

ISSN 0795 - 2201

ARTS & HUMANITIES QUARTERLY

Volume 5 *October 2010 *Number 4

OPTION FOR LIFE: CHRISTIAN ETHICAL IMPERATIVE FOR HUMANIZATION OF SOCIAL ORDER IN NIGERIA

FIDELIS C. AGHAMELU

Introduction

Many cultures and people of the world profess attitudes of respect for life and dignity of the human person. But critical examinations of the socio-economic, political, cultural and scientific phenomena of the world around us provocatively testify to the glaring lack of commitment to the absolute value of human person and human life. In moments of moral decisions, options are often made at the slightest invitation against life. It has therefore become necessary that man and society be once again alerted to the big moral and religious responsibilities which providence attaches to the value of life which categorically warrants irrevocable option for life. It is, therefore, not sufficient for society to profess an attitude of respect for life but always and in all circumstances to make an option for life. To promote so to say, a culture of respect for life.

This culture is hard to come by in society that is greatly immersed in materialism. The materialistic centered society fails to evolve a universalistic humanistic conscience of openness to the other. A materialistic society is one that does not promote a human relationship of mutual care and concern. It places a relative value on human life and instead elevates matter to the level of the absolute. It is a society that is dominated by corruption and violence.

An authentic metaphysics of respect for life or culture of life has an eschatology. This eschatology becomes the foundation for the cultivation of authentic love for life. Human life achieves its absolute value from this background of love that defines its eschatology and dignity. Love has, therefore, become a parameter for ascertaining the humanity of our world.

RESPECT AND OPTION FOR LIFE IN PERSPECTIVE

The phrase "Respect for life" is often commonly used to designate a high degree of aversion to homicidal acts, such as euthanasia, abortion, etc, but under the present consideration, "*Option for life*" is more preferable as a more effective terminology. This is because it is possible to respect something and not get involved with it. With regard to human life, claims to respect for life could assume an intellectual possibility of awareness of the value of life without the concomitant moral attitude of commitment to life as such.

For example, African culture professes a respect to, and equality of all human life. But the issue of, for instance, the out-caste system presents a contradictory picture of the claim. This is because in actual situation, that respect has no “practical consequences in our day – to – day lifestyle and makes no demands on our time and resources”. Again, the dualism of our present society where abject poverty co-exists with super-affluence also testifies to that same lack of commitment to life and persons.

Likewise, to say we respect life can suggest that we do nothing to destroy or human life, but it may allow us to stand idly by while life is threatened and destroyed by others

The term “Option for life” suggests something more. It envisages a positive decision taken by an individual or group to actively preserve and enhance life, especially those that are most in danger or most miserable, and that option involves a commitment of time, enthusiasm and resources. This self-consuming respect, is the kind that has eluded our present society and which has continued to be part of Christian tradition and challenge.

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN LIFE AS A VALUE

Our concern here shall be to determine the ethical status of human life in the context of the multiplicity to the possibility for search for absolute value in human existence. It is, therefore, beyond the mere biological or psychological, even the material realm that we shall appeal to.

Every consideration of the morality of human life starts with the self-evident assumption that life is a value, not just any value, but the greatest of all values. This assumption is based on the legitimacy of the universal intuition. *The Vatican II document “Gaudium et Spes”* gives details to this universal intuition when it states that,

not only is man tormented by pain and by the undermining deterioration of his body, but even more so by the demand of a perpetual extinction. He never rightly follows the intuition of his heart when he abhors and repudiates the absolute ruin and total disappearance of his own person no 18: 4³.

It is therefore to a universal human intuition that we appeal. This applies chiefly to one’s own life, but once the equality of all others to oneself is recognized, it applies to all others

also. Nobody therefore would dispute the fact that life is a value. However, the issue to be determined remains the ethical valuation of life in conflict with other values in particular social situation. What relative weight is to be assigned to life as a value? Two questions arise as we struggle for meaning in the network of social relations. The first question is the value attached to life in relation to other values. The second is the relative values of different lives in people's relations with other peoples. These two questions are very critical in ascertaining the level of consciousness to the culture of life in today's Nigerian society that presents itself as deeply religious.

However, scholastic philosophers have attempted solutions to the questions via their principle of essentiality "*vivere viventibus est esse*", meaning life is existence itself. Because if you do not have life you do not have anything.

