

THEOCRATIC BACKDROP OF POLITICAL NEUTRALITY: A BIBLICAL INQUIRY

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Abstract

This paper presupposes two things: (1) God's plans and purposes for His church and creation is the same yesterday, today, and even tomorrow (Heb 13:8); (2) God's claim of *pantocracy* (overall authority/almighty) has not changed since creation and will never change (Rev 1:8). In the light of this understanding, the church has no mandate whatsoever to help God in running the affairs of His creation. Therefore, its attitude towards politics should be informed on its understanding of God's position regarding world affairs. If the church believes that God is still in control of His creation, there is no need for it to indulge in politics. This supposition implies that political activism is not only a betrayal of faith in God but also a challenge against His *pantocratic* sovereignty. Lessons drawn from biblical history shows that such betrayal is caused by loss of trust in Him. It usually results in anger against God, hatred against humanity, loss of religious identity, and frustration and loss of the sense of mission. Apolitical attitude fosters unity, safety, peace, and mission fulfilment. It is futile for the church to indulge in politics of all forms because God is still in total control of world affairs until the end as predicted in much of the biblical apocalypse (Daniel and Revelation).

Keywords: Theocracy, *Pantokrator*, political Neutrality/apolitical, political activism

1. Introduction

The question of whether the church should be politically active or not is not new. For ages, this is one of the issues that has fascinated historians, sociologists, and political scientists.¹ In Africa, it appears that this concern is more pronounced due to several factors that influence Christian

¹Eric L. McDaniel, *Politics in the Pews: The Political Mobilization of Black Churches* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 3, within political science, scholars identify a special class of churches known as political churches. Political churches actively engage their members in the political processes by mobilizing them for political action and providing information about issues and candidates.

practices on the continent. Such factors range from cultural orientation to theological presuppositions and from political climate to economic trends on the continent. All these factors and others determine the church's success or failure in political activism. While some of these factors may be intrinsically motivated (influence from within African context), some factors are extrinsically perpetrated (foreign influence from outside of Africa). This paper presents a brief analysis of these factors in view of the church's mission and then establishes some biblical bases for maintaining political neutrality. Some biblical examples will be drawn to emphasize the church's need to anchor its practice on biblical theology which views God as the "All-powerful One" (the *Pantokrator*,)² who can effectively address the political challenges in Africa.

2. Cultural Orientation and Politics in Africa

In general, culture plays a key role in most aspects of family and communal development.³ In most African settings, power dynamics and social governance are hierarchically structured around households, community leaders known as chiefs, district leaders, and provincial governors. All these have a voice of great influence in matters of political governance in their country. From early childhood until late adulthood, Africans are socialized to respect hierarchies of power and not to challenge them. For that reason, authorities or chiefs normally leave their thrones upon death and not through communal noise from jealous aspirants. Groups of such communal structures constitute political constituencies that eventually form other higher levels of political governance. Politicians in Africa do their best to maintain these structures for their advantage. In such socio-cultural context of power hierarchies, the church and its mission are better sustained by maintaining political neutrality than activism.

In addition, "Africans are notoriously religious" as Mbiti asserted.⁴ Culturally, this assumption implies that Africans strongly believe in

²The name *Pantokrator* is one of God's titles that portrays His overall sovereignty. It means "The Almighty" or "The All-Powerful One." The word is derived from two Greek words *panta* "all, every, all things" and *krator* "mighty, powerful, dominion." In Revelation, this title is repeatedly used to emphasize God's sovereignty over His creation: Rev 1:8; 4:8; 9:6; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 16:14; 19:15; and 21:22. This title signifies divine authority that supersedes Democracy "people power"

³John W. Santrock, *Life-Span Development*, 11th ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 11. Culture encompasses behavior patterns, beliefs, and all other products of a group that are passed on from generation to generation.

⁴John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London, UK: Heinemann, 1969), 1.

divine intervention against evil forces that threaten their well-being. In times of crisis, the gods are consulted. Equally, that is the faith of the church in Africa. They believe in God's ability to redeem them from crisis and even protect them. Politicians know this religious assumption, and they always consider it as a weakness to take advantage of. Through the same awareness, imperialists colonized Africa.

