



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 20 · THURSDAY 15 OCTOBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 20

WHO WOULD SAY HE IS AGAINST PEACE?

A non-Catholic explains why encyclicals are political without popes
being politicians — and then why the streets are full everywhere.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 20 — recorded in the second week of the #EndSARS protests, and three weeks before the American election.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Who Would Stand Up And Say He Is Against Peace?

A viewer asks whether popes should take political positions. The answer — from a self-declared non-Catholic and non-theologian — turns into the sharpest thing said all year about why the streets are full from Bangkok to Lagos.

A solo broadcast recorded on 15 October 2020, with protests running in Thailand and across Nigeria, an American election three weeks off, and a Supreme Court confirmation hearing in its fourth day. **It begins with a question left over from the previous week and never quite leaves it: what happens when a moral claim is made in a room full of states, and none of them can afford to say no to it out loud.**

An archive edition, recorded 15 October 2020, in the eighth month of the Covid-19 emergency. Documents, offices and events are described as they stood that week; where the Professor's attributions differ from the record, the correction is noted rather than quietly fixed. He asks twice on air to be corrected if he has erred on matters of Catholic doctrine, and this issue takes him at his word.

01 · SPIRITUAL, AND THEREFORE POLITICAL

The question is whether a pope should be taking political positions at all. His answer separates two things the question had joined: the popes are emphatically not behaving as politicians, and the documents they issue nonetheless have political consequences, because a claim grounded in scripture lands in a world of states.

He declares his standing before he starts, and does it twice: he is not a Catholic, not a priest, and not a professor of theology — a professor of political science reading documents that happen to be religious.

His favourite pope is John XXIII, and he reaches for the natural-law argument: that the international community is not a jungle in which states may behave anyhow, but a community, and one grounded in natural law — from which, he notes, international law itself was originally distilled. Read that to a class today, he says, at a moment when United Nations agencies are under attack, and the political content is unmistakable without a word of politics in it.

Then the example that gives this issue its title. Issue an encyclical called Peace on Earth while a war is running and small nations are being brutalised by large ones, and the message is aimed squarely at the superpowers. And who is going to stand up and announce that he does not believe in peace on earth?

“Who will get up and proclaim that he does not believe in peace on earth?”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · IN HOPE WE SURVIVE

From Benedict XVI he takes *Spe Salvi*, and translates the Latin himself: in hope we survive. Not that we exist, he stresses — that our survival is founded on hope, and therefore you cannot give up.

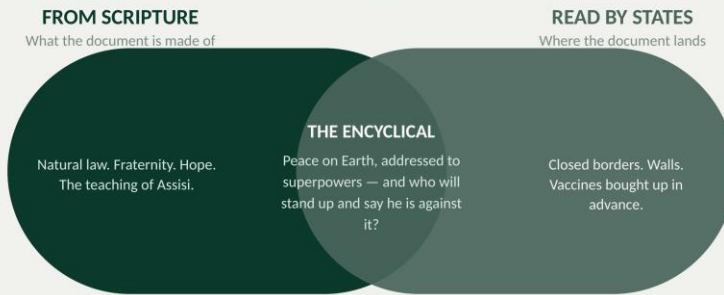
What he does with it is the interesting part. He recognises the sentiment immediately as one his own political generation used: keep hope alive, said when confronting tyrants, when demonstrating, when cheated. And he offers it, unprompted, to the Black Lives Matter movement — noting that the encyclical long predates it, which is rather his point about what these documents are for.

The most recent one, from Francis, he summarises as fraternal love having no geographical boundary — and therefore, he adds, no racial or cultural one. He traces it to Francis of Assisi instructing his brothers in the monastery, and behind that to the scriptural line about a man who cannot love the brother he can see.

Then he sets it against the week's news, which is where the argument bites. A pandemic in which everyone has closed up shop and borders have been re-established and reinforced; a wall going up on one frontier; and vaccines being bought up in advance and held, while the agencies argue they should be available to everybody. His illustration is the cleanest statement of the case for global distribution made anywhere in this archive: if ninety-nine people in a room are vaccinated and one is not, that one can infect the ninety-nine. Beggar-my-neighbour will not work.

Spiritual, and therefore political

His answer to a viewer: the popes are not politicians, and the documents are not neutral



"I am not a Catholic and I am not a professor of theology. But you cannot ignore the political connotation."

SESSION 20 • WHO WOULD SAY HE IS AGAINST PEACE?

As argued on this broadcast

The distinction he draws, and where the two circles overlap.

03 • GOOD TROUBLE, AND THE SHAPE IT TAKES

Asked whether the protests spreading across the world are the start of something, he answers with a premise rather than a forecast: as long as there is injustice, people cannot be satisfied. He quotes John Lewis, dead three months, on good trouble — and on not hesitating to get into it.

