

**Maiden Legacy Lecture, Madonna University**

**FAITH AND THE FUTURE:  
RECLAIMING MORAL LEADERSHIP IN A FRACTURED NIGERIA**

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**University Podium**

**Okija**

## **1. PREAMBLE**

It is my honour and privilege to be here to share with you some thoughts on our dreamed future for the Church and for our land. Please note our qualification of the future that we are concerned with – a future that corresponds to our dream for the Church and for our people. This means that our assessment of the present is in view of possible adjustments to be able to attain that future.

Before going further, let me express my gratitude to the organizers of this maiden edition of Legacy Lectures for requesting me to be the presenter. I thank all of you who have gathered here to listen to me. As already said, it is an honour, which I do not take lightly.

I am convinced that whenever one is called upon to share ideas, one should understand oneself as engaged in a sacred duty through which life could be transformed and individual as well as collective destinies changed. That is why, despite the short notice and my busy schedule, I accepted to be here today. Once more, thank you all for being here.

## **2. REVIEWING THE TOPIC OF THE LECTURE**

The organizers asked me to reflect on the topic: Faith and the Future: Reclaiming Moral Leadership in a Fractured Nigeria. Thereafter, they wrote: “this theme resonates deeply with our national realities and the mission of Catholic Higher Education in forming ethical, responsible leaders for tomorrow.” Put simply, they want me to reflect on how faith, presumably, Christian faith, as communicated through Catholic Higher Education, for example, in Madonna University, can contribute to the formation of morally grounded leaders in Nigeria. The scope is broad and the issue is topical.

### **Faith and the Dominant Image of God**

The first clarification to be made is that faith is not understood in terms of opinions, views, convictions held without solid evidence. Such a view opposes faith to reason and to science. This approach works with a misunderstanding of both faith and reason; faith and science. For a proper understanding of their relationship, we may need to pick up the Encyclical

Letter of Pope St. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*.<sup>1</sup> As a tribute to St. John Henry Cardinal Newman who will be declared doctor of the Church on November 1, 2025, I want to refer you to his *Grammar of Assent*.<sup>2</sup> Here, Newman distinguishes between notional and real assent. Notional assent is abstract intellectual agreement maybe to a set of doctrinal statements. Real assent involves the whole person. There is deep, personal conviction in the truth and meaning of what is assented to. This is arrived at through personal synthesis of evidence and experience. While people may not be able to explain their faith through reason alone, reason leads up to the limit of its capability and nods in the direction of the mystery that justify a commitment to a relationship that is personal, experiential and transformative. The challenge presented to us in this lecture is about how the Christian faith can become more personal, experiential and transformative in the Nigerian context.

This takes us to the second clarification that needs to be made. The Christian faith is not primarily to make us good men and women and thus those to reform society. If it were to be this, then Christianity would be nothing more than an ethical system. Christianity is rather about fostering the relationship of the human being with the triune God, through Jesus Christ, the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. When lived out properly, this relationship with the divine makes us holy men and women, that is, those who live wholly for God. A holy man or woman is invariably a good person. A good person may not be a holy person. Adapting the words of Jesus, one can say, if Christians aim at being good persons, what credit would they claim, even atheists do as much. Do they not? (Matt 5:46).

The above distinction, though subtle, is at the heart of my approach in this lecture. We cannot secure the dreamed future for the faith and the society by rolling out socio-political and economic programmes to be undertaken by the Church. Rather, we must examine the model of the relationship with the divine that is being proposed. As we hope to show, what is dominant is a transactional model of relationship with the divine. Instead of seeking to be transformed by the fire of God's love, people engage in practices – devotional

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, Encyclical Letter on the Relationship between Faith and Reason (Vatican: Libreria Editrice, 1998) [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html) (accessed October 1, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

and otherwise – aimed at harnessing and mobilizing divine power for protection from and defence against purported evil forces to whom people attribute their negative experiences. This has given rise to what I call Power Christianity, which recommends love of God's power instead of the power of God's love. This form of Christianity neither leads to holiness nor contributes to individual and social transformation, nor to moral leadership. At worst, it diverts attention from the socio-political and economic roots of the challenges people face by transposing them and their solution to the realm of the supernatural. This form of Christianity has given rise to a resurgence of the narrative that Christianity was a tool used to colonize the minds of Africans while other peoples have embraced science and technology. This gives the impression that Christian faith is antithetical to science and technology.

We shall come back to the relationship of Christian faith on the one hand and science and technology, on the other hand. Let us explore the meaning of moral leadership and show how the dominant form of Christianity does not promote it.

### **3. MORAL LEADERSHIP AS SELF-LEADERSHIP**

Leadership often conjures up the image of a person responsible for or in charge of others. That is why it is almost always ascribed to the elite – socio-political, economic and cultural. This perspective confines leadership to a few. In this lecture, we use leadership as it applies to every individual. Everyone is supposed to be a leader of his or her life. Addicts surrender their self-leadership to whatever they are addicted to. Against their better judgment, they engage in self-destructive behaviour under the influence of what they have yielded up their leadership to – social media, alcohol, etc. This means that individuals are complex wholes with different parts competing for dominance. Action is the outcome of a complex process, the resultant of different forces and influences, whose quality depends on the visions, forces or influences that had been energized through reinforcement and habituation.

This perspective is represented well by Plato in the allegory of the charioteer, which is found in his book *Phaedrus*.<sup>3</sup> For Plato, the human soul has different

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a-254e trans. C.D.C Reeve in *Plato: Complete Works*, edit. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997) 506-556.

parts: the rational, the temperate, and the appetitive parts. These parts compete for dominance and control of the person. In a more picturesque way, the soul is like a chariot with a charioteer. The rational part is the charioteer struggling to get two horses – representing the noble and the base aspects or impulses of the soul – to pull together in the direction mapped out by reason. Ordinarily, the base desires of lust, greed and immediate gratification pull in a direction opposite the noble aspect that pulls towards knowledge, truth and honour. The chariot would go in the direction of the horse that exerts the highest force. For Plato, the ideal situation is for the rational part of the soul, which has insight into the nature of things, to lead the others. If not, one is condemned to acting under the influence of one's base impulses and desires.