Other cultural factors include tendencies of dividedness among Africans through tribal, language, social status, and even political affiliations. Such diversity makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the church in Africa to speak with one voice in political matters. On the other hand, there is a strong temptation to individualism⁵ as manifested through greed for power, escalating levels of corruption and deception, brutality against real and alleged opponents, treacherous behaviours among politicians, and unbelief among the educated elite. This implies that the more people advance in education, the less trusting to God they become. With these factors in mind, can the church make any difference by way of political activism? No. To do so is detrimental to the very fabric of the Church's identity and mission.

3. Church Identity and Governance

The Seventh-day Adventist church is identified with the United States of America by virtue of its head office there. That identity has negative implications especially when the church attempts to meddle with issues of politics. This means, whatever the church may do in the name of politics, it will be closely associated with American influence. Such labelling would betray the church's reason for existence—mission. More so, the church's governing policies and constitution affirm apolitical stance. In view of all these factors, the church cannot aspire to change the political landscape of Africa through political activism. Such practice militates against its mission mandate. In addition, the games of politics in Africa are too rough for church organizations like the Seventh-day Adventist. For that reason, I present the notion that only God is capable of dealing with African politics and governance issues. Therefore, political neutrality is more ideal for the church in Africa. This does not imply that the church should not assist victims of war.

It is futile for the church in Africa to be enmeshed in political activism. In most cases where the church has interfered with politics, it lost its identity and mission. This was the case of our the Church during Apartheid in South Africa. This aspect is more sensitive on the continent

⁵Africans are generally community conscious as portrayed in their "Ubuntu" philosophy- "I am because we are." Individualism is an alien that is dividing.

of Africa because the vessel that brought missionaries is the same vessel that also brought mercenaries. Due to such vague impression, most Africans rejected Christianity⁶ and maintained their ancestral traditions or settled for African-initiated churches (AICs).

4. Misconceptions About Political Neutrality

While in some cases, political activism contributed to the outcome of political games, it appears that the motivation for doing so is not biblical. This does not suggest that the Bible blinds people until they are insensitive to political issues. In North America, McDaniel notes that "Christianity was first introduced to slaves as a means to keep them docile and disinterested in disturbing the status quo."⁷ Similarly, it is assumed that the same strategy was also employed in Africa in order to colonize them. Imperialists considered it easier and less expensive to conquer Africans by using missionaries than using force. Such was the case of Cecil John Rhodes who parcelled out the land in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) to missionaries for political reasons.⁸ He succeeded overwhelmingly, and the local people groups lost not only their lands but also their unity and royal identities. The reason of evangelizing was wrong. To this day, some people are still bitter about it such that they are even sceptical about missionary church institutions. Imagine what will happen if the same church institutions become politically active. The action will be considered treasonous. This paper does not subscribe to such ideology of cruelty.

In view of all these considerations, political neutrality remains the most ideal response to African politics. With political neutrality, the church invests its time and trust in God and service to humanity. By doing so, the church retains its identity and unity and remains focused on its mission. The church saves itself from untold frustration, irreparable divisions, and apostasy if it stays away from political activism.

⁶The case of Christianity in Zimbabwe. The Seventh-day Adventism church is unpopular in South Africa today due to its historical participation in favor of Apartheid.

⁷McDaniel, *Politics in the Pews*, 4.

⁸Solusi land was granted under such scheme.

5. Theological Presuppositions and Politics in Africa

People's perception about God and how He interacts with the environment determines their attitude even in political activities. For that reason, Mbiti's assertion about Africans' religiosity has deeper implications on political trends in Africa. Whether in regard to African Traditional Religion (ATR) or Christianity, the effect is the same. Christianity encompasses numerous churches that share diverse contemporary beliefs. Some Christian churches are easily influenced by recent movements like liberation, feminism, and black theologies. According to Osborne, such movements "seek to recreate biblical theology in light of the needs of the present community."⁹ For liberation and black theology, he further claims, "salvation means freedom from economic and racial oppression. Hence, their primary need today is not spiritual but economic liberation. Likewise, Feminist seeks to liberate women from patriarchal domination and exploitation."¹⁰ Based on their theology, such church groups, even if they indulge in political activism, are justified.

