



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

“God has become intellectually superfluous, morally intolerable, psychologically dispensable, politically ineffective and philosophically impotent. He is dying the death of a thousand distinctions” Anyone with this idea has become religiously crippled, morally incapacitated and spiritually disoriented and finally has lost sense of the sacred.

It is very sad that man in this present time has given not only his love but preference for temporal reality and it is his “be all and end all”. It is an indubitantum that man has an indispensable link with the divine. It is in this vein that philosophers defined man as a metaphysical being because he dies in search of that which is beyond him alienation of any kind makes man’s life futile; it is the sacred that establishes this relationship between the divine and human nature through activities like worship, sacrifice, and initiation with some natural objects that are imbued with sacred power. The theme inevitably insinuates the departure from the Sacred or a loss of the sense of sacredness, as it ought to be.

In this piece, we aim at positing the meaning, reason, categories, attitudes and interpretations of the Sacred and finally proffer ways, challenge, invite and advocate a return to the Sacred.

This will be done within the Cultural and Religious perspectives but more on the Religious side.

DEFINITION OF THE SACRED:

A certain feeling of absurdity comes over one on being asked to write on book about holiness and then in turn to expect other people to read it after it has been written”².

‘Sacred took its etymology from the Latin word “sacer,” “it could mean that which would pollute someone or something that comes into contact with it, as well as that which was restricted for divine use”. Durkheim refers it to ‘these things in the society that are forbidden or set apart and the guiding force in the society’. ‘Sacred’ also means consecrated, holy, set apart especially for the service or worship of God or a deity; hallowed by religious association; having a religious not as profane character, a sacred picture to be held in reverence (of a person or his office); inviolate”³. Based on the versatility of his word no definition is independently sufficient to describe it.

Since the first quarter of 20th century sacred people, places, objects, animals, events, activities, colours and numbers etc act as the centre of religious and cultural life, if not the essential



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

reality. This sacred act extended to our traditional and social life. The reverence man shows to the sacred is composed of both trust and terror. It is closely related to 'numen' meaning mysterious power or god.

This is used to describe the power of sacred before which man trembles.

WHAT AND WHO IS SACRED:

Sacredness is manifested in relation of various subjects, ranging from persons, objects and places: first among these however, is God. To answer this, we therefore bring out two points:

- That which makes a thing Sacred and
- Categories of things that could be considered Sacred.

It is pertinent to state, at this point, that God, the "transcendent" is the Essence, Source, Summit and Fullness of Sacredness. Conclusively, GOD HIMSELF IS THE SACRED. Therefore, whatever is considered sacred only derives such attributes due to its connection or relation to the Transcendent - God.

Consequent on this, we discover that sacredness is associated with things varying from one culture to another. Nevertheless, in a general sampling, we could class them into:

- Persons as in kings, priests, messengers, humanity in general (cf 1Cor 3:16)
- Actions as in prostration, bowing, knelling, the act of intercourse etc
- Things as in stones, mace, caps, horns, crucifixes
- Places as in temples, shrines, church, mosques
- Times and Seasons such as festivals, feasts and commemorations in general.

These could be exemplified in: the Tiv snake (Ikyerem), Idoma-Alekwu, Ibo-Eke, Yoruba -Olumo Rock, Benin-Oba, Hausa-Emir, the Ashanti tribe in Ghana-Golden-stool, Indians-Cow, Muslim-Ka'aba and a host of others.

Worthy of mention here is the fact that some professions and institutions consider or use, the term Sacred as it relates to their own context (for instance, the Military, the legal profession or legislators at a house meeting). However, the sense within which it is used at such levels relate to authority and position.



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

Having listed our sacred things in the different dimension (religious, tradition, and social), I would like to discuss on sacred person(s), sacred place(s) and activities, things and also animals.

Priest, bishops, pastors, chief priests and imam are sacred persons they are seen as special agents whose ritual actions represent divine acts. They are to live exemplary and idealistic life which people will see and follow their footsteps. "The priest must discard any describable image of himself and strive for the original the "imago Dei" that can become a reality one more through services, love and contemplation"⁴. In traditional dimension chief priest are seen as messengers of god or deity, and whatever they say comes from god. They are mediators between heaven and earth. The kings and other leaders of the community should be a model which his followers will imitate according to the saying that "Christ teaches by example" let what you say be what you do. The sacred person(s) should like Caesar's wife be above suspicion.

Sacred places are churches, mosques, and shrines. They are recognized by devotees as places where special altitude and restriction prevail because they are abode of the sacred. It is the place(s) that constitutes the meeting places of God and man; therefore its sanctity must be preserved. "The term church means a sacred building intended for divine worship, to which the faithful have right of access for the exercise of especially the public exercise of divine worship"⁵. These places are seen as where one can easily reach God or god(s), they are as sacred as a virtue of the holies appearing at the place, because it involves communion of a holy man with the locality.