Another way of putting it is that our actions are the result of competing influences. Like water, human beings tend to deploy actions along the line of least resistance. In the language of Plato, the spirited and the appetitive parts of the soul tend to more easily exert their influence. To act in line with the true nature of things requires effort to rise above the natural inclinations. This requires leadership and self-management. Moral leadership goes beyond leadership or self-management. Self-management may pertain to actions driven by self-serving and unwholesome motifs. Moral leadership goes a step higher. It is the aspiration to be guided in the deployment of any action by the higher values of justice, love, truth and peace. It is the commitment to always act, not as one wills, or for one's own benefit, but as dictated by higher principles. To put it differently and in line with Immanuel Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative, it is to strive to act always in such a way that the maxim of one's action can be applied to everyone in a similar situation.

The bane of Nigerian society, more specifically Igbo society, is that such moral leadership is in short supply. Many people's actions are guided by narrow, self-serving motives, which sometimes, boils down to the assertion of self. An example will underscore this point. Traffic light was installed in Ekwulobia roundabout and in other places in Anambra State. My experience at Ekwulobia is that at weekends or after close of work, the traffic light is not obeyed. Even if you stop by it, people will shout at you "go! They (the enforcers) are not there!" This means that people do not care about the truth or principle embodied in the traffic light. This is not peculiar. In Europe and North America, some people keep to the traffic rules for fear of being

captured by the surveillance cameras and being fined. Many more have imbibed it as a virtue, not just to obey the traffic light but to uphold the rule of law in the awareness that laws by clearly defining roles, expectations and punishments conduce to order in the society. Unfortunately, what is obtainable in our society can be described as the rule of the powerful. People want to assert themselves, take advantage of situations without consideration of the consequences for others or for the community at large.

Let me unpack what is meant by the rule of the powerful vis-à-vis moral leadership as commitment to higher values of justice, truth, love and peace. The rule of law is a higher value that transcends the individual. The rule of the powerful revolves around individuals. Let us go back to the example of the traffic rule. It is not uncommon that those who break the traffic rule are easily let off the hook by persons empowered by the State to enforce it. Sometimes, there is monetary inducement to forego enforcement of the law. At other times, it is a brazen disrespect of laid down rules and procedures and the usurpation of the power and authority of the law. Thus, those entrusted with protecting the interest of the community by enforcing laws meant to protect the common good, privatize the power. They use it to enforce their wills and for their private advantage and those of their cronies. No higher value, not even the common good, guides actions and relationships. This frame of understanding has trickled down to the different strata of society. There is a common denominator between the custom officer who turns a blind eye to firearms and fake drugs, for example, being moved through the checkpoint he is manning, and the fruit seller who uses harmful chemicals to ripen fruits despite the health hazard this poses. Both have no commitment to the common good. Their actions are dictated by selfish considerations and not by any higher value. This logic of action has become so rampant and insidious that it has become normalized. Actions to the contrary provoke a backlash. The result is that the social environment discourages moral leadership.

Christians are products of their environment although also called to transform it. There is a disincentive in the Nigerian environment to commit to self-renunciation and the higher values of the Kingdom of God – the values of justice, truth, love and peace. Some Christians have learned to navigate this by compartmentalizing their lives. For example, they engage in any kind of business if there is money to be made even at the expense of lives. They

turn around and donate to charity and perform one religious ritual or another in the hope that this would wash clean their ill-gotten wealth. They become transactional with God thus blunting the challenge of self-transformation and growth in love that a relationship with God induces.

One way towards creating the dreamed future is to unmask the various strategies used to domesticate, if not emasculate, the truth of faith and reduce its power for socio-cultural transformation. Before launching into this, one must establish that Christianity itself is not the problem, as some writers insinuate on social media. In line with the truism that the best defence is a good offence, we shall show that without Christianity and the Catholic Church, Europe as well as modernity as known today would not have been possible. This assertion goes against the presentation of the Medieval Period as a Dark Age. This leads to the next set of questions: if Christianity transformed Europe, why has the rot in our society continued despite the teeming Christian population? How can the transformational power of Christianity be harnessed?

#### **4. IS RELIGION THE PROBLEM? IS RELIGION ANTI-SCIENCE?**

As already mentioned, some social media presenters blame religion for the problems of Nigeria. The blame is not on account of religious bigotry leading to violent conflicts or the mobilization of religious or denominational identities during elections to derail issue-based politics and throw up clueless political leaders. These critics recycle Ludwig Feuerbach's and Karl Marx's strictures or criticisms against religion. For Feuerbach, theology is anthropology. Whatever is said about God is a statement about the human being, because God is the projection by human beings of their loftiest ideals onto a putative being external to them. Religion is therefore false consciousness, a way of thinking that masks the true nature of people's socio-economic situation.<sup>4</sup> This is the line of thought behind Karl Marx's dismissal of religion as the opium of the people; something fed to the masses to divert their attention away from the real cause and the workable solution to their misery.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, translated from the German by Marian Evans (London: Trübner & Co, Ludgate Hill, 1881).

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. by Joseph O'Malley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

The above negative view of religion is behind those who adjudge the religiosity of Nigerians as a diversion of attention. These affirm that if the number of Nigerians who attend religious activities is multiplied by the number of hours spent in such activities, it is astronomical. They argue that those hours are non-productive, wasteful and divert the people's attention from the issues behind their misery and substitute religious rituals for the purposeful actions that can turn things round.