On the contrary, Seventh-day Adventists claim to subscribe to the biblical concept of God. That conception views God as the only One in control of world affairs and all political dynamics. In the light of this assumption, following are several biblical factors that define God's relationship with this world: creatorship, sovereignty, omniscience, and salvation. Each of these four factors provides a foundational base upon which theocratic principles of the church's approach to politics and governance may be established.

6. Biblical Bases for Political Neutrality

Who God is to all humanity (believers and non-believers), and how He relates with them, is crucial towards a person's attitude to politics and governance issues. The term "theocracy" is derived from two Greek words **θεός** (*theos*) "god", and **κρατέω** (*krateo*) "to rule." Thus, the word **θεοκρατία** refers to "the rule of God." This implies a form of governance in which God exercises all authority in designating who does what in His kingdom. The concept of "theocracy" is anchored on God's essence as the only One **παντοκράτωρ** (*Pantokrator*) "the Almighty," a title that He

⁹Grand R. Osborne, "Hermeneutics" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & its Development*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1997), 471-484.

¹⁰Ibid., 473.

frequently claims in Revelation¹¹ to emphasize His overall sovereignty above all creation or creatures. This system of governance is different from Democratic governance. According to Abraham Lincoln, democracy refers to “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”¹² This study presupposes that unless God permits, humanity cannot do anything of itself, by itself, and for itself.

With this understanding in mind, the following subsections amplify some biblical bases in favour of theocracy as a foundational reason for practicing political neutrality among Christian believers. Key bases include God’s creatorship, God’s Sovereignty, God’s omniscience, God’s salvific role, and God’s role in eschatology. Each of these factors clearly distinguish God’s supreme authority over this world in comparison to human limited understanding of people and circumstances.

6.1. God’s Creatorship

To some extent, human perception regarding the questions of origin, determines a person’s attitude regarding political governance of this world.¹³ The two cannot be easily separated. The world was created by God, through Him, and for Him (Gen 1:1; Col 1:16-17). Each weekly cycle reminds us that God created His world and inhabitants (Gen 2:1-3; Ex 20:8-11). Because God created this world in its fullness, He has full prerogative to govern it. Whether *He does that governance directly appoints whoever* He desires to do so on His behalf [Adam, Noah, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Daniel, etc.] and *for whatever reason* [Isa 45:1-13], it is *His privilege*. Our duty as a church is to trust that He can accomplish all without our aid. Doubt on God’s creatorship role or confusion in this regard not only weaken one’s trust on His Sovereignty but also triggers a militant interest towards involvement in governing God’s creation.

Lucifer’s example serves as a good reference for this assumption (Isa 14:12-15; Ezek 28:12-19; Rev 12:7-17). Lucifer was the first creature to be

¹¹Revelation 1:8; 4:8; 9:6; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 16:14; 19:15; and 21:22.

¹²For more information on democratic governance and other forms of political governance, See <http://www.democracy-building.info/definition-democracy.html>. Democracy is by far the most challenging form of government - both for politicians and for the people. The term democracy comes from the Greek language and means “rule by the (simple) people”. The so-called “democracies” in classical antiquity (Athens and Rome) represent precursors of modern democracies. Like modern democracy, they were created as a reaction to a concentration and abuse of power by the rulers. Yet the theory of modern democracy was not formulated until the Age of Enlightenment (17th/18th centuries), when philosophers defined the essential elements of democracy: separation of powers, basic civil rights / human rights, religious liberty and separation of church and state.

