

**What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?: Establishing the Church in the  
[African] society  
By Emeka Xris Obiezu**

Emefie Ikenga-Metuh identifies the concept of dichotomy between soul and body as a western construct alien to the African mind. On the same note, the African “Man is a force in the midst and in union with other forces in the universe actively interacting with them.”<sup>1</sup> The Judeo-Christian tradition acknowledges that God created the world and pronounced it good.<sup>2</sup> The gospel went further to claim in John 3:16 that God so loved the world that at the appointed time [in history] he sent His only begotten son to save the world. Continuing in verse 17, the passage affirms “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world...”

Michael Himes upholds that the word translated in these biblical passages as world is the Greek word, *Kosmos*. According to him the word is of varied meanings in the scripture which can mean *everything* as the totality of creation referring to the creation account. It can also mean a “designated theatre in which the drama of salvation is played out;” as we have in Acts 17:24, “the world and everything in it.” Himes maintains that these two nuances have a role in the theology of the New Testament for when they placed emphasis on the divine agape as the ground of creation “World implies that which is called into being by God’s self-gift, as in John 3:16. But when they referred to the eschatological fulfillment of creation by God’s loving act, they seem to refer to the world as a theatre which destiny is to be transformed into something else, the Kingdom of God.”<sup>3</sup> This New Testament theology was taken over by Augustine in which the earthly city and the heavenly city simultaneously exist now until all is made all in all on the last day.

The Christian theology of history has its anchor in thoughts of an illustrious son of Africa, Augustine as expounded in his *City of God*. Augustine’s treatment of this subject is so central to Christian studies of all times because the background of his study was a crisis stricken society in which people sought an interpretation and meaning for the here and now and the future in the event of their time (the sacking of Rome in 41AD by Alaric-led “barbarian” Visigoths), just as people of the America and the world sought in September 11 2001 event and as Africans seek at the turn of each day in their seemed hopeless situation. For Augustine history is one “purposeful *procurus* from beginning to end, without an intermediate millennium. Profane events and transcendent goal are, in this view, separated in principle and yet related through the peregrination or ‘pilgrimage’ in hoc *saeculo* of the faithful towards the ultimate *telos*.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, for Augustine progress only means pilgrimage toward.<sup>5</sup> This is very important for Augustine as it distinguishes hope from optimism. Some medieval scholars thought that the *city of God* refers to the church while the *city of earth* to the state and then believed that the church was high and over the state acting as its supervisor; their theory is referred to as *political Augustinianism*.

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<sup>1</sup> Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions, (Onitsha, Nigeria: Imico Publishers, 1987), 181.

<sup>2</sup> See the creation account in Gen. 1: 1ff.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Himes, “The Church and the World in Conversation: The City of God and ‘Interurban’ Dialogue,” in James A Wallace, C.Ss. R. and Joseph A. Mindling, O.F.M. Cap., eds., New Theology Review Vol. 18, No.1, 2005, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Karol Lowith, “Augustine,” in his Meaning in History.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

Augustine however, judged the happenings of his time with sympathy. The vital points of his treatise which are of great importance to us are, the city of heaven does not mean the church for the church in its finite stage has within it both elements of the kingdom and elements of the earthly city and as well, the state has the elements of both cities. Therefore, it is the idea of Augustine that no city is in itself completely evil or completely good. The meaning of history past and present is the final consummation in future in Christ. Coming from his struggle with the Manicheans Augustine identifies that the human persons have both capabilities of good and evil in them and no one is utterly good or utterly bad. Gregory Baum interpreting Augustine says, "The city of God becomes present wherever people love and serve one another, but it gives way to the city of man the proud city, when people become self-centered, pursue their own advantage, betray their friends and abandon social solidarity."<sup>6</sup> For as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn says, "The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts. This line shifts..." It is the case of the parable of the wheat and weed.

The world for Augustine could be summarized thus, "a current state of creation, which is loved by God or it would not exist at all, redeemed by the sending of the Son, in which the Spirit is at work transforming all things into what they are called to be, and the kingdom (not strictly the church), is creation come to full stature, fully mature in the image of Christ himself."<sup>7</sup> Put in others words by Teilhard de Chardin, "By virtue of the Creation, and still more of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see."<sup>8</sup> For Augustine the Christian responsibility is not to flee from the world but to judge the event of his/her time aware of these two possibilities in life.

Considering the above establishment, the following conclusions can then be drawn:

A faith that is separated from history becomes spiritless and powerless because it remains at the level of immanent progress. Those who attempt to separate secular realities from the sacred dimension simply impoverish humanity and overshadow the role of religion on public life. The connection between secular and sacred dimension affirms the process of incarnation. The link between sacred and secular dimension does not involve any contradiction. The human soul that is truly seeking to save itself is fully social.<sup>9</sup>

Jerusalem does have something do with Athens; human person is one being soul and body; history is one and not two. Therefore, "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gregory Baum, "The Meaning of Hope in the Evil Times," 82.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Himes, 29.

<sup>8</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, Spirituality and Liberation, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 73.

<sup>9</sup> Aquiline Tarimo, "The Relationship Between African Economic Crisis, Cultural Traditions, and Religion," in Victor Zinkuratire, ed., African Christian Studies, Vol. 19, No. 4, (Nairobi: CUEBA Publications, 2003), 67.

<sup>10</sup> Gaudium et Spes, no. 1, in Austin Flannery, O.P. ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents, (New Delhi, India: St. Pauls, 1975) 794.

