

AFRICA ARISE

Remarks by

His Excellency President Olusegun Obasanjo

**At the Maiden Opening Ceremony of the African Forum on Religion & Government
(AFREG)**

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PROTOCOL

On behalf of the people and Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, I welcome you to the first outing of the African Forum on Religion and Government (AFREG I).

AFREG I, I understand, is planned to “be a continental consultation of African Christian thinkers and leaders” with the purpose “to build a movement of African leaders of integrity who are committed to transforming Africa into a first world continent shaped by God-centered moral values”. There is no doubt that an initiative of this nature is timely.

The potential of our continent, the very home of mankind and of the earliest civilisation, has never been in doubt. Yet too often, whether as decision makers, or as politicians, or as commentators, and even as friends of Africa, we have had cause to lament that Africa has been unable to confront adequately the challenges of development. If all that AFREG achieves is to go back to the root causes of the conundrum of African development as it relates to lack of capacity and the obscene gap between promise and performance, that, by itself, would have been enough justification for this conference.

To confront the crisis of African under-development head-on, the ethics of development have to be better appreciated by decision makers for the whole basis of development is ethical. It is a reflection of the ethics of responsibility, of a sense that one is not only on this planet to consume, but is, primarily, also in partnership with his Maker, a producer. And if there is one thing Africa needs more than anything else, it is a return to the ethic of production; the ethic of craftsmanship; the imperishable signature of the worker in the community.

The point has been canvassed by some scholars that the African crisis is a cultural one, arising largely from the discontinuities in our indigenous, organic response to the challenges of existence which the supremely violent nature of slave trade unleashed on our psyche and reflexes. My attitude to such analysis is that even if there were correct, we must move on. No doubt, we much come to terms with the unrelenting trauma of 500 years of slave trade, but I am certain that God Almighty, whose grace and love have no bounds, has given us the capacity of recovery which we are yet to draw on from with adequate enthusiasm.

The healing is long overdue. We must now pull into the depths of our soul and find a meaningful response to the disorientation that screams at us everyday, everywhere. We must find those kinds of strengths which only the abused and the victimised can recognise.

Is there no balm in Gilead? Has the Lord not spoken that Africa is part of His divine economy? What is holding us back, when Jesus Himself has already liberated the continent?

History is being made by the gathering of Africa's leading theologians, social scientists, politicians and other decision makers for the purpose of closing the gap between creed and conduct which has enfeebled the continent's capacity to actualise many of its lofty dreams. Questions that I imagine may need to be posed and answered in this important conference will, of course, include:

1. How do we reconcile a global reputation for being a very religious continent with a global reputation for being a very corrupt continent, if the Transparency International Perception Index Report is to be believed?
2. Is there a theology of the African State, strong and adequate enough to situate States in Africa as deserving of loyalty in the context of a Pauline theology of the ruler and the ruled, very much different from our enthronement of ethnicity as the first principle of statecraft?
3. How do we begin to internalise the truths of our two historical religions in order to walk our talk and ensure relative peace so conducive to drive development on the continent?
4. How can the received faiths of the two of the world's historical religions really speak more intimately, and more authentically to our cultural experience, and by so doing become more relevant to our situation and conditions?

The idea behind AFREG commenced upon the successfully hosting of a Prayer Breakfast for African Heads of State in New York, when I quipped, WHAT NEXT? Where do we go from the Banquet? How do we harness our famed resources to fight hunger in the continent, and its corollary evils of disease, conflicts, high morality, and endemic poverty?

Responses to this concern eventually crystallised in the proposal for a continental forum for Africans to address those leadership issues that are germane to our Christian witness in a season when hope and despair are in close-finish race.

The problem had never really been one of morality. The matter is more fundamental than that. The challenge has been how to move spirituality to its proper place as the underpinning factor of everything else. A moral response merely reflects the ethical concerns of the people at a particular point in time. It can be just like fashion. It may not have the transcendental quality of a concept worth living for and therefore worth dying for. If there is one thing Africa badly needs, it is perhaps such a unifying principle that commands the respect of all and life-changing enough to energise us to make awesome sacrifices for the development of the continent.

A spiritual response will define our core positions on all aspects of life, whether in our work ethics, or relationships, or interfaith issues, or even morality. The challenge there is to differentiate religiosity from spirituality. Even the folks in the village are very religious. There have always been. They only needed the philosophical push to begin to perceive these matters from a developmental aspect.

The issue of spirituality will address things like relationship with one's children, one's neighbours, one's family, and even relationships with our brothers of other faiths, especially Islam. That is how all-encompassing it can be.

Religiosity and spirituality are two different things. An understanding of this equips one to both appreciate our commonality as creatures of worship irrespective of creed or faith but proceed, as a matter of integrity, to acknowledge that while we are all children of God and must treat each other as such, the Christian delineation of children of God by common grace and children of God by saving grace provides a strong dynamic for Christian engagement.

Values start from home. If one's children know their father has itchy fingers as a public official, what values can such a parent teach, since values have to start from home?

I came across a challenge which the National Secretary of Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, Nigeria's Ruling Party – Ojo Maduekwe – threw up in a paper he presented 8 years ago, in 1998. He argued:

“Unless a new generation of African Theologians of both the cross and the crescent in concert with other serious social thinkers are able to evolve paradigm shifts that would lead to the urgent internalisation of the timeless truths of the two major religions of Africa, our politics will remain hopelessly corrupt, our bureaucracy relentlessly kleptocratic, and the task of nation-building a casualty of the deadly duels of primitive accumulation.”

I call on AFREG to make an adequate response to that heartfelt appeal that was made during those weeks in 1998 when I did not even have the freedom to merely show up in any conference whatsoever. It is as valid then as it is now that I have the pleasure to address you as your host President.

I thank you for your attention.