

African Journal of Contextual Theology
 SIST, Attakwu – Enugu
 P.O. Box 9696, Enugu, Nigeria
ajct@sistenugu.com

Subscriptions

The *African Journal of Contextual Theology – AJCT* – (ISSN 2141-3037) is published annually. The subscription price is the following:

Nigeria: N500 per issue

Foreign: US\$20.00 per issue (including postage)

Payment may be made in cash or by cheque, payable to:

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu
Enugu, Nigeria

The issues are available from Spiritan International School of Theology (cf. address above).

Permissions

For information on how to request permissions to reproduce articles / information from this journal, please visit www.sistenugu.com / SIST Journal.

All editorial correspondence should be sent to:

The editor-in-chief

African Journal of Contextual Theology

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu

P.O. Box 9696 Enugu, Nigeria

e-mail: ikennau@yahoo.com; editorajct@yahoo.com

Advertising

Enquiries about advertising and requests for review of Books should be sent to:

The Editor – Advertising

Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu

P.O. Box 9696 Enugu, Nigeria

e-mail: ajct@sistenugu.com

Journal Logo: the logo of the Journal is the map of Africa and the SIST logo, with the symbolic depiction of the Holy Spirit and the book. The Holy Spirit inspires our studies (the book) and the context (Africa) in which we do theology.

©

All rights reserved; no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means without prior written permission of Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu – Enugu, Nigeria.

Typeset, by SIST Publications.

Printed and bound by

Real Images

6 Bishop Ayogu Street,

Uwani – Enugu

08038814020, 08170874378

Email: realimages_gloria@yahoo.com

THREE

CHRISTIANITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION

Bonaventure Ikenna UGWU, CSSp

Abstract

What is popularly known and esteemed by many nations in the world today as human rights has a long history which cannot be told without the Christian religion. Christianity played very important role from different dimensions towards the development of the concept and practice of these rights which in turn have continued to contribute positively towards the unification and growth of peoples and nations. This study sheds light on how Christianity helped to lay the foundation of human rights through its teachings and practices. Drawing insights from previous studies on this issue, this discussion makes its own propositions, evaluations and conclusions about the implications of Christian contribution to human right on national unity and progress.

Introduction

The Christian understanding of the nature and destiny of the human being or of human existence, which is rooted on the concrete and full revelation of God in Jesus Christ, has contributed significantly towards people's ability to co-exist as nations particularly in the context of pluralistic cultures, religions and ethnicity. This contribution is prominent in the area of the promotion of the fundamental human rights of every living person. Moreover, the growth and harmonious integration of a

nation is essentially connected to the people's appreciation and respect for human rights.

The history of the development of the concept and practice of human right to the extent that it is in most nations of the world today took place by a gradual process through the contribution of many forces, factors and influences particularly Christianity. Following the Second World War and all the horrible atrocities that were associated with it, the United Nations Organization (UNO) in 1945 decided to recognise and establish human rights as an affair protected by international law. On 10th December, 1948, to be precise, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights came into existence. This was done not only a concrete step taken to prevent a repeat of the incidence of the War but also as a measure to bring about lasting peace in the world. In appreciating this universal declaration, many people tend to forget or are not able to put in perspective the fact that a number of factors, agencies and tradition contributed to the formulation of human rights by the UNO. Among other things, the Christian religion was a major influence in the foundation and recognition of human rights at different stages in time. In fact, Christianity would have played a greater and more extensive role in the history of human rights than the UNO. The nature and mission of the Church and its principles of operations logically connects with the philosophy and essence of human rights. This connection needs to be brought to light in order that it be appreciated and reinforced in the present generation. By so doing, the Christian religion in our own day would be encouraged to continue to promote the project it helped to start, namely, human rights.

What is Human Rights?

