

CHRISTIANITY AND NATIONALISM

Christianity is not opposed to nationalism in its concept of love and devotion to one's own nation. And the God's Kingdom Society since the days before independence has always identified herself with the aspirations of Nigeria as is consistent with the tenets of Christianity. However, in the various ways men give expression to their patriotic feelings there are lots of things against which a true Christian must take precaution.

Recently, a Government-owned newspaper based at Enugu – The Renaissance – issue of Tuesday June 5, 1973, carried in its front page a report captioned, "Jehovah's Witnesses Shun National Events". It stated that all the school-children whose parents were members of the Jehovah's Witnesses were not allowed to take part in the Nigerian Children's Day celebration in Umuahia division. A spokesman of the witnesses was quoted as saying: "Our children will not take part in any sort of national celebration because it makes them worshippers of Nigerian leaders. It is only God we will worship and respect on earth. Taking part in national celebration will make us and our children human worshippers and tools by which the world is split into states and into ideological blocs. Nationalism makes it possible for nation to rise against nation". A similar report was published in the Nigerian Observer issue of Thursday, June 7, 1973.

In consequence of these reports some sections of the Press have been provoked into lashing out against the Watchtower witnesses accusing them of fanaticism and non-cooperation with governments. We had expected that if the reports were untrue the witnesses would spare no time to make a statement refuting the serious allegations against them. But up to the time of writing this release there has been absolute silence from the quarters of the Watchtower Society.

Unfortunately, the Daily Sketch has wittingly or unwittingly dragged the God's Kingdom Society (GKS) into the matter in an editorial. And the Publicity Secretary of the GKS Brother B. O. Tietie immediately sent a telegram to the editor in this vein:

"YOUR EDITORIAL OF TODAY THURSDAY JUNE SEVEN REFERS X BE INFORMED THAT GOD'S KINGDOM ADVOCATE MAGAZINE IS PUBLISHED BY GOD'S KINGDOM SOCIETY AN INDIGENOUS CHRISTIAN ORGANISATION WITH HEADQUARTERS IN SALEM CITY WARRI AND NOT BY JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES SO CALLED X WE OBJECT IN STONGEST TERMS THEREFORE TO YOUR REFERENCE TO GOD'S KINGDOM ADVOCATE AS BELONGING TO JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES OR WATCHTOWER SOCIETY X MUCH AS OF FAITH WE UPHOLD GOD'S LAWS AS SUPREME WE ACKNOWLEDGE NIGERIA'S NATION-HOOD X RESPECT HER RULES AND SHARE IN FEELING OF NATIONALISTIC BELONGING AND LOYALTY IN ACCORDANCE WITH SCRIPTURAL IDEOLOGY X NOTE THAT GOD'S KINGDOM SOCIETY'S CHILDREN TOOK PART IN NIGERIAN CHILDREN'S DAY CELEBRATION X LETTER FOLLOWS."

Such being the case, we are bound naturally to defend ourselves so as to erase from the minds of people any false impression that seeks to group the GKS and the Watchtower Society as one and the same organization. And as the God's Kingdom Society is set for the defence of all that Christianity stands for, we feel constrained as well under the circumstances to throw some light from a scriptural standpoint on certain vital issues in relation to Christianity and nationalism.

The God's Kingdom Society and the Watch Tower Society are poles apart purely on the basis of principles and doctrines. We do not hate their persons but we detest their indiscretion and certain acts of fanaticism which, more often than not, have brought them into open clashes with authorities. Even if they have a good case, their lack of modesty and objectivity in their approach and presentation of matters have often undermined their intentions.

Now, let us consider a few points on the issue of the Nigerian Children Day.

Aim: The celebration as put in the Daily Times (May 28, 1973) was "aimed at reviewing the needs of children and to remind our governments, voluntary organizations, parents – in short, everyone, of their obligations to the young ones". This aim was comprehensively expressed in the message of the Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon that was read by the military governors and others to Nigerian children on the occasion. With regard to the message, The Nigerian Observer (Tuesday, May 29, 1973) reported as follows:

"In the speech, the Head of State, said that children have a unique and important role to play in the overall development of the nation. General Gowon observed that the greatness of a nation lay in the actual and potential contributions which the citizens can make towards its progress... General Gowon advised the children not only to eschew violence or irresponsibility of any kind but also to learn to air their grievances through legitimate and non-violent means in order to achieve effective solutions.

