At a Time like this – Where are the Prophets?

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The renowned spiritual writer, George Liddels, in the following words, speaks of prophetic voice as an essential quality for leadership and world peace:

Give me a man of God – one man,  
One mighty prophet of the Lord,  
Whose heart is touched by heaven’s fire,  
And I will give peace on earth,  
Bought with a prayer and not a sword.  

The present article is about prophecy and the role of prophets at a time like ours in Nigeria today. The article distinguishes true prophets from false, charlatan prophets that dominate our society these days. It highlights the fatigue of true prophets and genuine social activists or critics in the face of horrors of dictatorship. The overall aim, however, is to discuss prophetic mission in its religious sense vis-à-vis social activism, and show how both could function simultaneously in confronting the present-day evils of dictatorship and tyranny in Nigeria’s socio-political landscape.

Let us begin with the following preliminary considerations or questions:

At a time like this, when the welfare and security of poor masses in Nigeria leaves much to be desired, there is no doubt that many people are already praying for true prophets, endowed with special divine favors, extraordinary and courageous leadership qualities, to arise and speak in the name of God of hope, for the liberation of the people. At a time like this, when we as a people seemed to have lost the value and sense of sacredness of human life, people are praying already for genuine and courageous prophets to arise and assume the onerous task, risky responsibility of being the voice of the voiceless in the land.

At a time like this, when poor masses are forced to feel like strangers in their fathers’ land, innocent men, women and children murdered in cold-blood by terrorists groups – Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen, without any apprehension from those in power, people of good conscience are beginning to ask: Are there no true prophets in the land again? At a time like this, when the country is filled with many false prophets and pastors, who prey on the distress conditions of the ordinary citizens to defraud them, people are beginning to ask: Where are the true prophets? At a time like this, when every nook and corner of Nigeria are filled with many of the so-called ‘pastors’, charlatans, who parade themselves as prophets, visionaries or philanthropists miracle-workers, defraud people in the name of religion and healing ministry, people are beginning to ask: Where are the true and genuine prophets?
Moreover, at a time like this, with the advent of new social media, various classes of people with dubious characters, who parade themselves as “social crusaders”, have turned common masses into their victims of fraudsters and deceit. At a time like this, when what used to be prestigious media houses – Newspapers, Television, Radio (and what have you), with their workers, could sell their hard-earned profession for a mere 30 shekels of Silver for fake news, people are asking: To whom shall we go for real and true news? At a time like this, when our once revered intellectuals, state-men and women, social activists, human rights’ lawyers, journalists, pastors, Imams, traditional and religious rulers and institutions, etc., have become a willing tool at the hands of corrupt regime and politicians, people are asking: God, to whom shall we turn to? Who shall speak for us?

What all this amounts to, is that there is a vacuum in the land today. There is a vacuum of a credible voice and figure. A vacuum of leadership. Indeed, a vacuum of a credible voice of leadership of hope for the people. It is a vacuum of ‘the power of words’, authentic voice of true and genuine prophets in nation-building.

Nowadays, people constantly turn to God, in prayers and lamentations, hoping that one day, such leadership of credible voice will arise. Will this hope of the people be in vain? I don’t think so! Because, even when it appears that the people have lost every hope in the system, the existing social order and failed leadership, one thing is obvious: They would always hope in God, what he could do to save them and reestablish a new society founded on freedom, truth, justice, honesty and respect for human dignity. God will send true prophets and genuine leaders to his people.

The Meaning of Prophet in the Bible

*The New Jerusalem Bible* defines a prophet as: “One who has an immediate experience of God; to whom the holiness and will of God have been revealed; contemplates present and future through the eyes of God; is sent to remind men and women of their duty to God and to bring them back to obedience and love.”

Prophecy thus understood, and despite the similarities which may be traced with phenomena characteristic of other religions and among neighboring peoples, is a thing peculiar to Israel, a providential instrument of God for the guidance of his chosen people. Thus, the prophets played an important role in the religious development of Israel. They strove to keep the nation faithful to the true religion of Yahweh but, additionally, were the instruments especially chosen by God to further divine revelation.

