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Is God in Nigeria?¹ Land dislocation and the challenge of confessing Belhar in Nigeria today

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Abstract

Of the view that “in the land full of enmity, God is in a special way the God of the destitute and the wronged”, the essay explores the challenge of confessing the third article in the Confession of Belhar in Nigeria today. Nigeria has recorded a high number of displaced persons in the years between 1982 and 2016, who have been dispossessed of their lands and their hopes for better living standards. This situation has often been caused by the activities of radical religious activists. Also, a number of communal crises among ethnic nationalities especially in some parts of what can be described as northern Nigeria have added to the statistics of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). These destitute, many of whom are Christians, continuously cry out, hoping that God may intervene, and change their situations for the better, but seemingly to no avail. For some of them, it seems like all hope is lost. With such agonising situations among Christians, what sense will it make, “to preach” to them that “God is in a special way” their God? The essay examines this question by juxtaposing the Nigerian situation with South Africa’s past, when the Christians in South Africa confessed that God was still on their side amidst a seemingly hopeless situation. It also explores whether some

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- 1 Albert Nolan, a Roman Catholic Priest, used a similar phrase in the title of his book in 1988 (See Nolan (1988)). Anthony Balcomb then from the University of Natal (now KwaZulu Natal) used the phrase “is God in South Africa –” as part of a title of his article. In that article, Balcomb argues that the future of theology is at stake in South Africa, since theologians are not really speaking or saying anything of substance, but are merely clearing their theological throats. See Balcomb (2001:57–65). It may also interest the reader to refer to a reference to this in footnote 3 of Richardson’s article (2005). The phrase is used here in a different perspective, in the sense that, like South Africans during apartheid era, destitute Nigerians who are faced with the hopelessness that the events in the country have pushed them into, are asking the question: where is God? Yet the third article in the Belhar Confession, it has been argued, is a message of hope, or even a gift from heaven. See for example: Nico Koopman (2002), Piet Naude (2004). Koopman’s argument is that the idea that God is on the side of those on the margins of society is an old reformed conviction, and that it is regrettable that this appears to be neglected in the South African reformed theological circles.

lessons from the South African experience can be of any assistance or relevance to the Christians in Nigeria today.

Key words

Belhar Confession; Nigeria; land; destitution; confession

1. Introduction

And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
 how these things came about. So shall you hear
 of deaths put on by cunning and forces cause
 And, in the upshot, purposes mistook
 Fall's on the inventors head ...

Hamlet (William Shakespeare)

The above words of William Shakespeare given as epigraph above, though meant for a context dated over 400 years ago, are truer of what is being experienced in Nigeria today.² Nigeria is currently in the country's third decade of senseless killings, destruction of properties, especially church buildings, schools, homes and farms. Millions of people are displaced, dislocated or have lost their ancestral place of habitation. From all indications, it appears the end to this can only be more imagined than envisaged. Women are not just widowed, but are dislocated, many are left without any means of livelihood, and have lost any hope of regaining the land they once owned and occupied. For those in situations such as these, life is simply not worth living any longer. Children in internally displaced camps often wake up to discover all of a sudden they are orphans, because all parents had been killed overnight. Many Christians in some part of northern Nigeria today, where religious violence is common, would rather say their "last" prayers before heading to church services on Sundays, as

2 For Ibrahim Umaru, an economist at Nasarawa State University, Keffi-Nigeria, the above words of Shakespeare "should have been reserved for recent events" in Nigeria and other countries with similar situations (See Umaru 2006:1). Umaru is referring to ethnic conflicts in the host State of his University, Nasarawa (in North-central region), where ethnic conflicts has become so pervasive to the extent that virtually every local government of the state has, according to him, an unresolved conflict ranging from scramble for political or traditional power to status in society, and above all, land ownership (See Umaru 2006:1–19).

they are not sure of another opportunity to say them during the service or after. This is because there is suspicion that a suicide bomber might strike during worship service. The Muslims themselves are not left out. A story is told that many (in the affected areas) watch their backs as they bow to say their usual *sallah* prayers³. Millions of Nigerians that once had large farm lands are now living in camps with poor sanitation and under dehumanising conditions. Their daily cry is: where are you God?

Yet, we read Belhar saying, “... in a world full of enmity and hatred, God is in a special way, the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged ...” (See Article 3 of the Confession of Belhar).⁴ Nico Koopman (of Stellenbosch University), argues it “would not be an exaggeration to say that the theme of God’s special identification with suffering people runs like a golden thread through Scripture” (2002:253). What sense do these words make for the majority of the suffering people of Nigeria, who yearn for God’s identification with them by intervening in their challenging and difficult situations?⁵ In other words, what sense would it make, to a person who has lost a spouse and children during a worship service on a Christmas day, when a “gospel” is being preached that God is in a special way on his/her side? How could *Belhar* be confessed in a situation of disinheritance and land dispossession as it is the situation in Nigeria today, given that, land is at the heart of living, belonging, citizenship and basis for indigenisation in the Nigerian context?