"He called on parents to address themselves in the role which they could play in the development of children. General Gowon expressed the hope that children would still be nurtured to uphold the traditional emphasis on obedience and respect for parents and elders, despite the rapid technological and cultural changes taking place in the world.

"If this tradition is to be sustained, General Gowon observed, parents and guardians owe it as a duty to the nation and indeed to humanity, to provide for their children, 'good care, affection, understanding, security and protection against all forms of neglect and cruelty'..."

We consider this message of the Head of State as the most important aspect of the celebration. We find nothing in it that is scripturally objectionable. And so we have no regrets, therefore, that the children of the members of God's Kingdom Society took part in the celebration.

The action of the Jehovah's witnesses so-called in stopping their children from the Nigerian Children's Day celebration is without merit and is capable of exciting misgivings. That was why the President of God's Kingdom Society, Brother E. T. Otomewo, in a telegraphic message urged the representative of the Watchtower Society in Nigeria to warn his fellow witnesses against fanaticism. His telegram dated June 7, 1973, reads as follows:

"I REFER YOU TO RENAISSANCE OF FIFTH INSTANT AND SKETCH OF TODAY SEVENTH REGARDING CHILDREN'S NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION BOYCOTTED BY WATCHTOWER CHILDREN ON INSTRUCTION OF THEIR PARENTS X REASONS FOR THE BOYCOTT AS PUBLISHED IF TRUE ARE AMONG OTHERS THAT THE CELEBRATION AMOUNTS TO WORSHIP AND RESPECT OF MEN X MEN CAN BE RESPECTED OR HONOURED BUT NOT WORSHIPPED AND I KNOW NO RULER OF THE GOVERNMENTS OF THIS COUNTRY NOT EVEN THE HEAD OF STATE THAT IS WORSHIPPED AS GOD X YOUR UMUHIA COLLEAGUES ARE WRONG TO SAY MEN COULD NOT BE RESPECTED X THEY

CERTAINLY HAVE NO BIBLE AUTHORITY FOR THIS X RATHER THE BIBLE ADVOCATES RESPECT FOR KINGS RULERS ELDERS AND 'MEN OF ALL SORTS' TO QUOTE YOUR NEW WORLD BIBLE X READ FIRST TIMOTHY CHAPTER SIX VERSES ONE AND TWO AND FIRST PETER CHAPTER TWO VERSE SEVENTEEN AND WARN FANATICS AMONG YOU FROM MAKING THEMSELVES CHEAP MARTYRS AND ALSO BRINGING PERSECUTIONS UPON OTHER RELIGIOUS INNOCENT PEOPLE AND STOP GIVING CAUSE TO SCEPTICS TO WRITE MALICIOUS ARTICLES AGAINST THE CHRISTIAN FAITH".

The view of the Watchtower witnesses that taking part in any sort of national celebration would make them and their children worshippers of Nigerian leaders is untenable. We are not aware of any national celebration in this county in which Nigerian leaders are worshipped. It is not a sin for children or even adults to salute the Head of State or the military governors or any other accredited representative of the Government as a mark of respect.

On the occasion of the Nigerian Children's Day celebration it was the Administrator of the East Central State, Mr. Ukpabi Asika, who stood on the dais during the parade at the Enugu Sports Stadium. A picture of the parade appeared in the front page of "The Renaissance" of May 29, 1973.

If any aspect of the ceremonies and activities was objectionable to the witnesses on the ground of their faith, it would have been enough for them to explain themselves politely on that point rather than give the impression that tended to discountenance the entire celebration. It is a good thing that the Government has created such an opportunity to make both the children and their parents and other institutions realize their civic responsibilities as to work together towards the progress of the nation.