Generally, human rights have been understood in different ways by various persons which give rise to different definitions or theories of rights. The content of this plurality that characterises the understanding of rights can be summarised under three major categories: human rights as claims, human rights as interests and human rights as trumps.¹ As a claim, right is usually against somebody who is a respondent, as interest it is an entitlement to something which is of benefit to the one who makes the claim and as trump it is used by individuals to frustrate the overreaching collective demands made by large groups in society”.² Iweh refers to human rights as “inalienable rights inhering to the personality of citizens and which could be defended against all comers”.³ These include “inalienable and sacred rights to life, liberty and property”.⁴ For Njoku, human rights could be defined as “the entitlement, expectation and claims which accrue to human beings by the fact of their being persons”.⁵ It is a serious offence on justice to deprive a person of these entitlements. According to McBrien, “A right is a person’s moral claim upon other persons or society in general to the means of reaching an end that is his or hers, and that he or she is responsible for reaching”.⁶ In his explanation, the concept of

¹ Riwa, Richard N. *Ethics of Human Rights: The African Contribution*, Kenya: CUEA Press, 2010. P. 4.

² Riwa, Richard N. *Ethics of Human Rights*, p. 12.

³ Iweh, Nwachukwu S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights: A Study of the History and Interpretation of Human Rights*, New York: Peter Lang, 1986, p. 40.

⁴ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 40.

⁵ Njoku, Uzochukwu J., “Ambivalences of Human Rights Discourses in Africa” in Ugo Ocha, *A Pioneering Voice: A Festschrift for Msgr Theophilus Okere*, Chukwudi Anthony Njoku, ed. Owerri, Totan Publishers, 2012, p. 359.

⁶ McBrien, Richard, *Catholicism, A New edition*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994, p. 944.

right is connected with justice and duties. There are duties associated with every right. For example, "One's duty to respect another's bodily integrity flows from the other's right to life in all its fullness".⁷

There is no general agreement on the grouping of human rights but many scholars keep to five major sub-headings. These are civil rights, political rights, social rights, economic rights and cultural rights.⁸ The concept and reality of human rights is a matter of concern in the areas of philosophy, law, politics and, of course, religion. Each of these areas brings some form of distinctions in the understanding of human rights. In this paper, we intend to focus on religion, Christianity to be precise, in its relationship with human rights.

Human Rights Before Christianity

The history of human rights is much older than Christianity. Its remote foundations can be traced to the Old Testament precepts and the operations of the ancient Greek and Roman societies.

The Old Testament and Human Rights

The summary of the Old Testament's understanding of the human being is most beautifully expressed in the text of the first creation narrative in the Book of Genesis. This text states that the human being is created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1: 26-27). The implications of this affirmation are enormous. In the first place, it tells us that the human being has a dignity which is due to him or her by virtue of his or her creation. Human dignity is not dependent on race, gender,

⁷ McBrien, Richard, *Catholicism*, p. 943.

⁸ Njoku, Uzochukwu J., "Ambivalences of Human Rights Discourses in Africa", p. 359.

colour, class, status or profession; it is rather natural to him. The human being rightly belongs to the larger community of creation and yet he is qualitatively different from other creatures. By the way he is created, it is obvious that "Right from the beginning, God has always treated man with respect".⁹ Therefore, he is to be treated with dignity and respect by others. It is on the basis of this understanding of the human being that commandments that forbid killing, stealing, disrespect for parents and coveting our neighbour's goods are rooted. These acts are forbidden because they are against the human being. Prophets in Israel were mostly concerned with calling the people back to the right understanding of the fact that true worship of God means treating and relating to our fellow human beings as his image. Isaiah denounced the fasting and sacrifices of people who cared less about their oppression of the poor. He prophesied that affliction would be the punishment of all those who oppressed the poor and robbed them of their rights (10:2) Amos dedicated his entire ministry to addressing the issue of justice, social inequality and the oppression of the weak and the poor by the strong and the wealthy. The prophet Micah summarised what the Lord wants of his people in these words: "to act justly, and to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6: 8). For Eboh, "This statement summarizes what human right is all about".¹⁰

The affirmation of the dignity of the human being that is not dependent on anything condition on earth and the effort to promote and protect the implications of this understanding constitute a fundamental mark of the Old Testament. These are the building blocks of the concept of human rights.

⁹ Eboh, Simeon O., *Human Rights and Democratization in Africa*, Enugu: Snaap Press, 2003, p. 69.

¹⁰ Eboh, S. O., *Human Rights*, p. 69.

