

A bishop's sharp rebuke

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By Okey Ndibe

A few years ago I heard a story that is in all likelihood apocryphal and yet a profound illustration of a pernicious brand of superstition that has seized the popular imagination in Nigeria. The story is of a structural engineer who served as chief project manager in the construction of a bridge. Asked by reporters if he was satisfied that the bridge was structurally sound for the volume of traffic that would ply it, the engineer retorted: "Yes, by the grace of God."

Many Nigerians mistake such pronouncements as praiseworthy piety. In fact, any engineer who invokes God as guarantor of the efficacy of his work is often regarded as the best kind of engineer.

Faith is a healthy part of our human heritage. As the late Pope John Paul the Second eloquently established in *Faith and Reason*, one of his most widely read encyclicals, faith and reason need not exist in an antagonistic relationship. In their daily lives, many reasonable people are able to wed their spiritual beliefs to their professional lives. It would not be bizarre for an engineer to pray about his or her work. But an engineer who labors under the impression that God, not tested engineering principles, is going to sustain a bridge ought to undergo a sanity test.

In these days of collapsing bridges and toppling houses, Nigerians should be

wary of engineers who fast steadfastly and pray zealously but neglect to pay attention to material, quantities and measurements. Engineers who can't tell the difference between faith and superstition can neither be deep practitioners of their faith nor knowledgeable in their supposed field of expertise.

Several weeks ago, Nigerian newspapers reported the collapse of a major bridge in Cross River State. The *News* newspaper was first to alert the nation to this engineering calamity. The paper wrote: "The Itigidi bridge commissioned by former President Olusegun Obasanjo with so much fanfare in Cross River State, has collapsed...Two vehicles, a tipper and a car, have so far fallen into the river." In buckling, the bridge seemed to accuse both the engineers who worked on it and the man who awarded the N7 billion contract for its construction. When he officially opened the bridge in May, just days before exiting from power, Obasanjo had wagged a finger at his critics. According to the paper, the former president gloated that "those mocking his administration for doing nothing should 'come to Itigidi and see the wonder we have achieved here.'" Wonder indeed!

Sadly, many pastors of questionable standing—ostentatiously styled men of God by the credulous Nigerian media—encourage the promiscuous bandying

about of God's name. Hypocrites and fraudsters masked as workers in God's vineyard are spawning dangerous creeds and toxic ideas. It sometimes appears that the wackier the ideas purveyed by some fly-by-night pastors the greater their traction. Innocent citizens, beguiled by the astonishing pronouncements of men and women who claim to have God on speed dial, are often misled into affirming tragic ideas.

What's even more worrisome about the reign of asinine ideas is the failure of enlightened pastors and other citizens to consistently rebuke the errant, pollutant views injected into the public bloodstream by charlatans posturing as God's mouthpieces.

Whatever its cause, this abdication has only served to empower those who seduce the susceptible among us with fart packaged and labeled as perfume. One of Nigeria's chief perils is the growing acceptance of the superstition that all power comes from God. Vended by an unholy alliance of pastors, imams and political pundits, this blatant lie has caught on. Its effect is to inoculate many Nigerians against the necessary moral outrage that enlightened citizens ought to feel when their legitimate choices—their voices—are sabotaged by a few diabolical elements.

Politicians who steal others' mandates show no bashfulness in ascribing their purloined offices to "God's doing." If you ask Lamidi Adedibu who was responsible for (illegally) impeaching Governor Rashid Ladoja, it's a fair bet that he'd say that it was God's decision. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo was too good to be elected into office by mere mortals. So he bypassed Nigerians

and sought God's direct vote. By his testimony, he got the divine nod in 1999 and 2003.

Obasanjo's bid to rewrite the Nigerian constitution to enable him to wangle a third term in office was roundly opposed by Nigerians, and ultimately squelched by members of the National Assembly. Well, that's my human version of events. The divine version, peddled by Obasanjo, is that he never coveted a third term. If he'd wished to perpetuate himself in office, he would simply have telegraphed a petition to God. And Nigerians would have woken up one morning to discover that God, who is supposedly under an obligation to grant each and every prayer of the former president's, had rewritten their constitution!