*Metaphysically it is the most fundamental of all possible human values.
It is the chief instance of what is at once real and a value.⁵*

On the strength of this principle, therefore, life is the value most diligently to be pursued. The issue of the preservation of life, therefore, presupposes further ethical problems in society, which may not be totally resolved by the application of the scholastic principle. We cannot, therefore, be quite content with that position. A further investigation of principles is called up. The question can be asked if life is a value because it makes the attainment of other values possible, that is to say that life has a contingent value or instrumental value. If so, life is no longer valuable when the attainment of other values becomes impossible. There is no doubt that this mentality can be promoted by a certain situation of life. For instance, an entirely comatose life can be thought of having no value because it offers no prospects to the person of enjoyment of other values.

However, to hold strictly to this position might tantamount to an underestimation of the force of our principle '*vivere viventibus est esse*' A thing's life is its very existence. If the thing is itself valuable, then its life is necessarily valuable; its value is no longer merely contingent or instrumental. Its value becomes ontological. Can we say that human life is ontologically valuable in this way? To answer this question let us invoke our original intuition, the equality of all human beings, regardless of differences of intelligence, ability, race, age, size"⁶ etc. Then if that intuition is sound, what we say of human beings must apply to whatever is genetically speaking a human being.

Everything that exists is to some extent valuable in itself. So it appears that nothing is to be destroyed except for a proportion-ate good.⁷

But a human being of its nature belongs to the highest category of physical existence. So a human being is absolutely not to be destroyed or treated or despised anyhow except for the very highest good, and that can only mean, for lives of other human beings. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ can positively be placed in this perspective. Hence, human life is a supreme value in itself, whether it is open to other values or not.

The second question treats of how the values of different lives are to be assessed. Social ethics provides us with homicidal principles in this regard—the principle of viability and the principle of homicidal guilt. Human life for experience is not perpetual, but ends up sooner or later in death. A life, for instance, which has through old age or accident or other causes reached its ends need not be preserved at all cost. It will be somewhat of lower value than one which has not thus reached the end of its term.

*If a life is entirely comatose, and there is no prospect whatever of recovery and it can only be continued by extraordinary means, then it is non-viable*⁸

However, such a life can be allowed to terminate itself in a natural way. What constitutes an extraordinary means is of course impossible to determine precisely. What we have stated is just a basis of consideration of the relative values of different lives. A living person is preferable to a dead person. We have no problems upholding this principle in reality in respect of treatment of person.

On the second note, “a life which is guilty is one where there is an element of disvalue”⁹ But since everybody is guilty of something, it does not look like a useful basis for distinguishing between lives. So, guilt might seem hardly a relevant consideration in weighting up lives.

*But there are two sub-classes of guilt or wickedness which do seem relevant to weighting up lives. When the guilt consists in threatening another's life, it seems that the guilty one's life is somehow less valuable than those who he threatens, and when guilt consists in running the lives of others....*¹⁰

Though one may not terminate life, one may make totally bad and unhappy what is naturally meant to be good and happy by creating attitudinal situations of danger for others. The point that is being stressed is that social condition prevalent in society has direct bearing on the people's attitude to persons and life.

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes aptly captures this scenario as exemplified by the European society of the seventeenth century in his theory of state of nature.

*In such condition there is no place for industryand consequently no culture of the earth...no society, and worst of all, continual war, and danger of violent death, and life of man is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short*¹¹

Hobbes did not fail to point out that the social situation that brought about this negative condition of life proceeded from a deeply materialistic and egoistic morality prevalent in the life of people which placed no premium on the sanctity and value of human life.

*Thus, Hobbes maintains that man is naturally an egoist and a hedonist, and that in pursuit of egoistic satisfaction men perpetually and restlessly seek for power... the struggles for power among men generate contention, enmity, violence and war.*¹²

Such could be the level to which life can be undervalued under certain social context. It leads to the impoverishment of the human person and creation of a worldview of impersonal meaninglessness. The situation of life can be said to go contrary to the core Christian charity and attitude of life of the human person whose foundation is love and care. So many things can be said to be wrong with society with particular reference to people's attitude to life and persons in the pursuit of their political, economic and religious ends. This situation when supported by a predominantly materialistic and egoistic morality portends the possibility of low attitude to option for life.