The Ancient Greeks and Human Rights

A study of the condition of life among the ancient Greeks particularly in the city of Athens shows that the people respected human life with awe. This feature of the ancient Greek was informed by their philosophy of the human person. For instance, one of their ancient philosophers, namely, Protagoras, “declared man to be the measure of all things”.¹¹ According to Iweh, this respect for human life “must have inclined them to inflict summary and retaliatory capital punishment on murderers and to handle with undue severity other forms of criminal acts”.¹² Politically, the Greeks believed in some form of democracy and freedom even though this was practised in both selective and limited way.¹³ However, the Greeks understanding of the state as the measure and basis of human right could only give rise to a defective conception of human right.¹⁴ Slavery was an acceptable institution, the state and not the individual was “the sole subject of rights”¹⁵ and whatever was granted to the former as rights was intended to make him or her capable of playing his role in the latter. In the same spirit, private ownership of property was seen as a natural and normal way of respecting personal liberty but it is guaranteed only to the extent that they are conducive to or promote the public interest.

In all, in ancient Greek, “There was no question of inalienable rights inhering to the personality of the citizens and which could be defended against all comers”.¹⁶ There were rights but they were granted to persons with discrimination and in a limited

¹¹ Njoku, U. J., “Ambivalences of Human Rights...”, p. 363.

¹² Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 26.

¹³ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 30.

¹⁴ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 29.

¹⁵ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 27.

¹⁶ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 60.

form; many people in society were excluded from the rights in question. The idea of the human person as the bearer of inalienable rights of life, property, education, religion and so on was not obtainable. Many people were excluded from the existing rights.

The Ancient Rome and Human Rights

The condition of life and the attitude to it in the world of the ancient Rome speak a lot about human rights. At its earliest stage, the ancient Rome was organised around the family group heads (the Paterfamilias) who controlled the affairs of their respective groups of extended families. The practice was that the father had absolute power over the children and women in the family and this lasted for life. It was to the extent that he could even take their life without being questioned.¹⁷ In effect, the power of the head of the family in ancient Roman history knew of no restrictions. Children and women were considered and treated as inferior and were of little or no consequence as far as human rights are concerned. Slavery was popularly accepted and the condition of slaves was highly deplorable. The masses and slaves laboured under harsh conditions without getting any fair share of their work. Hence, "the principle of the fundamental equality of all men was a foreign and unknown idea".¹⁸ The situation got worse with time because societal growth came with added problems of population growth which in turn put pressure of the limited resources available.

Having said this, it is notable that to some extent, the Romans recognised the principle of humanity which "in practice restricted the absolute powers of the Paterfamilias and the

¹⁷ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 42.

¹⁸ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 44.

rigours of the other aspects of social life".¹⁹ This principle intends some elements of appreciation of human dignity in society. However, this was limited in application as it was confined to the nobles and educated members of society only. The Roman system of education accorded primacy to parents to see to the education of their children and there was not much discrimination on this matter. Slaves had about the same opportunity to be educated as the freeborn.²⁰

In this discussion, it is important to remark that the Roman legal system which was largely founded on Stoic philosophy lies strongly behind the contributions of the time to the foundation of human rights. One of the areas where the Stoic philosophy helped to build up was the concept of natural law. This philosophy envisioned a world as a single state where everybody is seen as brother or sister and there is a law that guides all, the law of nature. This law is based on reason and it is eternal, and immutable because it derives from the logos. It is the standard for human conduct.²¹

In all, given the system of family groups and slavery practised in ancient Rome, the general atmosphere therein was characterized by lack of freedom in matters of human rights. Servitude, oppression and unjust social inequality prevailed in society.

This is the context in which Christianity entered and its emergence became a serious landmark relative to the birth of human rights as it is known today.

¹⁹ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 47.

²⁰ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 55.

²¹ Eboh, S.O., *Human Rights*, p. 73.

The Emergence and Contributions of Christianity

Christianity has its origin in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth who is believed to be the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. During his ministry, Jesus called together some men and women and ultimately constituted them into a community of his followers. After his death, this group continued to proclaim and celebrate his active memorial. They soon became a movement with force that spread rapidly in and outside the Palestinian territory. The life style, message and the outcome of the life of Jesus particularly as interpreted and proclaimed by his disciples affected significantly the way people understood life and treated it.