Such canards, one insists, deserve vigorous repudiation—to deny them the fertilizer they need to germinate and garner some appeal. A few days ago, a Nigerian priest based in Sweden e-mailed me a heartwarming report that was published, again, in *The News*. The report was titled "Stop Praying, Fight For Your Rights: Archbishop Tells Nigerians". The opening paragraph captured the heart of the story: "The Catholic Archbishop of Abuja and President, Christian Association of Nigeria, (CAN), Mr. John Onaiyekan, has called on Nigerians to stop praying for God to deliver the country from misfortunes, but to stand up and fight for their rights." The archbishop's apt entreaty was delivered at the Michael Ajasin Foundation's 8th Annual Colloquium that took place in Lagos.

Onaiyekan is no newcomer to straight and salient talk. In the days when the nation quavered on the edge of despair

over Obasanjo's depraved pursuit of a third term agenda, the archbishop did honor to himself by opposing the ruinous recipe with pastoral candor and unwavering courage. On one occasion, in the presence of Obasanjo himself, Archbishop Onaiyekan delivered an unsparing rebuke of those who contemplated humoring Obasanjo's inflated ego by imperiling Nigeria.

Since April's disaster that Maurice Iwu mistook for elections, the archbishop has stood firm in warring with electoral impunity. He has encouraged wronged candidates not to cave in, and exhorted tribunals to approach their tasks with a great sense of responsibility and in the fierce spirit of serving truth. A few tribunals seem to have heeded his call. Unfortunately, many have failed to rise to the archbishop's entreaty.

Disavowing the habit of many other "men of God" who resort to inelegant verbal gymnastics in the face of grave assaults on a nation's moral integrity and political will, Archbishop Onaiyekan elected to, in the words of Malcolm X, the late African American human rights fighter, "make it plain." The archbishop, according to *The News*, "warned that with so many un-elected people in power, Nigeria [might] remain where it is if the situation remains the same. He said Nigerians [might] decide to tolerate the status quo, continue praying for divine intervention or take concrete action as this is the best option." He implored the nation to insist on "correcting the errors made in the past, the encouragement of the election petition tribunals and the approach to reorganize 'most of the flawed elections.'"

Onaiyekan has called it right. God, it needs to be restated, owes Nigerians nothing. We may shout ourselves hoarse in supplication from sunrise to sunset, but the amelioration or correction of our manifold man-made disasters is not God's business but ours. The elections of April were upended by a trinity of collaborators: a do-or-die president, a decadent ruling party bereft of ideas but seized by arrogance, and an electoral commission headed by a shameless Maurice Iwu. It's up to Nigerians—the stripped electorate, dispossessed candidates, members of the electoral tribunals, the clergy, journalists, labor members and the broad class of intellectuals—to rise and fight the impositions. If we shirk this duty, then why must we importune God to clean up our man-created mess?

It was comforting to see that, like me, Onaiyekan is no believer in Umar Yar'adua's inherently dishonest attempt at "reforming" the electoral process that gave him illegitimate power, the archbishop observed that the reformers were themselves in dire need of reform. "Who will reform the reformers? Who will watch the watchmen?" he asked.

Rather than be lulled to sleep by Yar'adua's so-called electoral reforms, the archbishop insisted that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) ought to be probed for its role in the rigged elections. His words: "A perfect electoral reform would lead us nowhere if people can simply disregard the rules, and get away with such crimes."

The priest who sent me the report on Onaiyekan's forthright talk also copied me a congratulatory letter he'd written to the archbishop. Part of the letter read:

“People who are traveling from Abuja to Lagos or from Port-Harcourt through Onitsha to Lagos often spend a good part of the...journey by bus praying – ‘binding and casting the Devil and his co-workers’ that unleash accidents on the roads. These Nigerians seem to be so engrossed in their religion that they forget to think. The ‘roads’ are nothing but death traps. The governments, both Federal and states, do not bother to repair these roads. Yet the people hold the ‘Devil and his co-workers’ responsible instead of their leaders who have failed to repair the roads.”

Continued the letter: “When there is a football match, people pray to God for NEPA or whatever it is now called, to give them ‘light’ to be able to watch the match. People abdicate their responsibility to challenge the evil status quo by engaging in needless prayers.”

Both the archbishop’s argument, set forth with characteristic candor, true patriotism and moral clarity, and the priest’s letter deserve commendation. No pastor worthy of the name who hears Onaiyekan’s words would have any excuse for evading what is a moral imperative. It behooves the nation’s clerical ranks as well as enlightened citizens everywhere to adopt a principled stance against the electoral predations of April. To the good archbishop’s penetrating insights the only word to add is: Amen!

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
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26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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