¹³“Where did we come from?” Our answers to this question determines our attitude towards questions of existence (why are we alive and how we should treat each other), and questions of destiny (where are we going and what will happen at the end of this world’s history).

politically active against the ruling government of his time, and the great controversy commenced. He mobilized supporters and found them. Together, they fought against their *perceived* evil system of governance. They lost the fight and were cast out of heaven and its privileges (Luke 10:18; Rev 12:7-12). Adam and Eve bought the same ideology against their Creator and lost their relationship with Him, with one another, and with the whole creation.

6.2. God's Sovereignty

While all politicians need power by appointment from majority votes and only reign for a limited time, God possesses ultimate power within Himself to reign for eternity. That means, He is the only One who can effectively participate in the politics and governance of this world without seeking majority votes by way of campaigning. As echoed earlier on, God is the only *Pantokrator*, "the Almighty" (Rev 1:8; 4:8; 9:6; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 16:14; 19:15; and 21:22). Whereas most politicians seek political positions for the sake of acquiring material wealth, God is self-existent. He does not play politics to enrich Himself. He does not need any support from anyone in order for Him to survive. His sovereignty is not by way of campaigning but is naturally part of Him.

One of the major reasons why most politicians are brutal is selfishness with regard to acquisition of material or financial resources for survival. With such ambition, even human lives can be sacrificed in the spirit of survival of the fittest. Unlike such egoistic tendencies, God's sovereignty is unselfish and non-militant for material or financial advantages. God is self-existent and doesn't need anything to enable Him survival as expressed in Acts 17:24-29. For that reason, He alone must be trusted to deliberate on who should participate in any capacity and at whatever time.

6.3. God's Omniscience

God is not limited as we are in terms of knowing people and understanding their best needs at any given time. Jeremiah declares, "The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9 KJV). This claim affirms our limitedness in knowing people and their political ambitions. People generally determine their preferences of political candidates based on historical facts behind a candidate, financial status, and promises during campaigns. They do this instead of consulting God who is able to declare the end from the beginning (Isa 46:10) and "Who establishes kings thrones on kingdoms" (2 Chr 7:13-18); ". . . Who changes times and seasons, removes kings and raises up kings. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have

understanding. He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in darkness, and light dwells in with Him" (Dan 2:21-22).

Based on His foreknowledge, God is able to draw a complete historical timeline from the beginning of time till the end of the age (Dan 2: 7, 8, 11 & 12; Rev 1-22). In that historical timeline, He punctuates details of time, names, events, places, and persecutions of His people and even their defeat to the enemy. He also identifies with heathen super powers such as Cyrus (Isa 45:1, 7) and the papacy and its destructive activities. Such details indicate that God is historically involved in the events and process of time in this world. For that reason, our political activism does not change God's history of this world. The only thing that moves God to change His heart or intentions is humility on our part, repentance from our wicked ways, our search for Him with all our hearts, and our obedience to His commandments as He recommended to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:13-14. All these recommendations suggest a passive attitude towards worldly politics.

6.4. God is The Only True Saviour

One of the major setbacks of politics in Africa is the claim by most politicians of the role they played in emancipating their subjects from the iron jaws of imperialists. Such claims are usually made to be more pronounced than the supreme role that God played in liberating Africans from White supremacy. While such role of dear brothers and sisters who sacrificed their lives was invaluable, that should not be the reason to suppress and exploit fellow Africans for personal enrichment of a few ruling class. More so, God played a more significant role in liberating Africa from its initial taskmasters. In view of that, political activism implies entrusting faith to a person or political system that one believes will liberate him/her from suffering. The role that God plays is often overlooked.

Contrary to political activism, the Bible clearly indicates that God is the only true liberator who treats His subjects with love and tenderness. After the fall in Eden, it was God, not Adam and Eve, who played an active role in redeeming humanity from Satan (Gen 3:8-10). In Noah's day, the world was filled with corruption and wickedness. It was God, not Noah, who played an active role in redeeming His people (Gen 6:5-8). The same He did for Israelites after their long suffering in Egyptian bondage. Christ's death on the cross was the epitome of our redemption.

Since God is the Saviour of this world (John 3:16), why can't the church trust Him for the governance of this world? If the church believes that God is the Creator of this world and that He is the Saviour of it, it should also trust Him for the governance of this world.

