thought. The role of African neo-Pentecostalism is ambivalent in the sense that while, on the one hand, it may seem to challenge secularization, on the other hand, it clearly fosters it. Put differently, African neo-Pentecostalism can be both a cure to secularization and vulnerable to it.<sup>52</sup>

Toren advances a number of reasons to support his position. He notes that even though there may not be “overt atheism, agnosticism or, more generally, the erosion of belief in the supernatural”<sup>53</sup> in Africa, there is a growing de-sacralization of the world. Because of this, the sacrality that defined the traditional African cosmos has been replaced by a so-called Christian worldview. Consequently, for most Africans the cosmos is now less sacred and political powers have lost their sacrality because they were once believed to have been derived from the supernatural. This spirals into belief in a pluralization of powers and values that are in contention. Consequently, individual religious commitment has faltered as non-religious explanations of life are available as never before. Unfortunately, neo-Pentecostalism has not met this challenge as it is often presented as a means to meet worldly needs rather than deeply spiritual yearnings.

These four authors share the belief that Christianity is a victim of secularization in Africa, and they argue that re-mystifying Christianity in Africa would help global Christianity to recover its lost spirituality. Unfortunately, they are all silent about the ways in which Christianity should strive to re-mystify the African religious space. They have also failed to establish that there is something that can be called African secularization. Instead they argue that there is secularization in Africa. While I agree that Christianity is a victim of secularization, I shall demonstrate further, as Toren did, that Christianity played a critical role in secularizing the African religious space.

### **The Demonization of African Religious Space and its Implications**

It is not necessary to review how the many Christian missionaries, Western

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<sup>51</sup> Seed, 77.

<sup>52</sup> Benno van den Toren, “African Neo-Pentecostalism in the face of Secularization: Problems and Possibilities,” *Cairo Journal of Theology*, 2 (2015): 103-120, 104; <http://journal.etsc.org>

<sup>53</sup> Toren, 105.



anthropologists, and colonialists demonized Africa and Africans. Let three examples suffice. First, C. P. Groves described Africa as the “Dark Continent,” a term resonant through many decades.<sup>54</sup> Second, the Oxford historian Trevor-Roper said that Africa had no history that was worth teaching: “Perhaps in the future there would be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness, and darkness is not the subject of history.”<sup>55</sup> As if these derogatory remarks were not enough, Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, who was the leader of the Fascist regime of Estado Novo, said, “Africa does not exist.”<sup>56</sup> Salazar’s racist disposition was so obvious that the Portuguese would not agree to negotiate with African leaders. He regarded them as non-humans, and the Portuguese exploited Africa for all it was worth. Though such attitudes have been vigorously challenged, they do not die easily – least of all in law as by the “stroke of a pen.” Curtis Keim, for instance, has shown how the erroneous beliefs about Africa continue to be entrenched in the United States by being propagated through various media and readily received by a willing audience.<sup>57</sup>

Bolaji Idowu,<sup>58</sup> among others, has systematically refuted erroneous labels and stereotypes, but leading African theologians and philosophers have often and rightly been accused of using Western paradigms to defend African religious beliefs and practices, while also forging some convergences between Christianity and African Religion.<sup>59</sup> Such terms as primitive, savage, native, paganism, heathenism, idolatry, fetishism, and animism, which were used to describe Africa, did not originate from Africa. They were marshaled by Westerners to derogate African religion, culture, and cosmic space. In effect, they were terms utilized to destroy African Religion. The Africans were made to believe that their beliefs were not supernatural because a truly supernatural religion – Christianity – had come to relieve them of their false religious yokes.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See C. M. Ezekwugo, *Philosophical Concepts* (Enugu: Agatha Series Publishers Limited, 1992), 257.

<sup>55</sup> H. Trevor-Roper, *Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1964), 9.

<sup>56</sup> See Amilcar Cabral, *National Liberation and Culture*. Occasional Paper No 57 Syracuse: Maxwell Graduate School, 1970, 138- 154, and James R. Bell, “Africa Does Exist: Amilcar Cabral at War,” <https://jrbml.wordpress.com/2015/06/24/africa-does-exist-amilcar-cabral-at-war/> accessed 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2017; Benson O. Igboin, “Afrocentrism: Recalling the Will of the Past for the Future,” *Cameron Journal of Commonwealth Studies*, 3/2 (2016): 44-60.

<sup>57</sup> Curtis Keim, *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2014).

<sup>58</sup> E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), chapter four.