In this multiple activity, each prophet made his own characteristic contribution to the doctrinal structure as well as the right ordering of society. These contributions were complementary, continuing to assert the three dominant features of Old Testament theology: monotheism, morality and future salvation.
With regard to monotheism, the true prophets’ denunciation begins when the people or their rulers manifest any sign or acts of deviation from the worship of the One-True God who had entered into an everlasting Covenant with their Patriarchs. For the prophets, in all circumstances and times, Israel must acknowledge only Yahweh, who is the most powerful of all gods and who demands exclusive honors, fidelity and obedience on the part of the people.

It is when this worship of the One-True God (Yahweh) is threatened, that the voice of the prophet must be heard. The prophet is always there to remind people of their fidelity to the Covenant and worship of Yahweh, the God revealed to the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob).

With regard to morality, the true prophets must remind the people that God is pure holiness; human beings are unclean (Isaiah 6:5). This conviction gives the prophets a sharp appreciation of sin. This moral outlook is implicit in the Covenant and the Law of Moses (the Ten Commandments). It lies behind Nathan’s rebuke of David (2Samuel 12), and Elijah’s rebuke of Ahab (1King 21). For the true prophets, sin is what divides humanity from God (Isaiah 59:2). This is so since sin is an offence against the God of saving justice (Amos), the God of love (Hosea), the God of holiness (Isaiah). Sin infects the entire nation, corrupting it, as it seems, beyond hope (Jeremiah 13:23). Anyone who is to escape punishment for sins must ‘seek God’ (Jeremiah 50:4; Amos 5:4; Zephaniah 2:3).

With regard to future salvation, for the true prophets, punishment is not, however, God’s last word. God does not want his people to perish utterly; they may repeatedly betray him – he still does not forsake his promise. A ‘remnant’ will be allowed to survive (Isaiah 4:3; Hosea 5:15). There is in the prophetic mind no perspective to distinguish God’s imminent punitive intervention from his remote and final judgment. Hence, the ‘remnant’ is at one, and the same time, those who survive the immediate peril and those who are to win final salvation.

In this future age, there will be such happiness, as the chosen people have never known. Those of Israel and Judah who have been scattered among the nations will return to a land of Promise (Isaiah 11:12-13; Jeremiah 30-31), astonishingly fertile (Isaiah 30:23-26; 32:15-17).

Between True Prophets, Social Activists, and False Prophets

Almost all Biblical scholars agreed that real prophetic movement in Israel began with Elijah. The prophetic mission of Elijah came at the time Israel was infected with countless number of false prophets, each claiming to be “inspired” speakers, who make their pronouncements in the name of God. These were spurious prophets, who claimed that they speak in God’s name.

Such spurious prophets, as the Bible shows, may be sincere but deluded, or they may be deliberate frauds; they are not often distinguished from the true prophets by their behavior. In fact, more often than not, their hearers are confused, unable to distinguish true prophets from false ones: thus Prophet Micaiah denounces the prophets of Ahab (1King 22:8ff); Jeremiah attacks Hanania (Jeremiah 28), and all spurious prophets in general (Jeremiah 23); Ezekiel condemns prophets and prophetesses in Israel (Ezekiel 13).
Again, it is in the context of this scenario of denunciation of false prophets by true prophets – (e.g. Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the tradition of Elijah), that we ought to situate the content and purpose of prophecy in Israel. In form and content, true prophecy in Israel is about preservation of the Holy Name of One-True God, already revealed to the Patriarchs. It is about fidelity to the Covenant, and fruits of future salvation. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy.

All this shows that true prophets are not social activists or reformers. Neither are social activists prophets in the real sense of the word. Prophecy or rather God’s intervention in human history through his prophets, occurs when the Holy Name of God is dishonored; when God wants to reveal his purpose to his people; and when God’s people are subjected to draconian regime and persecution by tyrant dictators. God intervenes through the voice of his chosen prophets when there is a deviation from the moral order. The prophetic voice arises to denounce the moral decadence in the society that has beclouded the people from honoring the Holy Name of God and living in love of one another as willed by God himself.