7. Biblical Lessons for Political Neutrality

This section briefly analyses some biblical examples of political activism among God's people and how it impacted their relationship with God, with one another, and with their missionary mandate.

In heaven, Lucifer questioned God's government system and was finally cast out heaven. God associated Lucifer's activism with rebellion. In Egypt, God played a key role in redeeming His people from bondage (Exod 3:6-10). God saw their suffering, heard their cry, knew their sorrows, came down to deliver them out of bondage, and finally brought them up from Egypt to a good land of milk and honey. It was God who elected Moses and commanded him to confront Pharaoh.

Based on that redemption factor, God initiated a perpetual covenant with His people concerning issues of governance and politics. As long as they believed and remained loyal to covenantal faithfulness, God prospered them, protected them, blessed them, and increased them in every aspect of their life. Whenever they violated this covenantal relationship and sought other gods, God even engaged heathens to deal with them and bring them back to the fold. It was not Moses who delivered them but God. At one point, Moses erroneously implied that he was the one who was in control, and God rebuked him (Num 20:10-12).

Rarely, God would appoint leaders (judges, prophets, etc.) for Israel until Israel sought to indulge in active politics like other nations and requested a king for itself (1 Sam 8). God equated that request with rebellion or idolatry (1 Sam 8:7-8). The eventual consequences of that wayward initiative were disastrous. Israel lost her identity, unity, sovereignty, kingdom, mission, and many other gifts. Later on, God gave them to Nebuchadnezzar—the mighty heathen in all the world (2 Chr 36:15-21). While in Babylon, God declared to Nebuchadnezzar through Daniel that He is the only chief architect of politics and world governance until the end of the world (Dan 2, 7, & 8). Since then, God has proven through successive world empires and super powers, as John also testifies in Revelation, by way of historical recapitulation of vision narratives.

According to God's timing, the birth of Christ took place when Roman government was in power (Matt 2; Gal 4:4). For God, *Pax Romana* through Augustus Caesar offered a better political climate for the birth of Jesus Christ than warring the Hasmonean Dynasty and the religious tension

within Jewish sectarianism.¹⁴ Thus, the Jews erroneously thought that Christ's mission involved political activism in order to overthrow the Roman government. In essence, they anticipated Christ to join their political persuasions. Instead, Christ's kingdom offered no room for political activism. Not that political intervention was not necessary, but the approach was quite different from theirs. To them, Christ was too passive to redeem the Jews from their cruel Roman taskmasters. For the reason of passiveness, most Jews not only doubted Jesus' Messiahship, they also rejected Him and even crucified Him. All His disciples, including Stephen, died martyrdom deaths and never retaliated against their evil persecutors.

Throughout His ministry here on earth, Christ never exhibited any gesture of political activism even though He had the capacity to do so. He even submitted to authorities and suffered in their hands until death. That cross experience does not imply that God had lost His sovereignty over world affairs. Rather, it was in line with His agenda. At the same time, this does not justify those who crucified Him. Christ even predicted wars among nations and suffering of innocent ones as signs of His second coming (Matt 24; Mark 13). Paul and other early apostles maintained similar notions of political neutrality even in the face of persecution because God is in control till the end.

8. Ellen G. White Comments

For further enlightenment on this issue, E. G. White echoed some crucial sentiments that are worth considering. On one hand, she expressed some reservations on church participation in politics. She encouraged members to remain silent in matters of politics. On the other hand, she seemed to have encouraged young people to aspire for positions in the government, including those positions that are achieved through political means.