In what follows, we intend to highlight some key Christian values, teachings and practices that were foundational to the Universal declaration of human rights in the world.

Christianity and Human Life

The fundamental Christian understanding of the human person in the light of the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ continued with the Old Testament witnessing that human beings are God's own image. This was strengthened by the outcome of the traditions of Jesus. On more than one occasion, the founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ made a public declaration of his mission on earth. While speaking about himself as a shepherd in relationship with his flock, he said, "I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10b). In another instance, he was in a Synagogue on a Sabbath in his home town, Nazareth and a scroll was handed on to him to read. He opened a passage and read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Luke 4: 18-19). Looking at these two texts, one would find that both are connected to bringing about abundant life the human being; they are declarations for life. The mission of Jesus Christ on earth is essentially defined by special attention and care for human life.

On the basis of the above tradition, Christianity attaches high value to human life. Moreover, life for Christians extends beyond this earthly existence; it is supernatural as well. Every effort is made to protect life at every stage of it from practices and persons out to harm it. In fact, "right from its early days, Christianity had always sought to protect human life from inhuman treatment and from the dangers to which the sacredness of life is exposed".²² All forms of criminal practices that are against human life are rejected by Christianity without exception. This explains the battle which the Catholic Church has continued to wage against abortion and Euthanasia. It is the belief of the Church that the sacredness and value of human life must be recognised and respected from cradle to its demise. In all, the right to life is one of the most basic human rights²³ and the affirmation of the value, the sacredness and dignity of human person is foundational to the articulation of human rights.

The Principle of the Equality of all Persons

Following the teachings and life of Jesus, Christianity recognised and upheld unconditionally the dignity and equality of all human beings regardless of any differences of age, colour, gender or economic class. The basis for this equality is the fact that all men

²² Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 64.

²³ McCormick, Richard A., "Human Life and Human Rights", *Understanding Human Rights: An Interdisciplinary and Interfaith Study*, Flaconer, Alan D., ed. Dublin: Irish School of Economics, 1978, p. 74.

and women on earth have God as their father. Common fatherhood and destiny of all humanity provides the ground for their equality. Those who were rejected and cast out by society on account of moral impurity, age, sickness or ancestry made up the table companions of Jesus. He was accused of eating and drinking with sinners. Through his life style, teachings, actions and eventually death and resurrection, Christ destroyed the walls and barriers which kept people divided in society (Colossians 3: 11). In fact, as St Paul succinctly put it, "For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3: 27-28). The acceptance of this principle with all its implications was not an easy task for the early Christian communities; the witness of the Acts of the Apostles leaves us with a record of their struggles to realize it. However, by its acceptance, a major breakthrough was made with rights to the human condition in the world. Iweh is of the view that "This emergence of man's personality with his fundamental natural equality with his fellows and with the recognition of the inviolability of his natural powers and rights is the most decisive of all historical land-marks. It is the greatest historical break-through".²⁴ This is truly a revolution in history which Christianity accomplished without raising arms or shedding blood. The seed of other forms of human rights having been sown in this way, it was only a matter of time and they started to be recognised.

Christianity and Human Freedom

Liberty is fundamental to all other forms of human rights and Christianity helped to lay its foundation in the world. While addressing Christians in Galatia, St Paul summarised the work of

²⁴ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 64.

Christ in terms of freedom. He said to them: "For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1). The presence of the Holy Spirit in human life is also described as geared towards freedom; "Now the lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2Corinthians 3: 17). This freedom in question is primarily spiritual but it is necessarily connected to the entire human person. The spirit control what happens in the life of the human being and so spiritual freedom guarantees the liberty of the whole being. It is on the basis of this freedom from sin, fear, and moral decadence that a just, upright and caring society is built up. By so doing, Christianity affirms that there is lasting peace which has a spiritual base. Christianity, thus, laid a solid foundation for real freedom in society. One should not forget that "it was on the issue of liberty that Christianity and the ancient pagan world fought their spiritual battle. It was precisely on the point and content of human liberty that the two worlds contrasted most with each other".²⁵ Both the medieval and modern Christian scholars lay great emphasis on the fact that the right to freedom is a fundamental element of natural law.²⁶

Christianity and the Abolition of Slavery

The advent of Christianity and its penetration into the societies of the ancient Roman Empire and other nations in Europe played important roles towards the ultimate abolition of slavery therein. The most remarkable way that Christianity did this was by laying the doctrinal and practical foundations for the abolition.²⁷ The gospel of the equality of all men and women on earth and of their freedom before God was a strong blow to the worldview which

²⁵ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 67.