In response, one can observe that although the number of (wo)man-hours spent in religious activities is high, a significant number, if not majority of Nigerians, do not engage in such activities. Yet, these people who have not come under the regime of the false consciousness of religion have not changed the face of Nigeria. This shows that the problem is deeper than simply about the excessive number of hours spent in religious activities. Some of the social media despisers of religion insinuate that Christianity was a tool wielded purposefully by the colonialists to brainwash Africans and keep them from pursuing science and technology, which truly hold the promise of changing the fortunes of Nigeria and indeed of Africa. Yet, Christianity has not and cannot hinder the Faculty of any Nigerian University from pursuing excellence in the sciences and in being an incubator of technological innovation. Other factors, rather than Christianity, must be responsible for the mediocre performance of our institutions of higher learning.

The suspicion of Christianity articulated in the paragraph above is widespread, especially among young people. That is why I want to respond to it, though not extensively but radically, that is, by engaging its basic assumptions. Let us begin with the opposition set up between religion and science. This opposition is false. There are many scientists who are religious. These do not find any opposition between their scientific pursuit and their religious faith. Included in this list are not only scientists like Copernicus, Kepler, Isaac Newton, Rev. Fr. Nicolas Steno (the father of Geology), Rev. Fr. Roger Boscovich (father of modern atomic theory) but also contemporary scientists. The story of Dr. Michael Egnor, a pediatric neurosurgeon, comes readily to mind. He was a materialist before some experiences led to his



conversion to Catholicism. The subtitle of his book, *A Neurosurgeon's Case for the Existence of the Soul* describes the new trajectory of his life.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, as we shall briefly show in the next section, some scientists who reflect on their practice of science, recognize an affinity with religion regarding the grounding of the truth claims of their practice. That is, some scientists have come to the realization that something akin to religious faith is at the heart of the scientific endeavour. Thereafter, we shall deliver on the promise of showing how the Christian faith, which is alleged to be at the root of the stagnation being experienced in Nigeria, contributed in building up Europe. The lessons learned will then be used to assess the dominant emphasis of Christianity as practised in our context with a view to identifying what need to be tweaked for Christianity to foster moral leadership and thus contribute better to national integration and development.

## **5. FAITH AT THE HEART OF THE SCIENTIFIC ENDEAVOUR**

For many people, faith and science are opposites. To say that faith is at the heart of the scientific endeavour would sound like a heresy. This is because of the phenomenal success of engineering (technology). This dresses the scientific endeavour in the borrowed robe that gives the impression that scientific theories are apodictically certain because they are exact transcriptions of the state of world out there. The history of science, however, does not support this view. Moreover, though interdependent, science and engineering (technology) are different. Their etymologies also underscore this difference. Science comes from *scientia* (knowledge) while technology comes from *techne* (skill, craft, the method to achieve a goal). An example will suffice to show this difference. Our forefathers used medicinal herbs to take care of their health challenges. Yet, they had no idea of how and why the herbs worked. Therefore, they had the technology but not the science, at least as conducted in line with modern scientific method.<sup>7</sup>

Before this example is dismissed as applying to traditional practices that are pre-scientific – whatever that word may mean – let us draw attention to what Eugene Wigner described as “‘false’ theories which give, in view of their

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Egnor and Denyse O’Leary, *The Immortal Mind: A Neurosurgeon’s Case for the Existence of the Soul* (New York: Worthy Publishing 2023).

<sup>7</sup> This delineation is important in the light of the contention in the 1960s about the possibility of African Science. See Robin Horton, “African Traditional Thought and Western Science” *Africa: Journal of International African Institute* 37:2 (1967) 155-187.

falseness, alarmingly accurate descriptions of groups of phenomena.”<sup>8</sup> For example, despite its falseness from the vantage point of the present, the Ptolemaic model in which the earth is at the centre of the universe gave accurate predictions of the positions of celestial bodies. In other words, successful application of a scientific theory or the development of a technology based on it, does not guarantee the truthfulness of the theory. Indeed, for philosophers of science, scientific theories are not considered true, but conditional statements that have not yet been falsified.<sup>9</sup> Even then, the falsification of a theory is not a straightforward and unmediated confrontation of the theory with bare facts. Rather, it often takes place through a paradigm shift.<sup>10</sup> In sum, despite breakthroughs in technology, scientific theories are not transcriptions of the external world. They are not nuggets of truth in comparison to which religious ideas are labelled as faith. As said above, they are conditional statements that hitherto have not been falsified or superseded.

One way to show that faith is at the heart of the scientific endeavour is regarding the use of Mathematics in the study of the physical world. Mathematics is a formal system invented by the human mind. The amazing thing is how this invention of the human mind describes the physical world. Eugene Wigner describes this as a miracle and writes that “the miracle of the appropriateness of the language of mathematics for the formulation of the laws of physics is a wonderful gift which we neither understand or deserve.”<sup>11</sup> If something as fundamental as the basis of the effectiveness of mathematical formulations in the natural sciences is not understood, but upheld on trust, just as the religious person trusts God without apodictic certainty, one can conclude on the centrality of faith in both. This upturns the Enlightenment’s arrogance and dismissal of the Medieval Age as Dark Age. Once the narrow and prejudiced judgement of the men of the Enlightenment is overcome, then one can appreciate the contribution of the Christian faith in shaping not only Europe but the modern world as known today.

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<sup>8</sup> Eugene Wigner, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences,” *Communications in Pure and Applied Mathematics* 13:1 (1960). <https://webhomes.maths.ed.ac.uk/~v1ranick/papers/wigner.pdf> (accessed September 10, 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Karl Popper, *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959).

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962).