<sup>59</sup> Toyin Falola, *The Humanities in Africa: Knowledge Production, Universities, and the Transformation of Society* (Austin, Texas: Pan-African University Press, 2016), 266-268; John A. I. Bewaji, *Narratives of Struggle: The Philosophy and Politics of Development* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Yet there is a clear connection between traditional African spirituality and certain aspects of Christian spirituality, especially Pentecostalism. As Toren argues, African neo-Pentecostalism has steadily invoked the traditional African religious resources as its basis for flourishing. African neo-Pentecostalism holds the belief that African space is highly spiritual; in fact, there are very many malignant spiritual forces that human beings have to contend with. “Neo-Pentecostals take the power of amulets and fetishes with utter seriousness” and consequently reject them “but also provide alternatives in the forms of anointing oil, blessed water, calendars, or handkerchiefs” (see Toren, 113). It is this form of “neo-belief” (which is a syncretism of African Religion and Christianity) characterized by neo-Pentecostalism that leads to militarization of prayer (see Benson O. Igboin and Babatunde

The implications of these ideas for the secularization of African can be summed up in seven points.

First, Western Christians, by condemning the religious practices of African Religion, inexorably introduced a secular language. Earlier missionaries introduced their languages, especially English and French, whose words and phrases do not all have correspondences in African languages. In attempting to translate ideas into local languages, meanings were often either corrupted or, when they did not fit into African context, entirely new meanings were given. Since the missionaries believed that African languages derogated their religious beliefs, only a few were interested in learning them. This introduced otherness and dualism, which were strange to the African composite cosmos. But the import here is that half-understood foreign words superimposed on African languages tended to desacralize African space for both Christians and adherents of African Religion. Even today, most Pentecostals in Africa have abandoned African languages, preferring foreign ones. In their bid to keep their audiences awake by stimulating their emotions, they employ crass expressions. For instance, it is not infrequent to hear pastors say: “God will *embarrass* you with blessings,” “God has rejected your kwashiorkor halleluiah,” “your halleluiah is not born again,” “this day is dantesco and praisesco to the Lord,” etc., thus secularizing God himself in the process.<sup>61</sup>

Anyone versed in African languages would appreciate the deep spiritual resources that could have enriched Christianity if missionaries and African Pentecostals had fully accepted and utilized them. In fact, when the gospel is preached in African languages, Africans come to appreciate and understand it more deeply than when it is presented in English. But the demonization of African languages also meant in the long run the secularization of Christianity itself. Keim puts it succinctly: “anyone who wants to study Africa in depth needs to learn African languages, because language is the major key to understanding how people mentally organize the world around them.”<sup>62</sup>

Second, in attempting to demonstrate superior power, Christians have often desecrated sacred spaces such as rivers, forests, and totems. For example, I grew up knowing that there were sacred forests and rivers in my hometown. As late as the 1980s, Pentecostal youth who believed that they had been empowered by the Holy Ghost went wild, killing pythons and fish, and felling trees held sacred by the people. They vehemently preached that there were no powers in those objects and that they

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Adedibu, "Power Must Change Hands' in Nigeria: The Militarisation of Prayer and the Quest for Better Life" [forthcoming]). In this scenario, almost everything African has to go through the process of exorcism or sanctification in order to make them beneficial and safe for human consumption (see Lydia Boyd, *Preaching Prevention: Born-Again Christianity and the Moral Politics of AIDS in Uganda* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015), 123.) This is called deliverance prayer. “Deliverance prayer is different from other forms of prayer and spiritual reflection in that it is specifically intended as a mode of identifying the influence of evil in one’s life and providing the means to “deliver” one from it.” (See Boyd, 117.)

<sup>61</sup> But in critical moments they can resort to code-switching. See Benson O. Igboin, “An Analysis of Code-switching in Christian Text and Context” (forthcoming).

<sup>62</sup> Keim, 4.

were made to be conquered. Although they did not die as many believed they would, the effects of unrestricted deforestation and desacralization of the rivers are being borne by all today. It is ironic, therefore, that many of these zealous youth have grown up to preach about greening the environment. Since Christianity presented the environment as a space to be conquered, exploited, and desacralized, Christians must now struggle to come to terms with the effects of avid urbanization.