²⁶ Eboh, S.O., *Human Rights*, p. 77.

²⁷ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 67.

sustained slavery. The logic of slavery presupposed that everybody is not equal; some are superior to others who are comparatively inferior. As the Christian message continued to get diffused, the erstwhile horrible conditions of slaves started to be mitigated. It is interesting to note that Christianity did not go about this mission by encouraging any form of physical violence or rebellion. St Paul's Letter to Philemon provides us with a beautiful insight of the Christian approach to the problem of slavery; Onesimus was a slave who ran away from his master, Philemon and got converted to Christ through his encounter with Paul. After a while, Paul sent him back to Philemon admonishing him to take Onesimus back no longer as a mere slave but a brother in Christ Jesus (Philemon 1: 16). So, we can see how the Apostle of the Gentile, Paul brings into the picture the Christian principle of the equality of all children of God; wherein all human beings are brothers and sisters in Christ. By this approach, Christianity weakened the soil on which slavery was standing and its eventual collapse came with time. As Iweh rightly put it, "Christianity raised men first to internal spiritual liberty, operating through charity—which showed that earthly class divisions, and divisions of the world into power blocs (or into the free and unfree) have no place in the city of God".²⁸ Therefore, the contribution of Christianity to the abolition of slavery can simply be described in terms of providing the spiritual and moral basis of freedom on account of which this ancient institution collapsed in time. Note must be taken that it took the combination of a number of forces to bring about the ultimate demise of slavery.

²⁸ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 69.

Religious Freedom

Christianity started as a minority group in the midst of people of other traditional religions. It was born into Judaism and it remained part of it for a while until the logic of Christian teachings and practices forced them out of that parent religion. As it stepped out of the borders of Jewish land, Christianity met other beliefs such as the mystery religions that were dominant in the ancient Roman Empire. These other religions were backed by monarchical absolutism. Violent persecution and hostility greeted Christians from every angle because the absolute rulers saw in them and their message a serious threat to their kingdom. Christians who lost their lives in the hands of the persecutors were named Martyrs and martyrdom became an acceptable feature of Christianity. In the meantime, Christians interpreted the blood of martyrs to be the seed of Christianity.

From its own experience of oppression, Christianity from its earliest stage took it up to defend the principle of religious liberty. For instance, on several occasions, the Apostles were brought before the Jewish Chief priests and elders where they were threatened and warned not to worship God in any other way than as it was handed down by the ancestors. They used such occasions to proclaim courageously that people should not be forced to worship God in particular way but be given the liberty to practice religion according to their conviction. The Fathers of the Church, particularly the Apologetics, “struggled for and defended religious liberty with an intense assiduity which matched the ferocity of the persecutions”.²⁹ Through its perseverance, Christianity was able to win the battle against religious freedom and this was officially established in 313 A.D. when in Milan, there was a joint declaration of religious liberty

²⁹ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 72.

by Emperors Constantine and Licinius.³⁰ The contribution of the Reformation to the idea of religious freedom much later in history is worth noting. One of the central doctrines of the Reformers is that the human person is justified by faith. As a result of this, people should be left free in conscience to express their faith. Now, "With the demand for freedom of faith and conscience, the conviction is expressed that not government or social power has the right to determine for a human being his religion or to dispose of his or her humanity".³¹ This amounts to a very significant contribution to the consciousness and practice of human rights.