Respect

We agree that God alone should be worshipped according to the Scriptures. But we disagree that men, especially rulers, should not be respected. Respect for those in authority, elders, and other classes of men is entrenched in the tenets of Christianity. St. Paul enjoined Christian servants to respect their masters, whether they are believers or not. He stated: "Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and *his* doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise *them*... These things teach and exhort." (1 Timothy 6:1, 2, see also Leviticus 19:32) And St. Peter also admonished: "Honour all *men*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king." – 1 Peter 2:17

We must not lose sight of the fact that the governments of the world are secular governments and so they should not be expected in all their ceremonies to conform to all principles and norms of Christianity or any other religion. This does not prevent Christians from co-operating with the governments or proving to be loyal citizens.

For cogent scriptural reasons, some Christians do not sing the national anthems which are political prayers. The freedom God gives everyone which, unfortunately, many abuse or exercise licentiously today by sinning against Him in various ways, and the freedom of religion or worship

upheld by good or democratic governments of the world allow such Christians to exercise this aspect of the fundamental rights of man. But they have no right to dissuade others who believe in singing the anthems from doing so. So too those who do not believe in the immaculate conception of Mary or her being the “mother of Almighty God,” have the right and freedom not to sing the “Hail Mary”. If they do whereas they have no faith in it, it is sheer hypocrisy and will be of no value whatever. And God is against hypocrisy: it is a big sin – Job 13:16, Isaiah 32:6, Matthew 23:27, 28, Luke 12:1, etc.

With regard to national flags, there is no doubt that they have their usefulness, and their importance as political symbols cannot be disputed. But like national anthems a Christian can on the ground of his conscience and faith based on the Scriptures refuse to salute them. He has no right, however, to prevent others who believe it is not a sin from doing so.

Citizen

We hold the view that a person who in sincerity of purpose for the reason of his religious beliefs does not sing a national anthem or value the flag but is peaceful and law-abiding, is a better and more useful citizen to the nation than one who though enthusiastic, in singing the anthem and saluting the flag, is fraud, smuggler, robber traitor or a subversive element who undermines government development plans and so on.

Although Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were faithful Jews, refused to bow to the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, they proved to be loyal subjects. The king, who was rashly furious against them, later regretted his error and realized that they were right, and had no cause to doubt their loyalty. At the end of the whole drama, the king promoted them and they were of immense help to his government. Had they been killed the Babylonish kingdom would have been deprived of their invaluable services which brought blessings to it. – Read Daniel chapter 3.

The experience of Daniel himself when others conspired against him and was thrown into the den of lions is also a striking instance. The fact that he prayed to God instead of King Darius did not mean that he had disaffection towards the government. He was at last vindicated to the appreciation of the king while the conspirators died ignominiously. (Daniel chapter 6) Any exercise, therefore, intended to compel anyone to violate his faith and the sincere dictate of his conscience can only be seen as persecution and an act of oppression. It is in this light we cannot in any way lend support to the atrocities meted out against the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” in Malawi, Zambia, Liberia or elsewhere which some reckless writers often cite in attacking them. We do not see how the raping of their women and killing of some of them have improved the images of those countries. Rather, they are a blot on them. And as the editor of “Drum” magazine commented: “We too, have heard reports of religious arrogance by God’s people. But the behaviour of the Witnesses does not justify the rape and killings by young political hooligans in Malawi.” – Drum, June, 1973.

The degree of respect and dignity commanded by the Head of State and other rulers of Nigeria today before the outside world is not because of their intolerance, restriction of religious freedom or use of violence against armless and innocent citizens (as some would want them to do); rather it is because of their tolerance and the maturity they have shown in their endeavours to keep the country together despite the diversities in the religious beliefs, cultures, and tribes of its people.

Any tendency on the part of any group of Christians not to recognize any constituted authority or government of any country must be deprecated because there is no scriptural justification for it. The existence of human governments in the present evil world is allowed by God. If there is no government there will be a state of disorder and confusion under which the gospel of Christ cannot be preached. And under such a situation the Watchtower witnesses themselves cannot be safe in preaching from house to house uninvitedly as they are doing.

A Christian is free to show love to and serve his country faithfully provided he keeps his faith inviolate and endeavours, by the grace of God, to refrain from sin or from being a reproach to God and his country. "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people." – Proverbs 14:34.