

Sunday Agang, PhD

Kagoro, Nigeria



Sunday Agang recently left his position as Academic Dean at *Jos ECWA Theological Seminary* (JETS) to become Provost at *ECWA Theological Seminary Kagoro* (ETSK). Both schools train leaders for the *Evangelical Church of West Africa* (ECWA), one of the largest denominations in Nigeria. Both are in states in central Nigeria which have been focal points for religious violence over the last decade.

In addition to his role in the seminary, Sunday founded *Gawon Ministries*, which provides humanitarian and spiritual care for widows and orphans. Although central Nigeria has been a focal point of religious violence between Christians and Muslims, *Gawon* serves people of all faiths and has thereby opened doors for sharing the Gospel.

Sunday has written numerous articles on issues of ethics, Christian Muslim relations, and leadership. He has two books coming out this year on how Christians respond to religious violence: *The Impact of Ethnic, Political, and Religious Violence on Northern Nigeria*, and *A Theological Reflection on Its Healing and We Have No More Cheeks to Turn*.

SCHOLARLEADERS INTERNATIONAL supported Sunday during his studies at *Fuller Theological Seminary* where he completed his PhD in Ethics in 2007. Sunday was the first Tim Lann Scholar, supported by funds donated in honor of Rev. Tim Lann, Pastor of *Birchwood Presbyterian Church* in Bellingham, Washington. Sunday and his wife, Sarah, have four children.

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DOES CHRISTIANITY HAVE A PUBLIC FACE?

Sunday Agang, PhD

SCHOLARLEADER
INSIGHTS

I grew up in a church that did not teach the public implications of my faith. That is, we did not consider the implications of following Jesus for personal or societal ethics and practice. Instead, our concentration was on the importance of faith for salvation. This is true of most churches in my country of Nigeria.

Injustice, moral decadence and corruption persist in Nigeria, in good part because we Christians tend to treat the sacred and secular as different spheres, then not practice the ethical teachings of our faith in everyday life. This is a costly mistake, opening floodgates for moral decadence in public life.

This situation has historical roots, many shared globally, but persists because church leaders do not consistently and forcefully teach Nigerians about the public practice of faith. The Bible is not silent on these matters and we need to call the church to teach her people that the reign of Christ impacts all of life.

A traditional African worldview is holistic in that gods permeate every facet of life. African Christians, however, inherited the worldview of nineteenth and twentieth century colonialists and missionaries, themselves deeply impacted by the Enlightenment and the doctrine of separation of church and state; i.e., separation of the sacred from the secular. As a result, for many Christians in Nigeria, the public arena where we live day in and out remains separate from the heavenly reign of Christ. We hold a dichotomized view of the world, where reason and practicality rule today and Jesus takes care of eternity.

African Christians accepted the separation of church and state without deep reflection. Consequently, most Nigerian Christians are unable to think critically about how they might become agents of transformation in a broken and corrupt society.

By contrast, Muslims believe religion, politics and ethics are inseparable. Yale Professor Lamin Sanneh, a convert to Christianity from Islam, identifies this difference between the Muslim and Christian worldviews as a key reason for the violent religious crises in Nigeria. Muslims

generally believe that religion without politics is worthless. Unlike their Christian counterparts, African Muslims insist on the political and public relevance of their religion and ethics.

This difference in worldview lies behind the debate over democracy in Nigeria. For Muslims, faith must rule absolutely and democracy is secondary. In contrast, Christians support democracy but have accepted the idea that God has little to do with politics, even that Christian morality is a private matter with no place in the public sphere. This view pushes the church and its teachings to the margins, even discrediting the pastor who calls for public ethics. Again, Professor Sanneh: *“If we concede the absolutist claims of the secular state, then we have challenged the right of religion to make absolute claims for God. It may be put another way: if you absolutize the secular you must necessarily relativize the religious.”*

In Nigeria today almost every street has a church, but the ethical values of love, compassion, justice and peace too often elude us. Centuries ago, the Lord searched in Israel and was *displeased that there was no justice* (Isaiah 59:15). Isaiah, inspired by God, went on to identify the absence of public truth-telling, honesty and integrity as major reasons for the conspicuous absence of justice and peace: *turning our backs on our God, fomenting oppression and revolt, uttering lies our hearts have conceived; so justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance* (59:13-15). **Lack of justice is a theological problem, a symptom of how God’s people have decided to stop listening to him.** Nigerian evangelicals need to reexamine the implications of Jesus’ admonition to be salt and light.

Let me tell you why you are here. You’re to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t

think I’m going to hide you under a bucket do you? I’m putting you on a light stand – shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16, The Message)

The problem will persist until Christian leaders and denominations rise to the task of reorienting their members to the public relevance of their faith and praxis. **We need to teach Christians to end the dichotomy between secular and sacred.** We Africans need to once again see life holistically. As Paul wrote: *Everything comes from God, everything exists by his power and is intended for his glory* (Romans 11:36). The private and public spheres of life both belong to God.

Paul goes on (Romans 13) to demonstrate that public engagement offers Christians the opportunity to love neighbors in practical ways, to help the suffering, to serve the poor. Our salvation has a public face:

- Christians owe everybody in Nigeria love, including Muslims. This will go a long way toward encouraging dialogue amongst the different faith groups in our society.
- Both those who are in the public and private sectors are servants of God. A calling to public life is a worthy calling and the church has a responsibility to train Christian politicians and public workers.
- Christians must engage politics and politicians of all varieties. God uses non-believers for his purposes, just as he did Cyrus (Isaiah 45). *The authorities are God’s servants, sent for your good... they are serving God in what they do* (Romans 13:4, 6).

To remain relevant in a democratic society, the church must teach her members the public implications of their faith!