<sup>11</sup> Eugene Wigner, “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences.”

## 6. FAITH AS THE ENGINE OF DEVELOPMENT DURING THE MEDIEVAL AGE

Despite the Enlightenment's dismissal of the Medieval Age as dark age, an age of obscurantism and retrogression because of the influence of the Christian faith, later scholars have highlighted how the Christian faith midwifed modern society. The title of Max Weber's book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*,<sup>12</sup> portrays that conviction. Weber argues that capitalism came about through the influence of what he called Protestant ethic, especially Calvinism. He acknowledges that the pursuit of profit has been present in all cultures but insists that modern capitalism came about by making material acquisition the ultimate purpose of economic activity. In other words, economic activities are not geared towards satisfaction of human needs, but primarily towards wealth creation. This implies the reproduction of capital through investment and reinvestment. This required, according to Weber, an unusual self-discipline which was made possible by a combination of two ideas, popularised in Protestantism, especially in Calvinism. These are the ideas of calling and predestination. By calling is meant the view that the highest moral obligation of every human being is to fulfill his duty in worldly affairs. Predestination means that God, in His sovereign wisdom, has chosen those to be saved. The chosen do not know that they are chosen. But success in worldly affairs could be a sign of and never the means of being chosen. The result, in Weber's analysis, is the unleashing of energy for success in worldly affairs with the accompanying discipline as people struggled to gain a modicum of assurance of their eternal destiny. This gave rise to a disciplined labour force and regularized investment of capital, which are the two things that underlie rationalised capitalism.

Max Weber's study shows that sociologists recognize the role of religious faith in shaping society, although the link he made between the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant Ethic is debatable. This notwithstanding, for a more comprehensive insight into how Christianity shaped modern culture, one must go back to what is disparagingly called the Medieval times which covers the time from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Renaissance. What

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<sup>12</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* trans. Talcott Parsons, introduction by Anthony Giddens (London: Routledge, 2002).

is remarkable about this period in the light of the concern of our paper, is how the Church not only helped the society navigate a turbulent period of history characterized by wars, plagues and other disasters, but stabilized it. This is to be the basis of our hope that however fractured the Nigerian society has become, Christianity can still contribute to salvaging it.

There are works on how the Catholic Church built Western Civilization<sup>13</sup> and on the innumerable contributions of monks.<sup>14</sup> Recall that the Church suffered persecution until the Edict of Milan in 313 AD. Thereafter, it gained state patronage. About a century after, the Church faced the challenge of rebuilding the empire after the sack of Rome by Alaric, king of the Goth in 410 AD. The fall of Rome created a leadership vacuum and brought about disruption of life as hitherto known. This was the first of a series of invasions from those derogatorily referred to as barbarians. In the socio-political turbulence, the Church rose up to the challenge of stabilizing the polity. Socio-cultural and political life revolved round the parishes, monasteries and dioceses.

Less than a century after the fall of Rome, Clovis, the king of the Franks, converted to Christianity. This was a breakthrough that cemented an alliance between the Church and the throne, the mitre and the crown. It led to the establishment of the Merovingian dynasty backed by the Church. Over time, this dynasty was weakened by the lack of competence and charisma by successive kings. The dynasty was superseded by the Carolingian dynasty through a palace coup by Pepin the Short whose son and successor, Charlesmagne was crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day 800. The name Holy Roman Empire captures the aspiration to establish a *Pax Christiana* on the model of the defunct *Pax Romana*. That is, the Roman Empire established peace and prosperity in its vast territory through its military might. The Holy Roman Empire sought to spread the peace, love and reconciliation of Christ throughout the vast territory that saw itself as heir to the achievement of the Roman Empire. They therefore strove to establish a transnational identity not based on military conquest and subjugation but on the Christian faith. As often as wars

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas E. Woods, Jr. *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> See the seven volumes of the study of Charles Forbes Comte de Montalembert, *Monks of the West: From St. Benedict to St. Bernard* (Edinburgh: W Blackwood & Sons, 1861-1879, reprinted by Georgias Press, 2008).

broke out and invasions took place – by the Vikings, the Magyars, the Muslims, etc – the Church, through the network of dioceses, parishes and monasteries persevered in the education of the people and in their formation in the faith. In this way, unity was preserved. The contribution of this unity and the relative peace that it fostered to the development of Europe cannot be overemphasized. Interestingly, the Holy Roman Empire was dissolved in 1806.

The monasteries played an important role in building up western civilization. It is reported that at the height of their influence, there were 37,000 Benedictine monasteries in Europe and 742 Cistercian monasteries in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>15</sup> One can imagine the multiplier effect of these centers of excellence in education, agriculture, technological innovation and transfer. The monks multiplied the educational materials by copying them. The printing press had not been invented. To make another copy of the bible or of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, for example, someone must sit down and copy book word for word. Without the monasteries, less of the ancient texts would have been preserved. Cathedral and monastic schools were at the forefront of the education of the people. Over time some of these schools became specialized. "Lectures in medicine were given by monks of Saint Benignus at Dijon, the monastery of Saint Gall had a school of painting and engraving, and lectures in Greek, Hebrew and Arabic could be heard at certain German monasteries."<sup>16</sup> This meant that there was movement of scholars and students. This led to the development of a system of certification. All these developments culminated in the birth of the university.<sup>17</sup>

The Church contributed to the development of technology. Gerbert of Aurillac, who later became Pope Sylvester II is credited with building the first mechanical clock for the city of Magdeburg in 996.<sup>18</sup> The Cistercians played a vital part in the development and diffusion of new techniques. They harnessed water power for crushing wheat, sieving flour, fulling cloth and tanning.<sup>19</sup> In the area of agriculture, the monks introduced new crops and

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas E. Woods, Jr. *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, op. cit., 28, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas E. Woods, Jr. *ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>17</sup> We are aware that the University of Timbuktu was founded within this period. We will not go into the debate of which was founded first – the universities in Europe or the one in Timbuktu.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas E. Woods, Jr. *op. cit.* 36.