Christianity, the Family and Marriage

The teachings and practices of Christianity about the family and marriage contributed in no small ways towards the institution of human rights in the world. The Jewish society was highly patriarchal and the system of paterfamilias reigned in ancient Roman Empire. While these remained, Christianity helped to humanise and eventually transformed them. As it were, "The reciprocal rights and duties of both husband and wife, and of parents and their children were proclaimed by Christianity and there could be no more of the absolute dominion of the Paterfamilias over the family".³² Christian families were founded on the principle of mutual love and fidelity and no longer on existing mores of traditional societies. Marriage acquired the kind of sanctity which made it a religious institution respected by both parents and their children. Christianity upheld the sacredness of the family and married life and defended it at all cost.

³⁰ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 73.

³¹ Eboh, S.O., *Human Rights*, p. 77.

³² Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 74.

Christianity and Attitude to Work

In most ancient societies before the birth of Christianity, people saw work as a sort of punishment which belittles human beings and for this reason, it was mostly left for slaves or the commoners. In Scripture particularly in the writings of St Paul, one finds a teaching about work which contrasts greatly with what was obtainable in the ancient world. For instance, Paul applied himself to work for his own maintenance not minding that his call as Apostle to the Gentiles gave him the privilege and even right to depend on the believers for his livelihood. He went ahead to establish a rule that anyone who refuses to work should not be allowed to eat (2Thess 3: 10). This, by implication, means that "Work no longer conveys the ancient idea of being unworthy of the man who desires to be respected; it is dignified and held worthy of all ranks of men".³³ This attitude to work which Christianity introduced amounts to a revolution which contributed immensely towards the elevation of the status of working class men and women in society.

Generally, the Christian faith has high appreciation for creation as a whole. It is considered good and valuable not only for human physical sustenance but because it mysteriously embodies and communicates the divine. This appreciation became accentuated by the Incarnation of Christ, the Son of God taking flesh in Jesus Christ. In the light of these, Christianity places a lot of emphasis on the value of human labour and productivity. Its understanding of creation recognises the human being as an active agent whose involvement is required for the perfection of the universe. In fact, every human endeavour is a form of

³³ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 76.

participation in God's creative activity in the world.³⁴ These are the insights that inform the Christian attitude to work which revolutionized the way people see their labour in society.

Issues about human life, the equality of all human beings, human liberty, the abolition of slavery, religious freedom, gender equality and attitude to work are outstanding elements of human rights and our discussion above shows that Christianity made great contributions in these areas of society. These positive, beneficial and exceptional contributions to human rights did not stop with the first few centuries of Christianity. In what follows, we shall show how the Christian religion continued to be a principal promoter as well as protector of the rights and freedom of human beings.

Human Rights and Christianity Down the Age

In this part of our discussion, we shall focus mostly on the contribution of the Christian Church to human rights through her social teachings and other magisterial teachings. In this regard, we shall limit our use of the Church to mean the Catholic Church in the West.

There is a good number of official teachings of the Church with insights that are salient for the understanding and promotion of human rights. We shall address ourselves to a few of them. The Encyclical of Pope Leo XII, *Rerum Novarum* issued in 1891 occupies a prominent place in the list of social teachings that we wish to examine. Before this document, Leo XII had issued two others that underlined some elements of vital importance to the concept of human rights: *Humanum Genus*, 1884 and *Libertas Praestantissimum* 1888. In the former encyclical, he stated that

³⁴ Robert Faricy, *All Things in Christ: Teilhard de Chardin's Spirituality*, London: Fount Paperbacks, p. 57.

the equality of all human beings is both natural and fundamental and he also encouraged the formation of workers associations to promote the welfare of workers. In the latter, the Pope observed that individuals should be allowed to exercise freedom of thought, teaching, conscience and worship without state interference.³⁵

Rerum Novarum is considered the most important document of Leo XIII particularly with regard to human rights. The time in question was the early stages of The Industrial Revolution with all the upheavals that came with it in relation to the worker. Thus, this document had the conditions of workers in the world as its primary focus. The spiritual nobility of the human person, the fundamental and natural right to private property, the right of workers to organize and form association for their welfare, and the right to just salary are upheld by the encyclical.