It is in this last instance, moral order, that the social dimension of prophetic mission of true prophets looms large. This is where one can attempt to establish a meeting-point between the social role of true prophets and that of genuine social activists or critics. Although, not exactly, since the two are different both in contents and forms. For while social activism draws its inspiration from existing social order and human ideologies, true prophecy is about preserving the Holy Name of God revealed to the Patriarchs of Israel, the Covenant, and future salvation. In this context also, it is obvious that true prophecy is not located within the ambient of the activities of false prophets, charlatan pastors that dominate our society nowadays.

True prophecy entails taking risks, vulnerability, not comfort and power, or association with the rich and the powerful in the society. It is about the prophet siding with God and the downtrodden, at all times, in good and bad seasons. The forgotten and marginalized of the society, are the people that God loves in a very special way. When the Holy Name of God that resides among these poor people, is dishonored, the rights and dignity of the people trampled upon by wicked leaders, a prophetic voice must arise to denounce it and remind the wicked rulers about the wrath of God, justice and mercy as well.

Upholding the Holy Name of God, taking the risk to face a tyrant or dictator in the name of God and his people, is the most onerous task of a true prophet. This entails tenacity to life of denial, prayer, fasting, enduring persecutions, misunderstanding, for the sake of God and his people. These are the distinguishing marks of a true prophet.

With tenacity, a true prophet relies absolutely on God – holds unto objective reality, long term-project, in view of God’s intervention at the appropriate time, in history, to save his people. The social activist, on the other hand, may put all his trust and hope on human power, political establishment, institution that is transitory. He relies more on narrow, short-term project, selfish interest that may not survive the test of times.
True prophets do not take their bearing from social order. Neither, is their mission or prophecy about social reform, though this is good. Social reform belongs to the domain of social activists and critics, since its reference-point remains the existing social order, which is transitory. True prophecy, on the other hand, is about a ‘new order’, a new way of being, of relating with one another, as willed by God, in his original plan of salvation for his people. This why in the New Testament, Jesus Christ said to the political and religious leaders of the existing, corrupt social-order: “Tear down these walls and in three days, I will rebuild them.”

True prophecy points to a ‘new society’, ‘a total overhauling’ of the existing corrupt social order, in view of bringing about the fulfilment of God’s original plan for his people, the recreation of the world through the mystery of the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ. It is about bringing into existence in human society, the gospel values of the Kingdom of God, inaugurated in Jesus Christ. It is the transformation of the society inside-out through the gospel values.

The ‘old order’ has to give way to the ‘new order.’ This is what all the true prophets recorded in the Bible witnessed to, and Christ epitomized through his incarnation, passion, crucifixion, death and resurrection. The created world, wounded by sin, is recreated, transformed anew through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Again, the facts above, distinguish true prophets, not only from social activists, but also from false ones. A false prophet lives and relies on existing social dispensation and structures. He promotes it, allies himself with the powerful – promotors of the draconian social order or tyrannical regime. A false prophet assumes the role of spokesperson and defender of a tyrant ruler and his spinoffs. By so doing, he enjoys his protection, wealth and praise.

Tyrants or dictators, use false prophets in waging a psychological war against their own people. These are false prophet-apologists and propagandists of the status quo. They are allies of those in power and the wealthy. False prophets are very wealthy also. They are always comfortable in the company of the powerful and the wealthy of the society. They measure their importance or achievements by material acquisitions: how many cars and houses they own, the size of their bank accounts. They measure their influence and importance by the strength of their financial pocket, association with the government in power, and the stupendous wealthy members of the society.

Again, false prophets pretend to be philanthropists but this is often a camouflage of their dubious associations and nocturnal activities. Often they pretend to be “miracle-workers”, but that is only a way of seeking influence, wealth and recognition in the society. They are experts in the abuse of ‘spiritual power’ and essence of religion. Most of them who have succeeded in this plot are today timbers and calibers of the society. Even Presidents, governors, ministers and parliamentarians, bow before them. In most cases, these classes of ‘prophets’ are the ones that influence some important governmental policies of the country. They have the listening ears of those in corridors of power. They are ‘untouchables’, above the law, have unlimited free access to every governmental machinery and security protection.
This is the case with false prophets. They are ‘prophets’ who have sold their souls to the Devil, for selfish and narrow interests. They hang-around those invested with human power, institutions and establishments of power, because of selfish gains they make from there. By so doing, they may look wealthy and influential in the eyes of the people. However, in real prophetic mission, they are false prophets, serving their stomachs and bank accounts, and certainly, not God and his people.