For the Christian, life is an absolute value because it is the beginning of a more profound happiness. Physical life is the "condition sine qua non" for the development of love, but is not absolute good in itself.

*We do not say that God is life, but that God is love. The great evil of killing therefore is that it prevents a life from becoming a loving life or a more loving life.*¹³

This can also be applicable to any other situation or attitude of persons that places any human life in second order value. One is reminded of so many incidences of corruption, violence and sundry of immorality arising from our precarious socio-political and economic situations, which have created a life of suffering and destitution for our people. The high level of unemployment, poor attitude to provision of basis amenities, embezzlement of public funds, all have made life abundantly insecure and meaningless. It

has been observed by scholars, that the condition of abject poverty and underdevelopment in our society point to various acts of human wickedness. The flight of that universal feeling of love from the affairs of Nigerians have made us not realize that every life, no matter the state, has the capacity to love and to be lived.

Unfortunately, in the modern world where love has been identified exclusively with the sexual expression, discussions of this kind are open to misinterpretation, but it is only in an appreciation of the nature of authentic human love that we can solve the many problems of our society. We can see tremendous value of life, even the life of an old incontinent incurably sick and suffering person.

The current attitudes of disvalue of life can be traced to society's emphasis on "productivity", the criterion of usefulness in our materialistic world.

*The productivity in question is the production of goods or services that will improve the physical standard of living of mankind....that is, of material goods and services and we exclude from that exalted, category, on the grounds of non-productivity....the mentally and physically handicapped.*¹⁴

This is an aspect of the impacts of materialists' culture of consumerism which C.B. Okolo had warned against, as antithetical to the promotion of a more positive value of life. This culture according to him crates a worldview of moral disperspectives. But a Christian should have a different value system. He sees that there is more to life than physical wellbeing, and knows that what the world rejects as useless may indeed be economic burdens but may also be magnificent assets because of their ability to evoke and foster selfless love, and thus increase the world's store of the commodity, the true essential commodity that does not pass away. This is what our acceptance of responsibility to life implies.

OPTION FOR LIFE: EXAMPLE OF JESUS CHRIST

The words of Jesus Christ "I came that you might have life and have it to the full", sums up his longing to draw humanity away from its fascination with material things and develop those attributes which are unique to man, the capacity of altruistic love. His teaching and life, and even his death, exemplified the fact that a materially non-productive life can be the most useful life of all.

Christ's option is very clear in his identifying with the rejects of society, the degraded, the despised. He visited them, ate with them, healed and fed them and committed them to the care of his followers in the most intimate, almost nuptial, manner. "Whatever you do to the

least of my brothers, you do to me". By his words and actions, Jesus Christ instituted an authentic existentialist humanism. With the context of this humanism, material things, power, position and influence are to be totally devoted to the service of life and the person.

From certain misconceived religious perspective, we have become used to the idea of Jesus identifying with the poor and the miserable to the extent of missing the revolutionary nature of that attitude in a nation where poverty, sickness and deformity were regarded as punishment from God and thus signs of God's disfavour. This new religious mentality tends to present misfortune as a sign of guilt.

Again, certain religious tendencies of the Muslim anti-Christianity predominant in the Northern parts of Nigeria have over the years and even in recent democratic dispensation, exhibited religious favour of mentality of anti-life. The obvious readiness of the Muslim in Nigeria to resort to massive plunder and destruction of life and property at the least possible opportunity, mostly against the Christians, is a regrettable testimony of a barbaric society without any impulse of respect for life.

The widespread abortion mentality and culture which is fast gaining ground, especially as a normal way of life among Nigerians and hugely promoted by various forms of sophisticated feminist propaganda, may perhaps remain the worst threat to the notion of the Christian idea of an option for life.

LIFE IN THE MODERN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

The magisterium of the Catholic Church with regard to statements in support of life and against destruction of any innocent person are unequivocal, unambiguous and well known. The document of then Vatican II "*Gaudium et Spes*" states that

*Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or willful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person....whatever insults human dignity....all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed.*¹⁵

Such is the high level of respect and regard which form an authentic Christian mentality of life and indeed the very basis of the foundation of a true culture of life and civilization. It should form the moral basis of obligation to life and person and should define the very fundamentals of human charity and love.