<sup>19</sup> A twelve century account about a Cistercian monastery shows the extent of they harnessed water power for different processes in an industrial complex: "Entering the Abbey under the boundary wall, which like a janitor

experimented in how to improve the breed of cattle without leaving the process to chance. It is reported that “in Sweden, the corn trade owed its existence to the monks; in Parma, it was cheese making; in Ireland, salmon fisheries – and, in a great many places, the finest vineyards. Monks stored up the waters from springs in order to distribute them in times of drought.... In Lombardy, the peasants learned irrigation from the monks.”<sup>20</sup>

The condemnation of Galileo Galilei in 1633 has given the impression that the Church in the Medieval period was against science.<sup>21</sup> As unfortunate as the handling of the Galileo affair is, historians now paint a more nuanced picture of the line of events. Copernicus, who proposed that the earth moved round the sun was consulted by the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517) about calendar reform. When Copernicus published an outline of his astronomy, Pope Clement VII tasked Johann Albert Widmanstadt to deliver a public lecture at the Vatican on the subject. When Galileo discovered the phases of the Venus, which further supported the heliocentric view – that the earth revolved round the sun – the Jesuit priest, Fr. Christopher Clavius in 1610 wrote to Galileo that his fellow Jesuits have independently confirmed Galileo’s discovery with his telescope. When Galileo came to Rome the next year, he was warmly received. Galileo himself wrote to a friend, “I have been received and shown favor by many illustrious cardinals, prelates, and princes of this city.” He enjoyed a long audience with Pope Paul V, and the Jesuits of the Roman College held a day of activities in honor of his achievements. When Galileo published *Letters on the Sunspots*, in which he espoused the heliocentric theory, Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who later became Pope Urban

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allows it to pass, the stream first hurls itself impetuously at the mill where in a welter of movement it strains itself, first to crush the wheat beneath the weight of the millstones, then to shake the fine sieve which separates flour from bran. Already it has reached the next building; it replenishes the vats and surrenders itself to the flames which heat it up to prepare beer for the monk,... The stream does not yet consider itself discharged. The stream does not yet consider itself discharged. The fullers established near the mill beckon on it. In the mill it had been occupied in preparing food for the brethren; it is therefore only right that it should now look to their clothing. It never shrinks back or refuses to do anything that is asked for. One by one it lifts and drops the heavy pestles, the fullers’ great fatigues.... How many horses would be worn out, how many men would have weary arms if this graceful river, to whom we owe our cloths and food, did not labour for us.... When it has spun the shaft as fast as any wheel can move, it disappears in a foaming frenzy; one might say it had itself been ground in the mill. Leaving it here it enters the tannery, where in preparing the leather for the shoes of the monks it exercises as much exertion as diligence; then it dissolves in a host of streamlets and proceeds along its appointed course to the duties laid for it, looking out all the time for affairs requiring its attention, whatever they might be, such as cooking, sieving, turning, grinding, watering, or washing, never refusing its assistance in any task. At last, in case it receives any reward for work which it has not done, it carries away the waste and leaves everywhere spotless.” Jean Gimpel, *Medieval Machine: Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976) 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas E. Woods, Jr. *ibid.*, 31

<sup>21</sup> For this section on Galileo, we relied on the work of Thomas E. Woods, Jr. *ibid.*, 67-75.

VIII, sent him a letter of congratulation. At this point, one might be wondering what led to the shift from such an enthusiastic reception of Galileo and the heliocentric theory to Galileo's condemnation. This turn of events was because Galileo refused to consider the heliocentric system as a hypothesis. He insisted that it was literally true, yet he could not respond to some of the objections raised by the geocentric view. Besides he called for reinterpretation of the Bible.

The Galileo affair played out after the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Church stood accused of not having proper regard for the Bible. The Church could allow Galileo's heliocentric system to be studied as a hypothesis, but it was much to set aside Scripture because of an unproven scientific theory. Even then, one sees open-mindedness and flexibility in the remark made by Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, who participated in the debate. For Bellarmine, "if there were a real proof that the sun is in the center of the universe, that the earth is in the third heaven, and that the sun does not go round the earth but the earth round the sun, then we should have to proceed with great circumspection in explaining passages of Scripture which appear to teach the contrary, and rather admit that we did not understand them than declare an opinion to be false which is proved to be true. But as for myself, I shall not believe that there are such proofs until they are shown to me."

In 1616, Galileo was cautioned against teaching the heliocentric system as truth rather than as hypothesis. He agreed to present it as a hypothesis and continued his scholarly work without any disturbance. In 1624, he visited Rome again. He was warmly received by Pope Urban VIII, who had sent him congratulatory letter at the publication of *Letters on the Sunspots*. The Pope described Galileo as a man whose "fame shines in the sky and is spread over the whole world," gave him gifts and medals as sign of patronage. Galileo's *Dialogue on the Great World Systems*, published in 1632 was written at the urging of the Pope. But **he ignored the instruction of treating the heliocentric view as a hypothesis rather than as an established truth**. In the light of the discussion above regarding scientific theories being conditional statements, it is the dogmatism of Galileo that triggered a response in kind and resulted in the unfortunate event of his condemnation. A close reading of the events of the period shows church people who uphold open inquiry and scientific rigor.