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- 3 I had a conversation with a colleague from north-eastern part of the country who admitted fleeing from the area because he could not freely participate in usual Friday prayers (*Juma’at* prayers)
 - 4 For more on the text interpretation and the *Accompanying Letter* of the Confession of Belhar, see Daniel Cloete and Dirk J Smit, (1984). This volume explains the circumstances, attitudes, purpose and intentions that informed the drafting of the Belhar Confession (1982) and the Confession of Belhar (1986).
 - 5 A story is told within Universal Reformed Christian Church (NKST) circles in Nigeria, that a pastor was almost poisoned by a bereaved member of his congregation because the pastor, during a condolence visit, told her to bear the loss because there is a greater good yet to be revealed to her. Apparently the pastor was applying the “greater good defence” apologetic approach to the problem of evil in the situation of the bereaved member, who did not receive that in good faith. The point here is that while there may be some destitute who, given the mundane Nigerian situation may appear to accept their situation as divine intervention, there are many who, given a very difficult and challenging situation like that of Internally Displaced Persons, question the divine justice and presence.

In what follows, the article explores the challenge of confessing Belhar, especially Article 3, in the Nigerian context of land dislocation and its attendant social and economic hardships. It does this by first outlining some disturbing events that lead to land dislocation in Nigeria. Secondly, it explores whether the confession of Belhar in such a context is meaningful. In the third part, some lessons are drawn from the South African situation that led to Belhar. This is done by juxtaposing the resonances of the South African experiences with what is being experienced in Nigeria today. It is argued that if it was the disturbing situations that led to Belhar in South Africa, it is still relevant to confess Belhar today, in the difficult and challenging context of Nigeria. But first it is important to briefly explain the geographical entity that is called Nigeria today.

2. The country Nigeria

For some who may not be aware of what the geographical and political entity that is called Nigeria consists of, it may worthy to note that Nigeria as a nation cannot be explained in the same terms as Israel, Germany, Greece, China or Korea where there is one language and culture. If Nigeria is viewed from the perspective of these countries, it can best be described as a nation of nationalities. Nigeria has over 252 ethnic nationalities with different cultures and orientations. There are over 472 languages spoken in Nigeria today by a population of over 145 million by 2006 census (see NBS), occupying just a total landscape of a little over 923, 000 square kilometres. The country's inhabitants subscribe variously to three major religions namely, African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam.⁶ Quest for power, land acquisition and access to available resources pitch the various groups against each other, resulting to conflicts that are usually difficult to resolve. Examples of some of these events that challenge the confession of Belhar in Nigeria are discussed in the next section.

6 This is so listed in alphabetical order and not in the order of adherence.

3. Examples of disturbing events that challenges the Confession of Belhar in Nigeria

As far back as 1982, the year when the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church tabled for discussion and subsequently adapted the draft Confession of Belhar, some parts of northern Nigeria was on fire. A deadly Islamic fundamental jihadist group called *Maitatsine* killed no less than 52 persons within 20 minutes of their operation in the early hours of 16th October in Kaduna. This was to continue a few days later on 30th October in the Northern commercial city of Kano, some 200 kilometres from the scene of the 16th October mayhem. This time around, church buildings were targets in Kano and several of them were burnt. About 3000 people, most of whom were Christian traders were displaced, leaving behind their landed properties and businesses, which were confiscated by the perpetrators with the aid of state machineries. As if that was not enough, the northeast state of then Gongola, now Adamawa and Taraba states, was to be the next target for the blood-bath. In 1984, the *Maitatsine* Islamic group attacked and killed 813 Christians in a week and displaced 1 000 of the survivors that were forced to leave behind their homes, farms, and houses that they had rented out. Up till today, none of those who were displaced and still alive were able to regain their properties.⁷

The Christians themselves were not left out of series of violence in the Nigerian landscape that displaced and disinherited persons of their ancestral lands. There were series of retaliation by Christians in reaction to the invasion of Islamic jihadists on their lands. The Zongon Kataf riot of 1986–1991, the Jos riots of 1999–2015; the *Kutev* and *Jukun*, the *Tiv* and *Jukun* riots of 1986–2012 all involved destruction of farm lands, churches,⁸ houses, schools, and a substantial number of people, including women and children, were killed in cold blood⁹.