But Charles Ryan has observed rightly, that just as "respect" can be a passive thing, it is also that the Church has a doctrinal position or policy which respects life, but does nothing about it. In the day-to-day preoccupations of the church wherever it exists, one looks for a

concern for the poor, the deprived, the endangered, and that is how we still judge how effectively the Church makes Christ present in our day.

Historians stress the tragedies, confrontations and lapses but they hardly notice a strong theme, recurring down through ages, of active concern for the poor, the sick, the insane, the captive and the enslaved. The totality of the Catholic social teaching is a challenge to an enduring apostolate to positive social actions in politics, economics, arts, science and technology all geared towards the one mission of making life worth living for all men and nations. This has been so true that, until recently, the running of hospitals, asylums, schools, orphanages and positive programmes of empowerment for the poor was almost totally in the hands of Catholic religious people.

“It is provocative sometimes at the tendency of the media and pro-abortions to tag anti-abortion-contraception lobby as a Catholic Campaign”¹⁶. Our annoyance springs from the promotion of a false idea that respect for life is a “Catholic teaching” whereas it is, or should be a position that is attained by any person who is capable of assessing the nature of things and the unique dignity of every human life, irrespective of his religious beliefs.

*Nevertheless, we can derive a certain satisfaction from the fact that the Church is actively identified in popular mentalities with a campaigning pro-life stance.*¹⁷

In this case, we must all remain resolute with the Church in achieving the rights of the degraded and the despised everywhere in Nigeria as a basis for achieving a formidable pro-life culture. There is a tendency to think of the Church as a global phenomenon but, in the final analysis, an individual's idea of the Church is what is perceived at the local levels. What is the image of the Church in Nigeria? Some people, a minority of public figures, had the cause sometime in history, to think of Christianity as “a fraud in Africa and the principal enemy of moral progress on the continent”.¹⁸ There are also those who fear, and consequently condemn the Church because of the numerical strength and political influence, but can it sincerely be denied that the Catholic Church in Nigeria has from the beginning been identified with the deprived, the threatened and the outcast of the Nigerian society.?

So the image of the Church as the refuge of the miserable is a demanding one, but a precious one because it is surely this image and reality that validate her claim to being a continuation of Christ's presence in our world. Consequently, any Christian who rejects that image or who by the practical details of his life compromises it is a threat to Christianity and the ability of Jesus Christ to make himself effectively present in Nigerian society of today. Option for life, or option for charity, is a Christian imperative. It is the

very foundation of our humanity. This attitude of charity must be perpetuated in every age and in every community.

OPTION FOR LIFE IN NIGERIAN CONTEXT

Since Nigeria became an independent nation over five decades ago, successive commentators on national issues have unanimously hailed the Nigerian society as one unmitigated theatre of moral, political and economic bewilderment. The situation has been a such that Nigeria portends the picture of society of anti-life. There has been presentation of Nigeria, a picture of a culture opposed to the possibility of an option for life.

Obinna, in a keynote address at a conference on the "Social Responsibility of the Catholic Laity" presents a picture of Nigeria as a society that is typically opposed to life. According to him, this society is heavily built on "violence and corruption". Shading more light on the dynamics of the operative forces and principles of the twin evil of "violence and corruption: in Nigeria which have formed the mental makeup of the average citizen, he observes the reality of

...multiple acts of violations of humans at various levels of life.....And continued violation of codes of right conduct in private and public life. In addition, institutions, structures and entire environments of human habitation have been subjected to relentless destruction, disfigurement and degradation in ways that defy description.¹⁹

In his own assessment of the Nigeria situation, F.U. Ekejindu outlines those urgent areas of serious attention that present the promotion for an option for life as sinequanicomic. According to him,

Human living conditions, development and progress in Nigeria constitute cause for serious concern as poverty, hunger, disease, insecurity of life and property still abound. With thoughts centered upon the prevalent sub-human standard of living.²⁰

According to Ekejindu, proper humanization of the Nigerian society to respond to the spirit and aspirations of the gospel message of option for life becomes the first step in the formation of authentic culture of life. This can be done from the back drop of the immense spiritual treasures already put at our disposal in line with the social teachings of the Church as earlier observed. This is because, to evangelize

*...is to engage in an activity which aims at total and integral development of the human person....body and soul, socially, economically, spiritually and politically.*²¹

According to Ewelu, there is a high incidence of devaluation of human life in Nigeria which should also form the kernel for rethinking an option for life. He observes as instance of this devaluation of life.