Pope John XXIII issued two encyclicals that are of special relevance to human rights, namely, *Mater et Magistra* of May 1961 and *Pacem in Terris* of April 1963. The first concentrated on reaffirming the rights already identified in previous papal documents while the second tended towards breaking new grounds. In fact, *Pacem in Terris* is considered to be “the most pontifical document in the field of human rights”³⁶ whether in the past or in the present. In many ways, it is a summary of all the salient points on human rights made over the years by previous popes. The logic of *Pacem in Terris* is that peace on earth is possible but on the condition that the natural order established by the Creator is observed. Now, “The observance of this Law or order in the human sphere consists in the practical

³⁵ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 138-139.

³⁶ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 151.

and sincere recognition of the rights and duties of every human person".³⁷

These rights are by their nature universal, rational, inviolable and inalienable and they include: the right to life and to a worthy manner of living, the right to associate or meet, the right to perfect one's personality, the right to free choice of a state or vocation in life, the right to use created things and to protection and participation in politics, the right to freedom in the pursuit of truth, the right to basic education and the right to worship God freely.³⁸ It is the teaching of this document that peace on earth depends on the extent to which these rights are recognised and respected. People develop fully in societies where these rights are upheld. It could, therefore, be said that "Though the concern for Human Rights in the Church can be traced from the very beginning of Christianity, however, the defence of Human Rights as universal, inviolable and inalienable rights, which are due to man as a rational being endowed with free will, came clearly with Pope John XXIII *Pacem in Terris* of 11 April 1963".³⁹ Nevertheless, the contribution of the Church to the question of human rights did not stop with this peak.

The Second Vatican Council represents a strong impulse towards the growth of human rights consciousness and practices. We can see this most concretely in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, nos. 27&29, *Decree on Church Missionary Activity, Ad Gentes*, nos. 8-9, *Declaration on Religious Freedom, Dignitatis Humanae*, nos. 2-15, *Declaration on Christian Education, Gravissimum Educationis*, no. 1-3, and *Declaration on the Relationship of the*

³⁷ Iweh, N.S.S., *The History and Content of Human Rights*, p. 152.

³⁸ McBrien, R., *Catholicism*, p. 944.

³⁹ Eboh, S.O., *Human Rights*, p. 90.

Church to Non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate, no. 3. Popes and other authorities in the Church have continued to make further contributions on the subject. It is known that “Paul VI made the defence of Human Rights integral part of his pastoral activities”.⁴⁰ One concrete step he took in this direction was the establishment of the Commission for Justice and Peace in the Church — an organ intended to engage in profound study of the problems of development and peace in the world. The pontificate of John Paul II which lasted for twenty-seven years gave great support to the appreciation of the dignity and sacredness of human life in a way that strengthened the claims of human rights. The Pope believed that life from conception to death needs to be cared for and protected against all forms of attack or threat. Details of his teaching on human life are scattered in most of his writings but the resume is found in his book entitled *A Theology of the Body*. He travelled a lot and in every land he visited, he spoke in strong terms on behalf of the oppressed, the alienated and the poor. His overall contributions in this regard make some people to think that “He can be described as ‘Apostle of Human Rights’”.⁴¹

The present Pope, Francis, has within a short space of his papacy given strong indications of strong interest and commitment to the promotion of values that border on human rights. He comes out strongly in words and action against all forms of inhumanity, exploitation, and oppression embedded in certain systems of human society. He denounces socio-economic, political or religious structure insofar as they contribute to the oppressive dehumanization of the weak, the sick and the poor. In his latest encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Francis shows that there is an essential connection between the exploitation of nature and of human

⁴⁰ Eboh, S.O., *Human Rights*, p. 91.

⁴¹ Eboh, S.O., *Human Rights*, p. 91.

beings. At present, the earth, our sister and mother "cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her".⁴² This has serious consequences for human beings on earth particularly the weak and the poor.

Spurred and supported by Magisterial teachings, some Christian theologians and scholars in contemporary times are making invaluable contributions to human right issues. As Moltmann rightly observes, "Christian theology also cannot dispense itself from the discussion of and the fight for the realisation of human rights".⁴³ Haughton is of the opinion that "The only possible way for a Christian to approach the subject of human rights, of justice and injustice, is to do so from the point of view which sees human beings as Jesus saw them, that is, as people to die for".⁴⁴ Liberation theology and theologians have distinguished themselves in this project. They teach us that liberation from sin and deathly inhumanity is essential to the Christian message and that "Experience in the praxis of liberation from inhumanity is for Christians and churches the concrete starting-point for the commitment to human rights".⁴⁵ In other words, the contribution of the Christian Church to human rights should not simply stop at the level of theoretical propositions or discussions: it should include committed practical involvement, a type that engages

⁴² Francis, Pope, *Laudato Si*, no. 2.