7 Alanamu & others (2006:612).

8 Name of a large community of non-Muslim groups in southern Kaduna in present day north-west zone of Nigeria.

9 The churches involved here are of Universal Reformed Christian Church (NKST) planted by DRC of South Africa (among Tiv), Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria planted by North American CRC (among Jukun); Reformed Church of Christ in Central Nigeria (RCCCN among Kutev). Kutev, Jukun and Tiv are ethnic groups in Central Nigeria. By history, all the three churches mentioned here are planted separately among these ethnic groups. Hence, each of the churches identified with one of the

Speaking prophetically, one could argue that the Nigerian situation calls into question, the public role of the church in addressing real challenges that destitute (some of whom are Christians) face in times of dislocation and alienation in their own land. Where is the church standing: on the side of the destitute or where? Is the church acting like it should in such circumstances or is it quiet in its place of comfort in the presence of discomfort on the part of displaced members of society in Nigeria? On the South African theological landscape, Allen Boesak (2014), argues that the struggle for “integrity” on the part of the church’s “prophetic witness” is ongoing, the world over (2014:1056). He says further that whether or not a church’s prophetic witness is of any integrity depends on where it is standing. For his church, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, Boesak asked whether the church’s words in the Belhar Confession find true expression in the life of the church today; whether like God, the church is standing where God is standing: “namely with the wronged and destitute” (2014:1056). Where the church is standing, not in times of comfort, but in difficult and challenging times (Smit 2009:372), circumstances like of land dislocation, displacement and alienation and destitution, speak volumes about its integrity. The cry “Where is God?” is a prophetic cry of the oppressed, seeking “help” for those on whose side God stands. The seeming absence of the church in such times is what calls for theodicy,¹⁰ the justification of God in times of human suffering. Again it is worthy to note the recurrent question, what is the Nigerian situation today, and where is the church standing? The answer to these questions

ethnic groups though a few members may come from other ethnic groups. Elsewhere, is a discussion on how ethnic politics among the ethnic groups affects directly these reformed churches (See Akper 2009).

- 10 For Boesak it is not just about a church saying something concerning the situation of the destitute. But very importantly also for the Nigerian situation, it is “about the prophetic *participation* of the church in the resistance of evil” (2014:1064). When the church speaks and acts to change the situation of those on the margins of the society, those in pains; those that are wronged, the church is understood to be speaking and/or acting prophetically. This is the intention of the Church that first confessed Belhar, that the Church in a situation of injustice and of evil doing, is on the side of the “wronged and the oppressed”. Where wrong acts persist, leading to displacements alienation of families from their lands and worship centres, it becomes a challenging to say prophetically that God is in a special way on the side of the oppressed, especially when the active voice of the church is not being heard.

would give some more insights into the challenge of confessing Belhar in Nigeria today.

Land dislocation has become a recurrent event in Nigeria.¹¹ Violence and conflicts have taken several dimensions ranging from ethno-religious *cum* politically motivated conflicts to flood disasters, and communal crises between nomadic and agrarian farmers. The climax of it all is the emergence of terrorists' activities in the country. In 2012, scores of Christians were killed in a church building in a satellite town of Suleja near Abuja, Nigeria's political Capital City. Before this event, the government reported that 25 million Nigerians were displaced by flood arising from the overflow of the twin Nigerian rivers of Benue and Niger. A number of the survivals of the flood ended up in camps that were either not properly raised or in the open fields and primary school compounds with no sanitary facilities. Young women were raped; others delivered their babies on leaves of trees without any medical personal attending to them. To many who have experienced some of the aforementioned disasters, life is not worth living any longer. Their daily cry is: where are you God? Where is the God of love and justice who intervenes to save his destitute people?¹² Yet, one is told that in situations such as these, "God is in a special way, the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged..."¹³ The challenge is: How can the agonising people of Nigeria confess that "God is in a special way..." their God? The next section explores this perplexing question further.

11 A Nigerian daily newspaper, *The Guardian* of 21st November, 2016 reports United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Nigeria and West Africa, Angele Dikongue-Atangana, as saying that there are at present 2.09 Million internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Nigeria, due to the insurgency (see. *Guardian* 21st November, 2016, page 9).

12 One may ask if the victims of the numerous violence and conflicts as well as natural disasters in Nigeria today actually fall within the category of persons described as poor, and destitute. Drawing on the South African Missiologist, Bosch (1991) and the Latin American Liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez (1974), Koopman describes the poor and the destitute as an "all-embracing category for those who are in various ways the victims of society, for those who lack every active or even passive participation in society". This marginality says Koopman, "comprises all spheres of life and it makes people feel helpless" (2002:255). The victims of land dislocation as a result of violence or natural disasters are helpless and question the existence of a God of love and justice. They are the poor, the destitute who have greatly been wronged.