Then he does what he does best, which is to put the week into a series. The French Revolution began with people who could not afford bread and a queen who suggested cake, and ended with both her head and her husband's. The Russian Revolution began with people protesting their conditions, and Lenin arrived to capture something already in motion. And the most consequential of all, he says, was the American one — whose founding document is quoted in the cellars of every movement since, more than anything Marx wrote.

The formulation he settles on is Kennedy's, and he paraphrases it exactly: those who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable.

His realism about outcomes is worth keeping. Not all of them succeed — the Arab Spring worked in some countries and was a disaster in others. But where a movement is derailed, the seeds are planted and will germinate. He points out that the Russian Revolution was not started by the communists, that the structure eventually built on it destroyed itself, and that the movement in Russia is not over. And he draws the same line at home: Black Lives Matter resurrects the hopes of the anti-slavery movement, of which pan-Africanism and the African Union are also children — still growing, still maturing.

"Those who do not make peaceful change possible make violent change inevitable. That is what is happening all over the world."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi, paraphrasing Kennedy

04 • WHO DERAILS A MOVEMENT, AND FROM WHICH DIRECTION

The moderator raises the awkward fact that men later charged with plotting to kidnap a governor had been seen at protests. The Professor treats infiltration as a structural feature rather than an accident, and says movements of this kind will have to confront it.

His historical case is the French Revolution again: the Jacobins captured a rising that was not meant to be that bloody and did not have to end at the guillotine, and it took a decade and more before order returned under Napoleon.

Then he insists on the part the question had left out. Agents provocateurs do not come from one direction. Some are planted by the establishment, because the establishment is never in favour of demonstrations whatever it says publicly, and because its emphasis is always on law and order rather than on justice.

The example he chooses is deliberately uncomfortable for anyone who thinks the state chooses a side and stays on it: while President Johnson was publicly embracing we shall overcome, the FBI had a free hand to disrupt the civil rights movement.

“The establishment is never in favour of these demonstrations, whatever the mouth says. Its emphasis is law and order rather than justice.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • A FIG LEAF OVER BAMAKO

On ECOWAS lifting sanctions on Mali, his verdict is unsparing: what is being called a success is the nakedness of a military intervention covered with a fig leaf and a sprinkling of civilians. Rather than an outright military regime there is a retired officer as president and a former foreign minister as prime minister — while the coup plotters hold the vice-presidency and defence. He concedes the limit ECOWAS was working against: it went as far as it could without invading.

The larger argument is the one worth carrying. The African Union's founding articles commit member states to good governance, to obeying court orders, and to free, fair and transparent elections. By his count something like thirteen African governments are in breach — extending their stay beyond the constitution, holding office through crooked elections, or ignoring court orders, particularly on the human rights of their own citizens.

And neither ECOWAS nor the Union interposes itself when a sitting government breaks those articles. It remembers its powers only when the army acts. The consequence he names is a reputational one and it is serious: these bodies come to look like agents of oppression, guaranteeing governments against their own people. They must, he says, find their way back to the balance where they also tell a government it has strayed.

“They remember the charter only when the army moves. The Union should not be seen as an agent of oppression that protects only oppressive governments.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • THE THIRD TERM NOBODY IS DISCUSSING

His test case is Côte d'Ivoire, where a presidential election is a fortnight away and two candidates have withdrawn on the ground that the incumbent is seeking a term the constitution does not allow.

He gives the incumbent the fairness the situation deserves. The man had agreed not to contest; the party's endorsed candidate, its prime minister, suffered a heart attack in a cabinet meeting and died; and the party was left without one. What he will not accept is the conclusion drawn from that. Do not tell him that in the whole of Côte d'Ivoire — a country he calls among the most developed on the continent culturally, intellectually and politically — the ruling party could not find one credible candidate to sponsor.

The sharpest observation is about memory. This is a president whose own installation required the intervention of French and West African troops. That he of all people should now be doing this, the Professor says, is a remarkably short memory.

And his complaint returns to the institution rather than the man. He has heard nothing from ECOWAS. It should step forward now — not wait until good governance and term limits have all been violated and then start blaming the opposition rather than the government.

“Do not tell me that in the whole of Côte d'Ivoire the ruling party could not find a credible candidate. Do not tell me that.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 • WHY RIYADH LOST THE VOTE

On Saudi Arabia failing to win a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, he says he is surprised and unsurprised at once, and the two halves are both instructive.

Unsurprised, because states notorious for violating human rights have been voted onto that body before and some got through in this round too. Had Riyadh gone through, he would have called it business as usual.

Surprised, because it did not — and he attributes that to the killing of the journalist and the United Nations rapporteur's report, which member states evidently judged made a seat impossible without slapping the face of the organisation itself.

His second explanation is the one a diplomat would reach for, and it is about absence rather than principle. In the past the United States would have piled into the contest and leaned on member states to squeeze an ally through. This time Washington was consumed by an election, its president had been ill, and it had itself withdrawn from the Council. The vote, on this reading, measures American weakness as much as Saudi conduct.