With such mixed feelings, it is essential to consider the context in which each sentiment was echoed in order to understand the wisdom of her counsel and its potential implications. While she spoke within an American context, there were some general principles that have universal application. Such principles include, but are not limited to, the following guidelines that she echoed in favour of political neutrality:

The Lord would have His people bury political questions. On these themes silence is eloquence. Christ calls upon His followers to come into unity on the pure gospel principles which are plainly revealed in the word of God. We cannot with safety vote for political parties; for

¹⁴Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 26-30, 513-536.

we do not know whom we are voting for. We cannot with safety take part in any political schemes. We cannot labor to please men who will use their influence to repress religious liberty, and to set in operation oppressive measures to lead or compel their fellow men to keep Sunday as the Sabbath. The first day of the week is not a day to be revered. It is a spurious Sabbath, and the members of the Lord's family cannot participate with the men who exalt this day, and violate the law of God by trampling upon His Sabbath. The people of God are not to vote to place such men in office; for when they do this, they are partakers with them of the sins which they commit while in office.¹⁵

In these words, it appears that White presents a universal principle that should govern church practice with regard to world politics. The need for wisdom and the Spirit of discernment is called for, if ever one desires to vote for anyone. Considering the general tendency of African politics such as common trends of corruption, heartless brutality against opponents, and other forms of ungodly practices within the domain of African politics, there is eloquence in "silence" or "non-activism" on the part of the church. In African politics, higher are the chances of becoming "partakers with them of the sins committed while in office."¹⁶

The counsel for "silence" or "political neutrality" should never be construed as suggestion for supporting cruel governance such as racial discrimination during E. G. White's context, ethnic genocide of any kind, or political violence in any form. This was not the case in South Africa's Apartheid where the church claimed silence while supporting perpetrators of violence against the black majority. As a result, the church in South Africa not only lost its image and sense of mission but also became divided on racial lines until today. The church retains its image, unity, and fulfils its mission by maintaining non-activism.

From another angle, White acknowledged the possibility of some young people, like Daniel and others, to fulfill God's purposes by assuming influential positions in power structures of ruling governments. She echoes:

God's purpose for the children growing up beside our hearths is wider, deeper, higher, than our restricted vision has comprehended. From the humblest lot those whom He has seen faithful have in time past been called to witness for Him in the world's highest places. And many a lad of today, growing up as did Daniel in his Judean home, studying God's word and His works, and learning the lessons of faithful service, will yet stand in legislative assemblies, in halls of justice, or in royal

¹⁵Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, TN: Southern, 1923), 475.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

courts, as a witness for the King of kings. Multitudes will be called to a wider ministry.¹⁷

While this understanding is true, it should not be considered as an overall guideline to encourage the church towards political activism. Rather, great caution should be exercised in selecting the Daniels of today. Like Daniel of old, we need young men and women of virtue who can stand for their faith without hesitancy.

To use her own words, E. G. White's echoes:

The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men who will not be bought or sold; men who in their inmost souls are true and honest; men who do not fear to call sin by its right name; men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole; men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.¹⁸

In Africa, such a breed described here, is rare. If one of such quality can be found, White seems to suggest an approval to endorse them. In cases of uncertainty with regard to the moral fibre of potential candidates, silence is eloquent. Silence implies non-activism and total dependence upon God through prayer. A closer analysis of both views clearly indicate that E. G. White too was equally concerned about the issue of political activism among Adventist Church members.

9. Conclusion

In view of African context regarding cultural orientation to power structures and most prevalent trends in African politics, the only sure hope that is left for Africans is total dependence on God for lasting political solutions. Such dependence is anchored on our belief in God's creatorship of the universe and His sovereignty and omniscience in its governance. With this understanding, the Church should desist political activism. Since creation until eternity to come, God remains in control over heavenly and earthly affairs. It is His prerogative to appoint or dethrone leaders (Dan 2:21-22). For these reasons, there is no need for the church to indulge in politics. This implies that political activism is not only a betrayal of faith in God but also a challenge against His sovereignty as lessons from biblical history pointed out. Political activism usually results in anger against God, hatred against fellow beings, loss of religious identity, and loss of the sense of mission.

The Church should remain apolitical and trust God to determine the movement of political winds. By doing so, it stands a better chance to

¹⁷Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1903), 262.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 57.

keep itself united, focussed on its mission, and even faithful to serve God alone. It is futile for the church today to indulge in politics of all forms, for God remains in total control of world affairs until the end as predicted in biblical apocalypse.