Third, the fulcrum of the family and its values were secularized by Christianity. As Boyd observes, traditional African homes that formerly were strictly private were brought into the public sphere. The moral authority of the home was challenged and reformed in accordance with Christian belief. Consequently, homes were divested of their sacredness, a practice many believe introduced or escalated the rate of divorce and separation of spouses.<sup>63</sup> “A prominent group of traditionalists,” Boyd explains, “argued that these relationships were necessary for morally sound families and marriages, and that to do away with the bridewealth ceremonies that emphasized such ties (a move encouraged by Western missionaries) posed a threat to social stability during a period of upheaval and change.”<sup>64</sup> Boyd further observes that “the church’s foremost concern seemed to center on Ugandan marriage” in order to entrench Christian practices, thus removing African customary practices.<sup>65</sup>

For both the church and the colonial state, marriage was understood to be at the center of the creation of a modern civil society; as an institution, a monogamous state-sanctioned marriage emphasized ideas about the obligations and rights of citizenship and the behaviors associated with democratic free will. The church recognized marriages that had been sealed not by bridewealth exchange but by an oath of consent, the assertion (“I do”) by two individual parties that stated their intent to marry. Christian and state-sanctioned marriage introduced new ways of thinking of the self – as rights-bearing and autonomous – as well as new ways of thinking of one’s relationships with others. People were taught to consider marriage a union between two “consenting” individuals rather than a relationship that joined two extended families and organized a broader set of kin-based relationships and obligations.<sup>66</sup>

Fourth, the communal system of living was secularized by Christianity. Communal solidarity was de-emphasized and replaced by an atomized individualism that strains relationships. Since salvation is personal, communal effort and cooperation came under attack. This is why no matter how the church tries to create a community within itself, it has not succeeded in building an organic one as strong as the traditional one once was because the people still have recourse to their relatives outside the church. Moreover, Pentecostals continue to demonize such communal affiliations outside the church community. Its replication within the church has been

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<sup>63</sup> Simon O. Ehiabhi, “The Impact of Colonial Rule on Uromi Political and Social Institutions,” Unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, Nigeria, 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Boyd, 57-58.

<sup>65</sup> Boyd, 61.

<sup>66</sup> Boyd, 62.

problematic because the rules and love that guide relationships are not as strictly observed inside as they were outside. For instance, any Tom, Dick, or Harry can profess to belong to a church community, and free entry to the church community has resulted in what some Pentecostal preachers refer to as “sinning Christians.”<sup>67</sup> Finally, by replacing African communalism with individualism, Christianity promoted a materialistic cosmos in which wealth has become the measure of spirituality. This in turn has created a cultural environment in which the Prosperity Gospel can thrive. An albatross around the neck of Christian spirituality in Africa, the Prosperity Gospel is nonetheless promoted or tacitly accepted by many churches, and any church that rejects it risks losing its members to more accommodating competitors.

Fifth, the syncretism of Christian and African metaphysics has promoted a form of secularization. This is due to Christianity’s demeaning of African ancestors as powerless and unable to protect the families they left behind, and by the teaching that a person faces judgment in the afterlife. Perhaps, because African people would not give up their belief in the ancestors, Christians, particularly Catholics, creatively recast Jesus as a proto-ancestor. In this teaching, Jesus is the first Ancestor who is able to meet with African ancestors for the benefit of the living. Adherents of this belief limit sacrifices and libations to ancestors to those offered in the Church to the Proto-Ancestor.<sup>68</sup> Of course, this belief has partly altered the basis of ancestorship in Africa.<sup>69</sup>

Sixth, there has been a “re-worlding”<sup>70</sup> of the traditional African cosmos so that it is presented as having been essentially secular before the advent of Christianity. In this view, the spiritual aspects of African Religion are de-emphasized while its anthropocentric values are exaggerated. It is argued that Africans lived to fulfill life here on earth with little regard for the hereafter. This world, it is said, was the scene of life’s drama, and this drama was played out in both the natural and supernatural spheres since the cosmos is composite. Health and prosperity in this world thus became the chief pursuits of life.<sup>71</sup> While this may not be altogether true, it is a fact that no human society, belief, or ideology lacks some anthropocentric consideration for life, not even Christianity in its purest form. The fact is that most people live their lives “struggling” to obtain as many earthly goods and achieve as much worldly success as possible. While doing this, Africans believed that any moral breaches they

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<sup>67</sup> Pastor William F. Kumuyi of the Deeper Life Bible Church has consistently preached that many people who call themselves Christians in the church are really sinners. Unfortunately, unlike the traditional community, those who do not represent the church well are hardly sent on exile in order to keep the sanctity of the church.

<sup>68</sup> Ferdinand, C. Ezekwonna, *African Communitarian Ethic: The Basis for the Moral Conscience and Autonomy of the Individual – Igbo Culture as a Case Study*, (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005); Alex Jebadu, *African Ancestral Veneration and the Possibility of its Incorporation into Catholic Devotion* (Rome: Collegio del Verbo Divino, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> Benson O. Igboin, “Revisiting the Basis of the Metaphysics of Ancestorship in Contemporary Africa” In Danoye Oguntola-Laguda, ed. *Death and Life after Death in African Philosophy and Religions: A Multidisciplinary Engagement* (Harare: Africa Institute for Culture, Dialogue, Peace and Tolerance Studies, 2014), 79-97.