“In the past the United States would have piled in and pressed its allies. This time it was embroiled in an election — and outside the Council itself.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • WARTS AND ALL

Asked whether America is losing its standing as a democratic exemplar, he begins somewhere unexpected: thank the social media. This is the case for the information revolution, and it is a case about suppression rather than speech.

Voter suppression, he argues, is not new. What is new is that it can be seen. Before, the established media would have kept it out — not, he says with all due sense of responsibility, out of cowardice, but because during the Cold War the press was in cahoots with the establishment in the project of showing America to the world in a positive light. The television stations and the major newspapers would have filtered it.

Now nobody can filter it, because everybody is a journalist. Stand in line for five or seven hours in Georgia and you, or your son, or your wife, can put it on the internet before you reach the front.

The consequence for him is personal rather than analytical, and it is the most affecting passage in the broadcast. The world, he says, needs a country that embodies human dignity and hope — the light on the hill that an oppressed man sees through the bars of his cell. To discover that the light is not there is demoralising. He hopes only that what is now visible does not damage the outcome three weeks away.

"You look through the bars of your cell and the shining light you see is the light of hope. To learn that it is not there is demoralising."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • WHAT A RESTORATION WOULD ACTUALLY REQUIRE

Asked how hard rebuilding that image would be, he answers with the encyclical he quoted an hour earlier: in hope we survive. Then he sets out what he thinks the job is, and it is notably unlike a victory lap.

A winner would have to understand that the victory is not only America's, and that there is work attached. It cannot be triumphalism — we are back — because the high ground has to be reclaimed and fought for rather than reoccupied.

The vice-president, he thinks, would be a major factor in that, and he is explicit about the mechanism: her presence functions as something close to a confession that the country derailed for four years, alongside the claim that the America you were used to has returned.

What follows the confession is partnership. Not the triumphalism the United States tends towards, but hope partly delivered, and then a role as a partner in rebuilding an international community — which is where the evening began.

"It cannot be triumphalism. He would have to reclaim that high ground and fight for it."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • TWO THINGS A NOMINEE SAID

On whether the election could still be delayed — the question prompted by positive tests in the vice-presidential candidate's circle — he is flatly reassuring. The process is too far gone, the principals are on their feet, the campaigns are running, the confirmation hearings are proceeding and Congress is functioning. He allows himself only a hope that none of the principals falls ill in the remaining fortnight.

On the confirmation hearings themselves he is not surprised they are going ahead — that is what was promised — and he acknowledges that nothing can stop approval by the full Senate. What he wants to record is that the hearings changed his mind about something, which he treats as worth saying out loud.

Two answers did it. The first was the nominee refusing the inference that criticising the Chief Justice's reasoning on one aspect of the health care act made her an opponent of the act — I am not, she said, which he notes is as close to a commitment as such a hearing permits.

The second was on severability, and he explains it properly. If the challenged portion of a statute can be excised and the core still stands, you excise it and uphold the rest; only if removal destroys what remains does the whole statute fall. He compares it to the doctrine he knows from Commonwealth practice, where a judge takes a pen to the offending clauses and asks whether the legislation still makes sense — and notes that courts are extremely reluctant to strike down an entire statute if they can avoid it.

He adds, as a straw in the wind, that the governing party appears to be backing away from total repeal under pressure from its own constituents who benefit from the act. And he ends with the appropriate caution: you cannot predict a judge once he or she is on the bench. His two takeaways, he says, simply make him feel somewhat more comfortable.

“You cannot predict a judge once he or she is on the bench. But those two answers make me feel somewhat more comfortable.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- An encyclical works, on his account, because nobody can publicly refuse it. Is that moral authority, or is it the absence of a cost for ignoring it?
- He credits social media with exposing voter suppression that the Cold War press concealed. What is today's equivalent of that concealment — and who is doing it?
- If the African Union only acts against unconstitutional seizures and never against unconstitutional retentions, it protects incumbents by design. What would a rule that caught both look like?
- A vice-president as a form of national confession is a heavy load for one office. What happens to that argument if the confession is never made explicitly?
- He changed his mind about a nominee on the strength of two answers under oath. How much weight should confirmation testimony carry, given how little binds it?

Watch Session 20 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinsights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

*An early broadcast with a correspondingly rough automatic transcript; quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — with the raw forms listed in the transcript header. Three corrections, offered in the spirit in which the Professor twice invited them: the natural-law argument about the international community belongs to *Pacem in Terris* rather than to *Mater et Magistra*, which is concerned with social and economic justice; Lenin returned to Russia in 1917 from Switzerland, through Germany, rather than from Austria; and the Commonwealth doctrine of excising an offending clause is the blue pencil rule, not the red. The scriptural line he searches for is 1 John 4:20, and runs the other way round from the version he recalls. His reading of the nominee's evidence on severability proved sound: the challenge to the health care act was disposed of on standing in June 2021, with her in the majority, and the Act stood.*