In sum, as soon as one peels away the label of Dark Age put by the Enlightenment thinkers on the Medieval Period, one encounters a period of history bustling with ideas, energy and innovation. It was the period when universities developed, when despite the justification of social stratification in Greek metaphysical thinking,<sup>22</sup> the idea of the equality of all human beings because they are made in the image of God was already gaining grounds at least in the monasteries. Above all, the dignity of human labour celebrated in the rule of St. Benedict, by its elevation as an act of prayer, guided Medieval society as well as the vision of a combination of faith and reason.<sup>23</sup>

## **7. THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

Let us come back to our local context. If the Christian faith built western civilization, what has happened to that transformative capacity relative to Nigeria? Yes, the Christian Churches introduced and are still involved in the provision of education, health care services and other socio-cultural amenities and processes. The Churches are expanding. We had mentioned the high (hu)man-hours spent in religious activities. Yet, the situation in Nigeria seems to grow only worse. Sunny Okosun asked the question, “Which Way Nigeria?” in 1985, when in hindsight, things were still going on well. Presently, people have started expressing frustration regarding the “Prayer for Nigeria in Distress” which was approved and circulated by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria in 1993. For them, the prayer has been said far too long with no noticeable result. One is therefore forced to adapt Cassius’ question in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* whether the fault is in ourselves or in the Christian message.

The Christian message has acquitted itself creditably in the past. This has been shown in the preceding part of our presentation. We are therefore challenged to look inwards. The focus is not to apportion blame but to understand the peculiarity of the context, which surely is significantly different from what obtained in the Medieval Period. The aim is to understand how best to make the Christian faith work in our favour regarding our socio-cultural, economic and political situation.

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<sup>22</sup> Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University 1933 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936, 1964).

<sup>23</sup> On the issue of faith and reason, one remembers Gerbert of Aurillac who became Pope Sylvester II (999-1003). He insisted that the just man who lives by faith, should combine science with his faith. Thomas E. Woody, 23. See also Edward Grant, *God and Reason in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge, 2001, 2003).



One of the key shifts since the Medieval Period is the form of socio-political organization in which people live and practice the faith. Just as people rarely take notice of the air in their environment until something has gone terribly wrong, the state as what structures the socio-economic and political environment people live in, is rarely adverted to. Yet the modern state, its social history, the health and strength of its institutions, the type of incentives it creates, makes the difference between social integration, stability and well-being. This is the idea that merited Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James A. Robinson the 2024 Nobel Prize for Economics.<sup>24</sup> This means that apathy towards governance of the state is irresponsible because it would take only a single policy decision of the government to impact negatively on the lives of all. The empire as a system of organization is limited in the reach of its powers.

The state, unlike the empire, structures the life of its citizens, because, by definition, the scope of its powers is extensive.<sup>25</sup> It has the monopoly of violence in its territory whose sovereignty is guaranteed by international law. This means that composite groups are not free to break away at will. The recognition of the sovereignty of every state makes intervention by other states, in whatever is termed internal affairs of one state, very unlikely. It is important to advert to this in the light of the calls for secession by different groups in Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> There is a concentration of authoritative and allocative resources in the office holder so much so that the struggle for control of these resources could be likened to a warfare. Sometimes, there is a collusion of the elite to capture the state and its institutions. When this is achieved, legality is conferred on even the most despicable act. The challenge is to get operators of the state apparatuses to use the enormous powers conferred on them to work for the good of the people and to have a way of resisting those who would want to abuse the power conferred on them by the state.

Colonialism introduced the state as the system of organization with profound changes in the landscape and mindscape of Nigerians. Despite political independence, the (post)colonial state continues to be an enduring

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<sup>24</sup> See Daron Acemoglu & James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Currency, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> For more on the State see, Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence*, Vol. II of a Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> In this regard it is important to reflect on the call for secession by the different groups.

legacy of the colonial era. In a sense, the nationalists who fought for political independence helped in entrenching rather than dismantling the colonial legacy. Kwame Nkrumah is quoted to have often said, “seek ye first the political kingdom and every other thing will be added unto you.” In response and from a Marxist perspective, Ali Mazrui drew attention to the primacy of the economic kingdom.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, as the political economist, Peter P. Ekeh rightly pointed out, the nationalists were in a hurry to replace the colonialists that they did not contemplate an overhaul of the predatory and extractive state apparatus that served the colonialists. The dark-skinned elite contended with the fair-skinned ones for control of the state which was set up for the benefit, not of the people, but of the colonizers.

Worse still, is that the struggle for independence, “entailed a necessary but destructive strategy: sabotage of the administrative efforts of the colonizers. A great deal of the anti-colonial activities by the African bourgeoisie consisted of encouragement to their followers to be late for work, to go on strikes for a variety of reasons, etc. The African who evaded his tax was a hero; the African labourer who beat his white employer was given extensive coverage in newspapers. In general, the African bourgeois class, in and out of politics, encouraged the common man to shirk his duties to the government or else to define them as burdens in the same breath he was encouraged to demand his rights. Such strategy, one must repeat, was a necessary sabotage against alien personnel whom the African bourgeois class wanted to replace.”<sup>28</sup> The colonialists pushed back by creating division among the nationalists along ethnic lines.

This strategy drew from and reinforced what Peter Ekeh called the two publics – the primordial and the civic. The primordial public refers to one’s ethnic, religious or denominational group while the civic public refers to the government or state. Writing in the 1970s, Ekeh noted that people felt obliged to contribute to the primordial public from which they received non-tangible rewards such as validation. On the other hand, relationship with the civic public was amoral. Obligation to the government is seen as a burden to

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<sup>27</sup> Ali Mazrui, “Seek ye First the Political Kingdom” *General History of Africa* Vol. VIII, Africa since 1935, ed. Ali Mazrui (UNESCO: Heinemann, 1993) 105-126, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000095906> (accessed October 2, 2025).