<sup>70</sup> See Babatunde Adedibu, “From House Cell to Warehouse Churches: The Reworlding of the British Christian Landscape by African Pentecostal Churches in London” *EPHA: Ekpoma Journal of Religious Studies*, 10/1&2 (June 2015): 190-233.

<sup>71</sup> N. H. Ngada and K. E. Mofokeng, *African Christian Witness* (Pietermaritzburg: RSA Cluster, 2001), 15.

might commit along the way would be punished by the ancestors. Even those who argue for an anthropocentric African cosmos do not completely deny the critical role that ancestor belief has played in ensuring that moral principles were respected in the community.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, as people grow older, spirituality often becomes a priority. Older people find respite in communion with the ancestors, and they generally have time to re-assess their lives in preparation for the next world. They also generally desire that their children will someday venerate them as ancestors, a hope that can influence for the better their behavior.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, even though there were strong tendencies towards an anthropocentric view of life in traditional Africa, it should not be concluded that this was a secular world before the advent of Christianity.

Seventh, there is a “double dualism” in African Pentecostalism. First, African Pentecostals believe that the devil is a “warrior” who is well-equipped to fight, has wounded and defeated many Christians, and can only be conquered by the power of God. Second, African Pentecostals also assume that indigenous African practices are in opposition to Christianity and must be destroyed. In many instances, when God has not been “quick to answer” prayers for the destruction of evil forces, some African Pentecostals have engaged in iconoclasm. That is, African Pentecostals have destroyed many traditional religious paraphernalia to demonstrate victory over opposing traditions and practices.<sup>74</sup> As a result, traditional religious adherents often disdain Christians for their apparent fanaticism.

## Conclusion

The secularization that exists in Africa, though due to exposure to Western influences, is not the same as its counterpart in the West. The neat separation of religion from secular institutions in the West cannot be said to have taken place entirely in Africa. Hence, instead of secularization *in* Africa, this article has argued for the secularization *of* Africa. This secularization is a legacy of the colonial era in which Christian missionaries demonized and desacralized African Religion.

But having succeeded in de-spiritualizing the African religious space, Christians failed to effectively re-spiritualize it with its own mode of spirituality. The irony here is that Christians have fallen into a trap of their own making as they now must operate in a secular space and deal with the effects of secularization within their own faith. Despite these challenges, many Western scholars – such as Toren, Paul, Ngarsoledé, and Seed – continue to believe that African Christianity retains a high level of spirituality and may yet engage in a “reverse mission” that will result in the re-spiritualization and re-sacralization of the West. This may be, but African Christianity’s first task must be to re-mystify African religious space in order for the gospel message to penetrate more deeply into the hearts of the African people.

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<sup>72</sup> Benezet Bujo, *The Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South*, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998).

<sup>73</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958); Benson O. Igboin and Oluchi J. Igili, “Like Father, Unlike Son: A Reconstruction of the Meta-life of Unoka in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*,” *Southern Semiotic Review*, 5/1: (2015): 143-163; Igboin, “Revisiting the Basis of the Metaphysics of Ancestralship in Contemporary Africa”; Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Paulines, 1997).

<sup>74</sup> See “Pastor who destroyed Shrine in Ogun Speaks,” *Premium Times*, [premiumtimesng.com](http://premiumtimesng.com) accessed 17<sup>th</sup> May, 2017.



**Benson Ohihon Igboin is an Academic Associate of the Research Institute of Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Department of Religion & African Culture, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.**

**Book Review**

***Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World***

**By Eric Metaxas**

**Penguin Books, 2017, 480 pages**

October 31, 2017, marked the five hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, which historians date from the posting of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* on the church door at Wittenberg. Recent historians, however, question whether this famous incident actually took place. The date and incident were recalled by Philip Melanchthon several decades later, but he was not actually present in Wittenberg at the time and was only relating hearsay. It is more likely, writes Eric Metaxas, that Luther posted his famous theses two weeks later and that the date, October 31, 1517, is only significant because it was on that day that Luther posted a letter to Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz alerting him to the abuse of selling indulgences in Saxony that was then taking place under his name. Metaxas' biography of Luther is filled with this type of myth-busting information and analysis.