*The high level of destruction of human life through extra-judicial killings, ethnic communal clashes, armed robbery, cultism...very many instances of abortion, ritual killings, political assassinations, open air killings.*²²

Perhaps, politics and governance in Nigeria present us with the greatest problem in creating a culture of respect for life. This is because, as the foremost concern for the public good, politics and governance have direct and necessary consequence for the promotion of the core values of life. Politics has direct bearing with the "good life". As mentioned elsewhere, I have argued that politics and governance are primary in every human endeavour. The death of morality in politics and governance in Nigeria as noted by Ejizu can be traced as the very foundation of the failure to foster life by means of public authority.

*This falls within the specific areas of stewardship of resources, the external structuring of power and regulation of social relationships in such a way that individual and communal well being are achieved and maintained.*²³

However, to the contrary, the prevalence of corruption in politics and governance has brought about the abject impoverishment of life in Nigeria. It is our conviction that the disregard of the ethical norms of politics and governance continues to frustrate the possibility of an option for life in Nigeria through public service. Corruption in the public life of Nigeria has many faces, including

*The misuse of economic resources, nepotism, mediocrity, recklessness, indiscipline, dishonesty, extravagance, misuse of political power, denial of human rights, mutual jealousies, thuggery, oppressions, rigging of elections, etc.*²⁴

All these phenomena of corruption engender a moral disperspective and insecurity on life. It is within this context that we are challenged by the Christian vision of life to rethink our different negative approaches to issues of life.

CONCLUSION

The Christian account of creation upholds that man was created in the image and likeness of God who is love. Consequently, this likeness must surely appear in man's ability to reflect and live. It is this ability that gives man his unique dignity. From the moment of conception, no physical deformity, economic or social considerations ought to deprive a person of this dignity. A Christian has a unique commitment to life and fights to uphold and protect it. "Option for Life" or any other form of expression of commitment to life must, therefore, include positive enthusiasm and expenditure of energy and resources to protect and enhance the lives of those who are threatened by a materialistic society.

The anti-materialistic attitude is not unique to Christianity. It is a part of virtually all major religious of the world, but the confrontation between Christianity and institutionalized materialism is most dramatic because Christianity is the one religion that survives the capitalist and the communist world. Christianity is, therefore, uniquely placed to remind society that there is much more to life than just being useful or productive. At any time and in any place, each individual and society must constantly re-assess the tangible form that the option for life must take, that is seeking out the most threatened and degraded life and showing the world the world its true value.

REFERENCES

1. Forristal, D. *The Moral Life*, Dublin. 1973 p.11
2. Forristal, *Op. Cit.*, P. 13
3. Vatican Council II "Guardium et Spes" art 27
4. Vatican Document "Guardium et Spes no. 18
5. Fagothey, *Right and Reaso.* Toronto: Merrill Co. 1985 pp 19-35
6. Ibid
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
9. Ibid

10. Hobbes, Thomas, Leviathan, in Emmanuel Idike *Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy* p. 87
11. Idike, E, *Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy* Nsukka. Good seed Co, 2002, p 78
12. Charles, P. Ryan, "Option for Life, the Christian Vision," A Paper Presented at Ikot-Ekpene in a lecture organized by Bigard Pro-life Association 15 August 1986
13. Umoh, B.E, *Christianity in African Perspective*, Uifo, 1982 P. G.
14. Vatican II, Gaudium et Spes no.8
15. Charles, P. Ryan. Op. Cit P. 7
16. Ibid
17. Ibid
18. Obinna, J.V. "The Social Responsibility of the Catholic Laity" in a Keynote Address at the 2002 Annual Laity Seminar at Okpuno. Dec 10
19. Ibid
20. Ekejindu, F.U. *Lay Associations in the Church*. Laity Press Awka 2006 p. 84
21. Ibid
22. Ewelu, B. "Life Its Value in Nigeria Today" in Achunihe, H.C. (ed). *Evangelization in the Third Millennium: A Contemporary Analysis*. Onitsha: African-EFP, 2002 P. 16
23. Ejizu, C.I. "Ethics of Politics in Nigeria: The Christian Perspective" in *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* Vol 2 No 1 April 1989.
24. Ibid

Mr. Fidelis C. Aghamelu is a senior lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.