This, however, is not the case with true prophets. Elijah, for example, lived in the wilderness, chose life of fugitive, instead of surrounding to the biddings of a wicked ruler. His life was under constant threat by Queen Jezebel and her weak husband, Ahab. In the New Testament, John the Baptist, ministered from the wilderness, was the perceived enemy of those in the corridors of power – Herod and Herodias, who sought his life, and finally, got him beheaded.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the fulfilment of all the prophets and law, from onset, did not hide his identification with the poor, life of self-denial and total submission to the will of the Father. Even those who attempted to get hold of him, make him their king, Jesus eluded them. He never sought earthly powers and riches. He lived poverty all through his earthly life; was crucified and killed by the combined conspiracy of the political, judiciary and religious institutions and powers of the day. His prophetic and messianic mission became a threat to these human powers and institutions.

As the Bible shows, no matter what, God comes to the aid of his true prophet and people. This is why true prophets always remain unshakable in their mission. In spite of the roughness of the road, they know that God does not abandon his prophet, but at the same time, he does not transport his prophet across the desert journey on ‘eagles’ wing’. No. A true prophet must walk the extra miles, knowing that God is at the other end of the river, waiting for his arrival. When he is thirsty along the journey, God provides him with water (as he did to Elijah on the way to the Mountain of God, to the people of Israel during the Exodus from Egypt).

In other words, no matter how odious and hard, the long walk and trials may seem, a true prophet is always prepared to undertake them, for the sake of God and his people. A true prophet lives and works on the rhythm of God – the patience of God with his people. As one author puts it: “Ours is the time of salvation. Time of salvation is the time of God’s patience with the world.”

In this time of salvation, of God’s patience with the world, Jesus warns us to “beware of false prophets who come disguised as sheep but underneath are ravenous wolves.” Because on the judgment day, as Jesus tells us:

“Many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in your name, drive out demons in your name, work many miracles in your name?’ Then I shall tell them to their faces: I have never known you; away from me, all evil doers” (Matthew 7: 15, 22-23).
All this implies that social activism, whether in the form of material, economic prosperity, political structure and power, do not however, lie at the heart of prophecy in Judeo-Christian tradition. They are only concomitants of the realization of the kingship of God. For this, the essential hope which the prophet preaches, implies a profoundly spiritual outlook: virtue and holiness (Isaiah 29:19-24), a new mode of life and divine forgiveness (Jeremiah 31:31-34), true knowledge of God (Isaiah 2:3; 11:9; Jeremiah 31:34); peace and joy (Isaiah 2:4; 9:6; 29:19).

Implications for Nigeria

Let us begin by appreciating the social dimensions of prophetic mission – the fatigue of a true prophet of God vis-à-vis that of genuine social critics. In the first place, true prophets are courageous people, those who know sincerely and interiorly within themselves, that they have received their mission and gift from God, for the sake of their people and society. Theirs is a noble task. It is a task or mission, which comes with great price and tribulations for true prophets as well as for real social critics.

True prophets and genuine social critics, often, are isolated and avoided by the very people they have sacrificed their lives for their liberation and restoration of wounded humanity. This occurs from the moment those in power, whose draconian and tyrannical rule are threatened by the preaching of the true prophets or the writings and speeches of social critics, begin to clamp-down on them. The author of the world celebrated book, “The Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, the Brazilian, Paulo Freire, is right on the mark: ‘The education of the oppressed is the most difficult task for authentic true prophets and teachers.”

Tyrannical regimes are on constant harassment of courageous and true prophets as well as genuine social activists and critics. Tyrant leaders often feel threatened and uncomfortable with the awareness created in the society through the preaching of true prophets or writings and speeches of genuine social critics and activists. True prophets and social critics, are often singled out for persecution, torture, false accusations, blackmail, stereotype psychological attacks, etc. Most of the true prophets and engaged social critics, often end up being assassinated, poisoned or left to die slowly in exile or in prisons.

In the Old Testament, Isaiah had forewarned of what would befall Jesus Christ as a Prophet of God: “… this child is truly Emmanuel … God with us. … But at the same time it is true that the ‘rod of his oppressor’ is not yet broken, the boots of warriors continue to tramp and the ‘garment rolled in blood’, still remains” (Isaiah 9:4ff).