There have been a number of excellent biographies of Luther written over the years. Many today – including me – grew up reading Roland Bainton's classic, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (1950), an eloquent volume that has appealed to both scholarly and popular audiences. Biographies in the past few decades have tended to be directed more to scholars than laypersons. Metaxas himself cites Martin Brecht's *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation* (1981) as "unsurpassable." Others might lean more towards Heiko A. Oberman's *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (1992) or Lyndal Roper's recent *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (2016). These latter books carefully weigh the historical evidence and remain in conversation with other scholars in the field in ways that historians of the Reformation appreciate. For those, however, who want to read a popular but reliable and up-to-date introduction to Luther, Eric Metaxas' new biography may be just the thing.

In addition to the *faux* story of the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses*, the introduction to Metaxas' biography notes six other famous myths about Luther that have no basis in fact, and other Luther fables are exposed in the course of Luther's story as Metaxas tells it. Metaxas also doesn't shrink from being dismissive of scholarly works on Luther such as Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* (1958), a widely read but generally misleading psychoanalysis of Luther that concluded that Luther's assaults on the papacy were due to a redirected oedipal complex.

This is not Metaxas' first foray into biography. He first came to my attention with *William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (2007), and he gained universal renown for *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (2011). Like his

biography of Luther, these *New York Times* bestsellers were well-researched, fast paced, and written in a popular style.

Though Metaxas is fair-minded throughout, he does not pull his punches. In describing the practice of Catholicism in the city of Rome when Luther visited it in 1510, he writes, “If ever one needed a picture of ‘dead religion’ and ‘dead works,’ here it was in all of its most legalistic ghastliness.” As for the pre-Reformation popes, Metaxas has no kind words. “The elegant evil of the Medici popes,” he opines, “sometimes makes Machiavelli himself come across like a gap-toothed rube.” The Roman Catholic Church, to be blunt, was engaged in a massive fraud: the sale of indulgences. Clearly the Augean stables needed cleansing, and in Metaxas’ view, the reverent but blunt-speaking Luther was just the Christian Hercules for the job. Borrowing an image from the *Wizard of Oz*, Metaxas describes the leaders of the Catholic Church as “a group of small and fearful men pulling ecclesiastical and legalistic levers from behind red and gold curtains,” while Luther is the little black dog that succeeds in pulling the curtains back to “reveal the imperious and worldly chicanery at the black heart of it all.”

The Luther that Metaxas presents is far from being a Protestant plaster saint. Though profoundly religious, he was not otherworldly. He loved his wife and children, and his theology affirmed the goodness of the physical universe as God created it. Though he often presented himself as a peasant, this was a ruse. He was from a well-to-do family that gave him the best education available at the time. He could be earthy, irascible, and – late in life – anti-Semitic. His name, curiously, was not originally Luther, but rather Luder or Ludher, which today, Metaxas suggests, might be translated as “hussy” or “bitch” – hardly a suitable name for a religious figure. Luther understandably changed his name at some point, possibly as he was becoming famous and feared that it would be an easy target for his often vociferous and uninhibited opponents. When close to death, he retained his humility as well as his sense of humor, saying, “If I get back home to Wittenberg, I’ll lie down in a coffin and give the maggots a fat doctor to eat.”

Metaxas’ Luther is a genuine hero, a Christian scholar of tremendous insight, honesty, and courage. While Luther scholars have closely examined the great reformer’s place in the history of Christian theology, Metaxas is less concerned with Luther’s theological contributions than with his influence on Western culture in general. For Metaxas, Luther is “the man who created the future.” In using the new medium of pamphlets, Luther not only became the voice of the people but helped to create the very idea of the *vox populi*. By insisting on freedom of conscience for all individuals, he helped to pave the way to today’s religious pluralism. As a religious prophet who spoke truth to power, he helped to open the door to modern notions of religious dissent, human rights, and democracy. Because he based Christian truth on the Bible rather than the bald assertions of an authoritarian institutional church, Luther made it possible for people of conscience to challenge both church and state when they veered from the teachings of the gospel.



Luther did not anticipate all the great reforms that have occurred in the five centuries since the Protestant Reformation, nor did he even dimly foresee them. Yet, Metaxas reasons, his insights and example surely helped to make such reforms possible: from freedom of the press as advocated in John Milton's timeless *Areopagitica* (1644) to democratic government created in the upheaval of the American Revolution (1775-83); and onward to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that saw the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of child labor, legislation to benefit the poor, and so much more. Luther's long shadow can be seen even in the messy democratic world we inhabit today, for it is the world that he helped to bring into being.

**Michael Parker**  
**Professor of Church History**  
**ETSC**