There are sacred activities like worship, sacrifice, initiation, festivals and sacrament etc. "In June 1985, "psychology today" published an interesting survey (by Laure and Laurer) of couples who have been married for fifteen years or more. Among the top four reasons given by them for their long lasting relationship was a sense of sacred about marriage. So it is obvious that the sense of sacredness is quite valuable"⁶.

The sacred animals like, "The Hereon regards all cattle as sacred and as having originated from their mystical tree of life, from where human and other life comes"⁷.

"The 'Eke Njaba' or python among the people of Awo-Omamma in Imo State is a sacred animal originated from their great Njaba River which is the water of life"⁸.



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

THE PROFANE:

The word came Via French < Latin profanus “outside the temple, not sacred” < fanum “temple”. It means to treat (something sacred) with irrelevance discrete, to treat disrespectfully, debase”⁹.

The Sacred: In Relation to Culture: Maintaining a sense of awe/reverence for whatever is considered Sacred is inherent in man’s nature (as earlier mentioned), since he is by nature, inclined to reverencing the Transcendent.

Culturally, the night is considered a sacred period and so no activities of the day ought to perform: sweeping, fetching of water, whistling, etc truthfulness was a virtue that was taken seriously and people infact took oath of truthfulness. Women were not to go near a grave. Marriage was held in high esteem (thereby prohibiting adultery)

These are innumerable, however, we could summarily say it bother on high sense of Morality, respect for Human life and dignity, sacredness of sexual relations, regard for elders, favors received from God and a host of others.

THE FLIGHT TO GOLGOTHA:

Man has become a moral pygmy and a spiritual dwarf. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer the world has come of age and no longer assumes that God is “up there: ready at every minute to intervene our human affairs to rescue or punish. This evince the change in man’s thought-pattern from the theocentric to anthropocentric, it is no longer God but man who is the measure. The acceptance of rational and critical perspective for judging the claims of religious authorities in Europe since the 18th century plus the development of historical relativism has contributed to the affirmation of man as basically a secular person. “The once absolute authorities in the West (Bible, priest, Quran) are no longer the prime sources for one’s self-identity”¹⁰.

It is very obvious today God is no more what he used to be; it has been replaced by science and other things on earth. It is the God of when all scientific attempts proved abortive. Man is now changing things to the way it suits him to justify his wrongdoing. Man has attempted to resecularize contemporary cosmology, history and personal experience by firstly applying limits of religion concerns to secular areas as politics and economy also modifying theological position and liturgical forms to incorporate new models of expression and experiment with new style of living.

The Ministers of God or god(s) have gone along way to desecrate their status and office. They no



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

more live up to people's expectation. According to the saying "familiarity breeds contempt" they show little or no reverence to the sacred. Even at the altar preaching he is looking and marking beautiful ladies. They are now much interested on wealth. "If you want to get rich quickly, if you want accumulate wives become Aladura pastor"¹¹. "A good priest should allow the laity to canvass for funds while he practices the word of God. It is rather disheartening to see a priest spending homily session preaching money"¹². Salvation and money, which is more important? Priests and pastors are now almost the highest in the records of child and sexual-abuses and coercive sexual intercourse.

The action that goes on in the churches in this modern age has nothing to write home about. Every Christmas mass and Easter mass (night) is now opportunities for youths who are under strict parental care to fornicate even within the church premises. Wooing of girls and exchange of addresses inside the church even during homily is no crime. Those who have mobile phone(s) "GSM" cannot allow a serene atmosphere in the church even during readings and homily. In the cities some girls' dressing especially those in higher institution is a sight to abhor. The "... Aladura Church movement, women are seen to be seduced even during prayers and the ecstatic hallelujah jump".¹³

People now sell shrines to oil companies and for other industrial purposes. They even encroach into shrines in order to acquire large portion of land. The best business is selling oracles to white men. The animals have high economic importance; now sold and used for many profane acts by people or for consumptions.

The chiefs, Igwe(s) now collect bribe from people to judge in favour of them. Titled men now use their position to extort money from the poor masses, people pay levies upon levies for one thing or the other and a refusal will attract punishment to the person taken as sign of disobedient to the order coming from the leaders.

Adultery is now seen as a culture where husbands and wives go about in promiscuity. Some deceive their partners and call their lover distant cousins or relations. "Tunji joined pleading incoherently confessing that he was indeed Funke's boyfriend and not her cousin".¹⁴ Women bring in opposite sex into the family. Even use matrimonial bed for these acts (i.e. adultery). The ways of living is now relative, it all depends on the way you see it.