Nothing irritates a dictator or tyrant more than speaking the truth to him. Dictators are averse to truth. They hate anybody who tells them the truth. That is why they do everything possible to subdue everybody under their domain. Dictators act like bully. They are insecure individuals, who project their insecurity unto others. They believe and live by bullying their subjects. They create a culture of silence and intimidation.
As insecure person, a dictator tends to suspect everybody, except himself. Even his wife, or closest associate, is perceived as a potential traitor and so are all around him. He does not trust anybody, except himself. That is why dictators are very brutal and have no respect to the rule of law and order. Dictators are often religious bigots and ethnic chauvinists. They rule through lopsided government, empowering only people of their own area, ethnic or religious affiliations. Dictators hate democratic principles and rule. They have no respect for the nation’s constitution.

Again, as insecure individuals, dictators and tyrants surround themselves with “yes members.” These are renegades, inexperienced, semi-illiterate people, who are always at the beck and calls of their dictator-master, to do his biddings of silencing or eliminating his perceived enemies or opponents, who often happen to be the true prophets or genuine social critics of the society. It is from this classes of persons (yes-members and renegades), that a dictator draws members of his “killing squad” – “secret assassins”, those who do the bidding of eliminating secretly, perceived enemies of the dictator.

Sometimes, these renegades are the ones appointed by the dictator to the positions of ministers or heads of government parastatals in some sensitive areas such as justice, finance, security, military, police, customs, immigrations, etc. These are the areas where, they use government machinery as camouflage in going after the opponents and perceived enemies of the draconian government in power.

Dictators or tyrants avoid working with knowledgeable people, experienced individuals. They avoid working with courageous, talented scholars and intellectuals, with independent mind. They clamp down on media houses of journalists of independent mind. They would do everything possible to sideline the real elders of the people, genuine thought leaders, intellectuals, journalists, for fear of being confronted with their wisdom, independent mind and talents. In other words, dictators prefer to work with renegades, those individuals who have sold their souls to the Devil.

Finally, dictators function by divide and rule, setting up individuals or groups against themselves. They are the most corrupt leaders, who live by self-glory, self-congratulations and self-celebrating. They are prisoners of their own world.

Dictators and tyrants do not even know that time and space are already up against them. They are full of themselves, wallowing in fools’ paradise, an archaic utopia. They are ignorant people, who happened to be at the head of government or institution, determining the lives of decent people. This is the tragedy of dictatorial and tyrannical government.

Conclusion

Any society that finds itself under tyrannical and dictatorial situation must pray for a prophetic voice to arise. This is where prophet’s social mission and that of the social critics meet. They both feel the obligation to confront tyrannical rule with the power of words and
determination of the human spirit, dismantle it and set the people of God free. Dictators or tyrants prefer an environment of intimidation and silence, to democratic principles and rule of law. They rule like brutes and are ready to kill at will anybody or group of people that dare question their actions and draconian Machiavellian style of ruling.

However, through the prophet’s courageous mission and social critics’ un-compromising stance, such an inhuman rule is denounced, confronted or rather rejected in the name of God of hope. Through the powerful words of true prophets and genuine social critics, dictators are reminded that human existence cannot be silent in the face of tyranny and dictatorship. True prophets and genuine social critics show us that human existence cannot be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world.

It is in speaking out, in truth and spirit, against tyranny and evils of dictatorship that people, name their world, transform it and achieve their significance as human beings created in dignity, liberty – in short, in the image and likeness of God. Society cannot be transformed or renewed unless the people themselves, through prophetic leadership, un-compromising stance, engage in critical thinking and speaking-out against tyranny and dictatorship of the ‘belly’. This is not just any type of thinking and speaking-out. Rather it is that which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity. That is, that which believes, firmly in the capacity of human spirit to triumph over evil and make concrete the designs of God for the people.

It is in so doing that one begins to separate chaffs from truth, recognize truth itself, and reaffirm the reasons for human existence. As humans, we are created in dignity, freedom and truth – in the image and likeness of God. Nobody, no matter how powerful, has right to trample upon our human dignity and freedom as children of God.

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