<sup>28</sup> Peter P. Ekeh, “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17:1 (1975) [91-112] 102-103.

be evaded while the resources of the state or government, is seen as belonging to no one and up for grabs by the powerful. Thus, any who could misappropriate these resources is celebrated by his or her primordial public as a hero or heroine who has acquired their share of the national cake. What this means is that there is no commitment to the common good. Recently, what Peter Ekeh called the primordial public has increasingly lost its hold on individuals. People increasingly act as if they have no obligation to anyone, not even to their families or kindred or to any higher principle except to their inordinate ambition to be wealthy. This is the implication of the practice of Yahoo+ when people are ready to sacrifice loved ones for money and personal ambition. We have earlier drawn attention to this in terms of rule of the powerful and of wealth as contrasted to rule of law, principles and ideals.

It is unfortunate that the above emphasis on power and wealth is being reinforced by a particular strand or emphasis in Christianity – the Prosperity Message. Note that I did not speak about Pentecostalism. This is because this emphasis can be detected in the activities of some ministers in the mainline Churches and by many lay faithful who run ministries while claiming to belong to the mainline Churches. This strand of Christianity has two main emphases. The first is the power of the man or woman of God. These have spun a discourse in which human deification is understood in terms of the human being, in this case, the owner of the ministry, being granted God-like status that enables him or her to have God at his or her beck and call. Some have blown this out of proportion by claiming that they could make direct phone calls to God. The death and resurrection of Jesus is interpreted as granting dominion to believers, who have been chosen to be winners. This brings us to the second emphasis. Living in dominion or being a winner means having all of one's needs, if not wants, fulfilled – health, wealth, fertility, longevity, etc. The intervention of the “power-full” man or woman of God combined with other ritual prescriptions, such as, sowing of seed, *ọlụ ezinaulọ*, etc – guarantee one's rehabilitation in the life of dominion and abundance.

The Prosperity Message came about through the transnational influence of Pentecostalism especially the brand from the United States of America. However, it resonates with elements of the people's primal religious culture. When the missionaries came to Africa, they built hospitals to take care of the

health challenges of the people. They still understood their mission in terms of routing the devil. In other words, without denying the existence of the supernatural world of spirits, the world was sufficiently disenchanted that health challenges could be addressed in the hospitals. The primal worldview of the people had this balance. The Igbo, for example, had *dibia mgborogwu*, who prescribe herbal remedies and *dibia afa* – diviners. But the missionaries, despite numerous references in the Old Testament to the efficacy of animal sacrifices and direct divine communication to the prophets and to others through dreams, had no provisions for such phenomena. The African Initiatives in Christianity (AIC), such as the *Aladura Churches*, *Odozi Obodo*, emerged and emphasized this office as well as other elements of the primal religious worldview of the people. Among these elements is anthropocentricity, that is, the view that religion is supposed to cater for the temporal needs of the adherents. There is an expectation that all things being equal, persons are to live in abundance of health, wealth, fertility and longevity of life. When this is not the case, there is a suspicion that the lack is an omen; that it is not in vain (*o gbaghi aka*). Concerted effort is then made to identify and placate the aggrieved spirit by ritual experts.

As already said, Prosperity Message resonates with the emphases of the African Initiatives in Christianity (AIC). Fulfillment is envisioned to be in this earthly life and obstacles to this fulfillment are conceptualized in terms of the intervention of spirit forces. Unlike in the primal religious worldview where the spirit forces are neutral or ambivalent, in Prosperity Message the spirit world is demonized. This is in line with the warfare theodicy. The death and resurrection of Jesus is seen as marks of his victory over Satan and all evil spirits. All Christians, and in a pre-eminent way, the “power-full” man or woman of God, enjoy this victory with Jesus.

Despite the resonance between the Prosperity Message and the Igbo primal religious worldview, the difference in the North American and the Nigerian contexts, create remarkable divergence as regards the import of this perspective in these contexts. With a booming economy, quality healthcare system and systems of social support, Prosperity Message in North America amounts to a transcription of the self-help talks by people like Dale Carnegie onto the religious register. In the Nigerian context, however, where there is scarcity of opportunities for upward social mobility, with broken healthcare services and insecurity to life and property, it serves as a way of

conceptualizing negative experiences. A car crash is easily attributed to the evil machination of an old woman in the village. No question is raised about the condition of the road, the road worthiness of the vehicle, the eye- and general health and skill of the driver, the thoroughness of his training and certification. Similarly, joblessness or the phenomenon of mature girls not finding suitors, may be attributed to the envy of an uncle who stalled the progress of his sibling's family through occult means. No thought is given to the economic situation in Nigeria, the rate at which jobs are created and how this affects the male population regarding marriage. In short, the warfare theodicy of the Prosperity Message abstracts from socio-economic, cultural and political processes that are at the basis of many negative experiences that people go through. It projects explanation onto the spirit world. In this way, the so-called "power-full" man or woman of God gains foothold to ply his or her trade. No wonder this brand of Christianity is described by some as a scam and ineffectual in addressing the living context of the adherents.

## **8. HARNESSING THE TRANSFORMATIONAL POTENTIAL OF CHRISTIANITY**

As seen above, the Nationalists strove first to get the political kingdom but failed to address some of the contradictions built into the colonial state that made it serve colonial interest. The Ugandan scholar, Mahmood Mamdani, laid bare the contradiction of the indirect rule system of government used by the British and showed how these run contrary to democratic culture.<sup>29</sup> At the heart of this contradiction is the hijacking and instrumentalization of traditional institutions in the service of colonial interest. In this regard one remembers the warrant chieftiancy created in Igboland and how those recruited for this office were those to whose credit was the readiness to carry out the bidding of the colonialists with ruthless efficiency.<sup>30</sup> This presented governance in terms of the rule of the powerful, with or without legitimacy, rather than the rule of law. The result was corruption and abuse of power.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> Adiele Afigbo, *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in Southeastern Nigeria 1891-1929* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

<sup>31</sup> Uzochukwu J. Njoku, "Colonial Political Re-Engineering and the Genesis of Modern Corruption in African Public Service: The Issue of the Warrant Chiefs of Southeastern Nigeria as a Case in Point," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 14:1 (2005) 99-116. See also, Lawrence Nwankwo, "Corruption, the State and the Challenge of Social Stability in Nigeria" *UJAH: UNIZIK Journal of Arts and Humanities* 14:3 (2013) 45-64.