Culturally:

- We find that the reverential fear/awe for the night is gradually fading



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

out.

- Fornication, adultery, incest, homosexuality and some other sexual/social vices are no longer seen as Taboo.
- Calumny /Slander for example being found among elders and people under oaths of truthfulness and many others.

Religiously (Catholic perspective),

- The sincere act of reverence for God is rare; this also pertains to the Sacraments: - dispensed and received for various personal motives.
- Reverence for the Word at mass and Liturgical Celebrations has been greatly lost, as readers and lectors go to display their dress or wealth of phonetics & diction; cantors, their beautiful voices and some Homilists, their shouting and preaching ability.
- The sign of the cross is shied away from, modified or ignored.
- Regard is no longer given to the Blessed Sacrament in repose as the fine dresses or cassocks may be soiled through genuflection.
- The vows of poverty, chastity and Obedience seem to some, archaic, old fashioned or antediluvian.
- Houses of formation/seminaries novitiates becoming breeding ground for immorality of various kinds.
- Church funds being coveted by Laity-council Chairman, Catechists and church -leaders following the dictum that "it is where you labor that you eat". "the church in the name of the church has committed what the church forbids said by Henry Newman
- morally, life has lost its sense of sacredness, hence the increasing rate of abortions, genocide, suicide, wars, etc
- Immodesty in dress been considered as modern or up-to-date.
- Dishonesty and greed giving way to societal decadence.

I will not be doing justice to this piece if on the passing I don't mention the rate at which life is disrespected by men. People take their life and that of others at will not caring about the consequence or the worth of human life.

"BENEFITS" OF LIFE IN GOLGOTHA:

It has adversely affected the Human person in all facets of life: dignity for life is lost to



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

mere/trivial consideration, which may lead to the total extinction of the human race due to the increase in production of weapons of mass destruction.

Genuine Spirituality (piety) relegated to mere religiosity. By this we mean that there is a sense in which people have relapsed to unnecessary emphasis on external practices without genuine/sincere affiliation with the Divine.

Leadership position (Whether Traditions, Political or Traditional) are used no longer as means of service but of self-aggrandizement, wealth acquisition, oppression and financial/social security.

Religion is now seen and used as a social forum or a platform for some political agenda.

Aspirations towards the priesthood and religious life in some cases, arising, not out of a felt need of service to God and his people, but a means/access to travel abroad, drive good vehicles, adequate medical attention, been assured of financial/social security and at the end been bade farewell with a grand, societal, Episcopal/pontifical funeral as Karl Marx rightly put it 'Religion is the opium of the people.

Celebrating the Sacraments or performing other liturgical functions (e.g. chanting, reading or assisting at mass) for sake for the financial benefits or admiration of people, thereby demystifying the priesthood, religious life, the sacraments, sacred vessels, the cassocks, habits and a host of others.

WHAT NECESSITATED THE FLIGHT TO GOLGOTHA

There are host of nameless, faceless and innumerable reasons for this departure from the Sacred, nonetheless, the most fundamental would hover around the loss of values or transvaluation due to the Secularist and liberalist ideologies that have cropped into the minds of people as a result of the extreme developments of science and technology, Western Education and Transposition of focus from God to Man.

AN EXODUS FROM GOLGOTHA:

A Call Of Urgent Immediacy: our call is to a re-orientation from what is, not so much to what was but to what should and ought to be. For culturally, sacred consciousness was tending towards the obtaining of the ideal, likewise religion. However, we are conceding that to change the world



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

we must begin from a particular nucleus -ourselves. If we as individuals and groups can begin with ourselves, it is expected that spark of the 'right thing' would set ablaze the flames of the ideal in the globe as a whole.

No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of his master. It is time for us to come back to our senses and obey our conscience rather than following sinful- commands. "You must be holy just as your father in heaven is holy."¹⁵ it is to this light we are called to return to the sacred, not returning to those inhuman and ungodly traditional and religious practices. We are calling for a return to reverences given to God or Allah and things connected with it. That is to return to a thought-pattern of theocentricism from anthropocentricism. "We have left God in search of satisfaction man and God has been juxtaposed" the question still is when? where? how?, and why? this "Return"

It should be noted that the call we are making is not to a return to an antiquity or an act of anachronism, else Civilization. Western Education and even Christianity would have to give way. Moreover, we cannot "unknown" that which has already been known. We are rather calling for a re-appreciation of that inner conviction, feeling or principle that led man in the past to regard sacred things as such and to accord them the necessary reverence.

In other words, we are not calling for a re-mystification of the "demystified mysteries" but a reorientation of focus from Man to God -the transcendent -thereby bringing a new perspective: not of reason alone but of reason illumined by faith.