13 Nico N Koopman, (2002). Cf. DJ Smit (1988).

4. The Confession of Belhar in Nigeria today?

At the end of a section of an incisive article on the formulation in Article 3 of Belhar, Koopman argues that “the formulation that God is in ‘a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged...’, is indeed a basic Christian and Reformed conviction which forms part of the heart of the Christian message” (2002:256). Koopman’s point is that the formulation in Article 3 of Belhar bordering on God’s option for the poor, carries the intention, purpose, attitudes, and the expectations of the 1986 Synod of the former Dutch Reformed Mission Church as expressed in the *Accompanying Letter* to the Confession of Belhar (1986).¹⁴ Also, that this conviction is a reformed one and should apparently not have been neglected in South African reformed circles as not being reformed.¹⁵

In the light of the foregoing, the confession of Article 3 of Belhar is not only imperative for the Reformed church worldwide, but also for the whole of the Christian church. This suggests that the formulation that God opts for the less privileged is “the heart of the gospel” of salvation to the world. The gospel itself is therefore at stake if Article 3 is not confessed by victims of land dislocation and displacement in Nigeria as they are precisely the population the Article intends to “speak” to in their new challenging and difficult circumstances. Belhar itself did not originate out of comfortable circumstances. It originated from an uneasy context of destitution, poverty, injustice, enmity, hatred and hopelessness. Furthermore, Reformed theologians worldwide are convinced that “the world we live in, the society we live in, the political, social and economic realities we live in, are all matters of faith” (Leith 1989 cited in Koopman 2002:255). The socio-economic and political realities in Nigeria today are all matters of faith – the destitute doubt whether they are children of God. This is a matter of

14 South African theologians charged with the responsibility of presenting the draft Confession of Belhar (1982), Daniel Cloete & Dirkie J. Smit explain that it was the intention of the Synod of 1982 that the Confession of Belhar be read together with the *Accompanying Letter* for the *Letter* conveys the motives, attitudes, intentions and purpose of the Confession as they saw it then (see Cloete and Smit 1984:1–4; Smit (2003 footnote 3).

15 Nico Koopman’s colleague at Stellenbosch University has recently undertaken an exploratory study of the history of the Belhar Confession in the Reformed community right from its inception to the present. See Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel (2013). John W. De Gruchy also described the Belhar Confession as being “reformed in character”. See De Gruchy (2013:34).

faith. A poor person who doubts his/her position in God's economy of salvation is nearly at the verge of renouncing his/her faith in the triune God as the One who saves. Yet salvation is of the Lord (Jn 2:9).

There is the need for a realisation of the fact that it was the destitute in the then apartheid South Africa that saw the need to confess their faith anew in God, in times of despair in an unfair society, and such as Nigeria is in now. A seemingly more appropriate word that could comfort the hopeless would be to say that: "salvation is of the Lord" (Jn 2:9);¹⁶ and that in times of despair, the hope that God is in a special way on the side of those the society had failed or abandoned gives hope to the hopeless.

5. Some concluding remarks

As the South African theologian, Piet Naudé argues, "the social, economic and political developments that precede and inform a confession are mostly not neutral, and due to their theological interpretation by the confession are themselves at stake in the act of confession" (2004:204). It is therefore not surprising that the social economic and political developments in Nigeria today challenge the relevancy of the formulation in Article 3 of Belhar. But it is also revealing to note those social economic and political developments in South Africa that preceded the institutionalisation of the Confession of Belhar also challenged its confession, just as those in Nigeria are doing at the moment. However, it is within this socio-economically and politically challenging circumstances that God's saving power normally manifests. The triumph of God's acts of salvation is mostly manifested after the "dark cloud". It was the agonising death of Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary that convicted the guards at his crucifixion site to confess that "truly, this was the Son of God" (Mk 16:39).

Another lesson to consider is the South African experience. Belhar was confessed by those from the margins of the then apartheid South African society. It was within the historically conditioned oppression and destitution

16 Allen Boesak, one of the black liberation theologians and civil rights activists in South Africa, also in various meetings remind Reformed Christians of his experiences in jail in the post-apartheid South Africa, feel with grief that "his own" had abandoned him, took solace in these words, that "Salvation is of the Lord". Indeed, that form of salvation came to his side as he regained freedom.

that the wronged in South Africa confessed Belhar. Four years later, after the Confession of Belhar (1986) formerly became a standard article of faith, liberation came to the destitute in 1990; when the destitute “regained” their land. Drawing from the Christ’s event and the South African past, it is not out of place to conclude that “salvation” is at the door step of destitute Nigerians that can confess and believe “... in a land full of enmity and hatred, God is in a special way, the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged ... Belhar, therefore, speaks to them in their challenging and difficult context of land dispossession and dislocation. Perhaps the church in Nigeria would be kind enough to preach this message to Nigerians.

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