Similarly, the colonial state was not answerable or accountable to the Nigerian people but to officers in Britain. This lack of accountability has continued under both the military and civilian dispensations. Electoral fraud is the highest manifestation of this disdain for the choice of the people.

Until recently, appeal to the primordial public has been used to justify and cover up some practices that are anomalous to the *episteme* or rationale of the state. However, the deepening socio-economic, cultural and political crises that have bedeviled Nigeria have forced many, especially the young ones to rethink and focus on taking back the country from the elite, even those from their own ethnic group. Singapore offers us hope – a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, which was also colonized by the British, but managed to get its acts together. The first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, pointed out the effort made to run a transparent government, a government that is accountable to the people, one with zero tolerance for corruption and underlined the importance of this. Corruption in this context goes beyond misappropriation of funds to abuse of power. Positively put, it is a government that abides by the rule of law.<sup>32</sup> In a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, it is only when people perceive that everyone is equal before the law and is so treated, that national integration becomes possible.

It will be a wrong impression to see the challenge of upholding the rule of law as pertaining to law enforcement agents, judiciary workers, politicians, and influential people in society. It is rather a challenge to all the citizenry in their different life contexts. This is because the rule of law is only a place holder for the challenge to live not according to one's whims and caprices or to live in fulfillment of one's desires, but to commit oneself to living according to what is larger than oneself. It is to live according to the principles of justice, peace, love and truth. It is to act in such a way that one is ready to make the maxim of one's action universal principle. These principles challenge the market man or woman to conduct business and pursue profit but not at the detriment of other members of society. This means that there is consciousness of the wrongness of the adulteration of products because it goes against justice and fairness. A lecturer would understand that he or she has an obligation to the students in truth and love, to prepare his or her

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<sup>32</sup> Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

lecture with due diligence for effective delivery. The student would also invest in his or her studies so that he or she would gain commensurable knowledge to justify the certificate he or she will be issued. In the family, parents would endeavour, in fairness to the children they brought into the world, to provide a loving and conducive atmosphere for their integral development. One can multiply examples.

In the Nigerian context, this invitation to live according to higher values is honoured in the breach than in the observance. Things are so bad that the basic frame for looking at life is that of a struggle. For some it is a struggle for survival. For others, it is a struggle to excel or to retain whatever inch they had gained. It is a question of one either eats or exploits the other or one is eaten or exploited by others. What is clear is that in a survival mode, the instinct of self-preservation is often at overdrive. This may explain the seeming compartmentalization of life observed in the lives of some Christians. In the Church, they hear sermons on the social virtues of social justice, love, truth and peace. They identify with these values. Yet, as soon as they step out of the Church, the logic of survival reasserts itself and takes upper hand again. They get back to default mode of living for themselves and their survival and flourishing at the expense of others. To steel oneself against this focus on one's well-being and to commit to higher values for the good of all, is already a testament to the triumph of hope.

The Prosperity Message, which is the dominant form of popular religiosity, is not helping matters. It exacerbates the sense of struggle through its warfare theodicy. Besides, it focuses on the individual whose welfare is abstracted from that of the community and made to depend on direct divine disposition. A change in fortune is seen as a call to engage in one ritual practice or the other – paying of tithes, engaging in fasting, etc – as part of one's bargain. Relationship with the divine is transactional in this scheme.

To be transformational, the Christian faith as an invitation to a loving relationship with God must be foregrounded. This is at the heart of the revelation of Jesus Christ. The fact that the Jesus event – birth, ministry, death and resurrection – is rooted in God's love for the world is attested to in various parts of Scriptures (Jn 3:16, 1 Jn 4:9-10). God chose us in Jesus Christ to be holy and blameless before him in love (Eph 1:4). We are not chosen as individuals. Rather, God calls us to a community, the People of God, the new

Israel. We have a mission – to renew the face of the earth through the power of the Holy Spirit. The implication is that none of us lives for himself but for him who died and rose from the dead (Rom 14:7-9).

God has a purpose for planting each one of us in our various families and communities. At a general level, the purpose is for each to bloom and flourish where he or she is planted through the exercise of our God-given creativity. God has given human beings the intellect to deploy and conquer the earth in a positive sense. The food you ate this morning is the product of human labour beginning with the farmer to the cook. The phone, the electricity, the microphone, the wristwatch etc., are products of people's sleepless nights and diligent research. These did not fall from heaven. Maybe, God planted you in our midst to be the source of great idea or invention, but you are not working hard enough to realize it. Some exercise destructive creativity which can be contained only through the cultivation of moral leadership exercised in hope.

In the light of this new understanding of our call as Christians by God, it becomes clear that each of us has the challenge of growing in moral leadership first of ourselves and then of any group we find ourselves in. Moral leadership as shown above pertains to steering one's life according to the higher values of justice, love, truth and peace. This guarantees the integration of the fractured Nigerian polity and discharge the transformational power of the Christian faith. What the Christian faith did in Medieval Europe, it can still do in the Nigerian context. We only need to pitch in, allow ourselves to be transformed by the loving power of God, so that we can carry the fire of that love into the whole world beginning with our immediate context.

As I thank you for your kind attention, I challenge you to allow the transformation to begin with you!

Peace be with you!



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