This return may be viewed as an attempt to recapture the true experience of the sacred back to ourselves. With burning heart let us redress our steps for we have deviated from the state of purity. There are certain questions at hand when one talks of the sacred; these are when? How? Why and where?

When shall we return: it is not to return tomorrow when, we hope we shall improve, but now in the midst of our failures and current needs, as we are where we are. It is time for us to look back and see all we have done and then attach reverence to that which or who is due to it.

Do not say then "tomorrow I shall be converted, tomorrow I shall please God and all that I shall have today and yesterday will be forgiven me; what you say is true, God has promised forgiveness if you turn back to him. But what he has not promised is that you will have tomorrow in which to achieve your conversion"¹⁶.

After the question of when, we begin to ask how. According to the papal homily on the



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

canonization of Jose Maria Escriva titled: we are called to Holiness. "The awareness that we are called to holiness is the first place then force yourself to be saints by cultivating an evangelical style of humility and service of abandonment to constant listening to the voice of the spirit"17. He also described a way to do it. "However to fulfill such demanding task there must be constant interior growth nourished by prayer"18.

Why should we return to the sacred? Our close relationship to the divine pattern is very vital and this is made possible by the sacred that we are bound to return, let us enter into the sacred realm, which gives vigour, health, luck, fortune and long life. "We have all sinned and fall short in the glory of God"ROM8:23 we need to return to God.

Where shall we find sacred? This is another pressing question. It is only God or gods(s) who is/are the highest sacred who will give us this and God is within us "you lord were within me while I was outside"19 "I sought the lord and he answered me where did the Lord hear within and where does he reply? Within"19. Let us return to that which assures us eternal life, the lord is calling us "make straight it cries out the way of the lord"20.He is calling us to return to him "come to me all you who are laboured and overburdened I will give you rest"21.

Let us return to our traditions, which are very good than the western tradition, especially in terms of medications, dressing etc since we still move back to God when science cannot solve our problem. Amidst all these so-called developments man is still lacking inner tranquility and always at war with himself.

Attention should be given to that innate conviction (within each) person of the presence of the divine being, which cannot be denied but can only be disregarded, a conviction out of which the sense of sacredness springs. We therefore call for a genuine practice of spirituality which would give meaning to our religious outward practices rather than a pharisaic activity which doesn't spring out of conviction. For familiarity regularity ought to bring about deeper understanding of the mystery rather than contempt.

Call to life (as Vita) which is God gift (Gen. 1:7) and life as (Moralis) which God commands on man (Lev 20:26). This would help curb whatever pertains to the taking of life: abortion, Euthanasia, genocide, infanticide, suicide, war tribal/ethnic conflicts etc. Conscious of fact that human sexuality is a gift God for service, intimacy and pro creation, it should be used within these perimeters.

Authority to be used for service rather than being served. As to the sacrament and sacramental:



The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things

granted that the sacraments are “ex-opera-operato” the ministers must be conscious of the fact that he celebrates the sacraments for the people bearing in mind the people’s upliftment and his personal salvation. Ministers should be conscious of the fact that unnecessary emphasis on the financial contingencies would lead to some practice of the sin of “simony”. Liturgical offices should be performed or carried out of the spiritual need and necessity rather than admiration and display, because it is an office fulfilled in Christ’s name (*Instrumentum laboris manus Domine*). The sign of the cross for instance should be performed with all sense of sacredness rather than shying off, hiding our identity.

Soutanes and sacred vessels should be treated as holy things rather than with contempt or familiarity. They should be regarded as aids to real worship of God. Sacred places should be seen as dwellings of the most high and treated as such. People charged with the responsibility of taking care of church buildings and sacred place should do it with joy, as service to God not just neighbor. This affects also the presbyteries being considered as hotels, or bars for prudent debauchery. Church funds and collections should be treated also as sacred for the intension is not so much to the minister for his own sake but for God’s. The Eucharist particularly should be seen and considered the true body of Christ and all- who receives it must and should always adequately prepare for it. Familiarity should not breed contempt rather than a deeper appreciation.

CONCLUSION:

There are three basic things which man has not been able to cobble together through science: contingency, scarcity and loneliness respectively. Although man’s physical problems have been solved by science to some extent man is still dependent on God for what science cannot offer namely protection and satisfaction of the soul.

Science has been able to cobble together the poverty of man but man is still insatiable by the material gift of science, still faced with limited resources and man’s capability to harness them is not perfectly there.

In the view of loneliness, science has not succeeded for man is still restless; it is for these we are called to return to the Sacred, our hearts are restless till they rest in the lord said by ST. Augustine.

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The thanatology of the sacred: a heart rending situation of the state of things



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