⁴³ Moltmann, J., "Christian Faith and Human Rights", p. 193.

⁴⁴ Haughton, Rosemary, "A Christian Theology of Human Rights", in *Understanding Human Rights: An Interdisciplinary and Interfaith Study*, Flaconer, Alan D., ed. Dublin: Irish School of Ecumenics, 1978, 235.

⁴⁵ Moltmann, J., "Christian Faith and Human Rights", p. 192.

itself with wrestling with the situation with a view to articulating new visions and helping them to take flesh.⁴⁶

Human Rights and the Church in Africa (Nigeria)

Our discussion would appear incomplete if it does not in some ways reflect the local context in which we live and have our being. Njoku uses the term “ambivalence” to describe the situation of human rights in Africa because according to him, human rights consciousness is a reality in Africa and yet it is not sufficiently reflected in the socio-political structures or the dynamics of public governance in the continent.⁴⁷ There is obvious disjunction between theory and praxis with regard to human rights in Africa. To a large extent, the Church in Nigeria plays active role in some matters pertaining to fundamental human rights. Every Catholic Diocese in Nigeria has an established department of Justice, Peace and Development. Some religious congregation such as the Spiritans has Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) as an integral part of their charism and mission. Marriage tribunal and welfare departments in the Church do a lot to promote and protect human right especially in the area of family life and marriage. At times of political elections, the Church in Nigeria contributes to see that people are educated to know their civic rights and that these rights are protected. In many States in Nigeria, delegates appointed by the Church form part of the monitoring teams during elections.

⁴⁶ Flaconer, Alan D., “Theological Reflection on Human Rights”, *Understanding Human Rights: An Interdisciplinary and Interfaith Study*, Flaconer, Alan D., ed. Dublin: Irish School of Ecumenics, 1978, p. 197.

⁴⁷ Njoku, U. J., “Ambivalences of Human Rights Discourses in Africa”, p. 358.

Evaluation and Conclusion

While it is obvious that the Church has contributed and continues to contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights, questions can be raised about how some of the laws and practices of the same Christian Church stand on the way of the full realization of human rights.

For example, having played so serious active part in laying the foundation for the recognition of the equality of all men and women, the Catholic Church is being seriously challenged to reconsider its official stand on ministry which excludes females from ordained ministers.

The Church especially in most less developed nations is alleged to be the place where one finds the least paid workers in society. There is hardly any Church institution in these countries that has an established pension scheme and so those who work for the Church retire with little or no benefits to cater for the rainy days. Labour unions are seldom encouraged in ecclesiastical institutions and so it is extremely difficult for the workers to fight for their welfare as a body. Moreover, the Church does not operate democracy; rights are hardly protected in systems that are not democratic.

So, on one hand, the Christian Church is a good promoter as well as protector of human rights in the world. However, on another hand, she does not represent a good model of the practice of human rights in a number of areas of life.

From the discussion above, we can see that Christianity occupies an important place in the history of the struggle for human rights in the world. The story of human rights as it is in the present times cannot be told in any meaningful way without its Christian

roots and contributions. Through its emphasis on the sacredness and value of life, the equality of all men and women in the world, human freedom, religious liberty, the value of human labour and of human family and marriage, Christianity provided the building blocks with which human rights was erected. It has continued to promote and protect these rights down the ages using different means. The Universal Declaration of human rights will be able to achieve its goals most effectively and more rapidly if the Church does not relent in her contributions to the appreciation of human rights in the world. The Church in Africa is expected to work even harder to get rid of the ambivalence that characterizes the human rights situation in the continent. By committing itself to the promotion of human rights, the Church contributes to national integration. The integration of a nation is often closely related to its respect for human rights.