

RELIGION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN AFRICA: A CRITICAL AND APPRECIATIVE PERSPECTIVE¹

Obaji M Agbiji & Ignatius Swart

Research Institute for Theology and Religion

University of South Africa

Abstract

Religion constitutes an inextricable part of African society. As such, political and socio-economic activities are often flavoured with religious expressions and rituals. Whilst Africans are steeped in religiosity – this is expressed in many ways – poverty and corruption are rife on the continent. The question thus arises as to whether African religiosity gives impetus to poverty and corruption on the continent or whether religion has a crucial role to play in the liberation of African societies from poverty and corruption. By using the concept of religion in relation to African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam, this article investigates the role of religion in the crisis of poverty and corruption in African society and argues that whilst religion has been instrumentalised in some instances to perpetuate poverty and corruption on the continent, it remains a crucial component of ‘Africanness’ and could contribute to moral, socio-political and economic transformation.

Key Words: Religion; African Traditional Religion; Christianity; Islam; Social Transformation; Poverty; Corruption; Development; Social Capital; Values; Africa

Introduction

Religion constitutes an inextricable part of African society. But although religion is flourishing in Africa, many sub-Saharan African countries are amongst the world’s poorest nations. Regrettably, according to a recent report of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), nine countries in sub-Saharan Africa rank among the seventeen most corrupt countries in the world (NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency *et al.* 2012:14).

In response to the challenges of poverty, corruption and underdevelopment faced on the African continent, Lual Deng (1998:141-146) has called on African intellectuals to look at African history for a possible guide to an appropriate developmental framework that would integrate African social values and institutions in combination with the economic fundamentals included in contemporary development theories. In the same vein, Dele Omoegbon (2010:55) has suggested that the study of African culture and history could

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provide guidance for future African development. African religions therefore constitute an enormous terrain that overlaps with the socio-political and economic spheres in sub-Saharan Africa and its diaspora.

Harold Koenig (2009:284) argues that the definition of religion is generally agreed upon by scholars of religion: it comprises beliefs, practices and rituals that are related to the sacred, to God, to the mystical or to the supernatural. Religion, accordingly, is not just a typical function or variable amongst other variables: it constitutes the root from which the different branches of life sprout, grow and flourish. From this point of view, religion is of integral importance: it concerns the deepest root of human existence and integrates human life into a coherent whole (Schuurman 2011:273-274).

John Mbiti, for his part, has argued that it is difficult to define religion. He argues that it is even more difficult to define religion in the context of African traditional life. Despite this difficulty, he asserts that for Africans, religion is an ontological phenomenon: it pertains to the question of existence or being (Mbiti 1999:15). Religion has rules about conduct that guide life within a social group and it is often organised and practised in a community, instead of being an individual or personal affair. All African societies view life as one big whole and religion permeates all aspects of life. In terms of this thinking, it is the whole that brings about the unification of the parts. There is no such thing as compartmentalisation or dichotomisation when it comes to human existence: there is no division between matter and spirit, soul and body, and religious practice and daily life.

Speculative reflection without practice has never been characteristic of Africans; the two always go together (Kunhiyop 2008:226). As such, in the African worldview religion permeates the political and socio-economic life of Africans, just as politics, economic activities and other vital components of life permeate religion. In many African countries people who do not subscribe to any form of religion make up less than 0.1% of the population (Koenig 2009:283; cf. Mbiti 1999:15).

In line with the perspectives (or claims) of several other scholars (Deng 1998:143-241; Koenig 2009:284; Kunhiyop 2008:226; Nkom 2000:75; Omosegbon 2010:55; Schuurman 2011:273-274), in this article we uphold the thesis that religion constitutes the main fabric of African societies, and is intertwined with their general existence, including their socio-political and economic development. Furthermore, like these scholars we similarly depart from an understanding of 'Africa' as constituting 'a specific cultural context' that allows for at least some degree of common identification amidst diversification. "In spite of myriads of subcultures, there are common denominators and cultural signifiers that underscore shared identity, and denote the deep-level assumptions and allegiances that format the varied cultural ingredients and provide larger meaning" (Kalu 2010b:4; cf. Kalu 2010a: 11-15).

Within a framework that allows for common identification and understanding, this article wishes to reconsider the role of religion in eradicating poverty and corruption – and in doing so contribute to the socio-political and economic transformation of sub-Saharan African societies. By using the concept of religion in relation to African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam, the article seeks answers to the following questions: What is the essential nature of African religiosity? How do poverty and corruption pose major challenges to African societies? If African societies are very religious but at the same time very poor and corrupt, to what extent does religion contribute to poverty and corruption on the continent? If religion is crucial to Africans, how could its resources and actors be mobilised to liberate African societies from poverty and corruption? In striving to answer

these questions, we will first seek to develop a better grasp of religion as a major constituent of the worldview of African people. This will be followed by a more pertinent examination of how the realities of endemic poverty and corruption pose ongoing challenges to African societies, despite the phenomenon of overt religiosity in those same societies. Departing from this discussion we will proceed to reflect more critically on the factor of religious complacency and on how religion is instrumentalised – especially through Africa’s leaders – to sustain and enhance the structural existence of poverty and corruption in African societies. Finally, we will end our discussion by giving new consideration to the ways in which the resources of religion could be utilised by Africans as a force for positive social transformation and development in African society.

Religion as a Way of Life

Secular modernism has succeeded in distancing religion from the socio-economic and political spheres in the developed world (Clarke & Jennings 2008:1). However, despite the influence of secular modernism in Africa, such separation has not left a lasting imprint on African societies, where religion continues to play an important role in socio-economic and political life.

Mbiti asserts that Africans are notoriously religious. According to him, religion permeates all departments of life to such an extent that it is not easy or possible to isolate it (Mbiti 1999:1). Although the African religious consciousness was initially derived from the practice of traditional religion, Christianity and Islam have given further impetus to this consciousness. Conversely, however, as the unfolding of a natural cultural process, both Christianity and Islam have in turn been influenced by traditional religion (Muzorewa 1985:31).

In African traditional life, the individual is immersed in religious participation that starts before birth and continues after death. For the African, “to live is to be caught up in a religious drama” (Mbiti 1999:1). Religion is indeed fundamental for Africans, since human beings live in a religious universe. Both the universe, and practically all human activities in it, are seen and experienced from a religious perspective. This means that the whole of existence is a religious phenomenon, which leads Mbiti to argue that in the African worldview, to exist is to be religious in a religious universe. In this sense it is unthinkable for an African to live without religion. This religious worldview informs the philosophical understanding of African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships (Mbiti 1999:15). This same worldview also accounts for the religiosity of the African in political and socio-economic life (Kalu 2010a:11-15). That Africans resort to religion unconsciously shows how deeply a religious consciousness is ingrained in an African person, whether he or she is at home or in the diaspora (Chitando *et al.* 2013:5-7). It is, therefore, common for Africans to display their religious beliefs and rituals in moments of joy and despair. Africans come alive when they manifest their religiosity. African expressions, names, activities, symbols, celebrations, work, ideology and philosophies are loaded with religiosity.

Whilst the African traditional religious heritage remains a potent force that – on a subconscious level – still influences the values, identity and outlook of Africans, Christianity and Islam have become major sources of influence in African society. Christianity has been in existence in Africa for more than two thousand years and its enormous influence is undeniable. Evidence of such influence can be seen in, for example, the number of Christian churches, names and institutional establishments in many African societies

(Metuh 2002:vii-xvi). In turn, Islam has also been around for such a long period of time that it has led Mbiti (1999:223-248) to comment that these two religions can both claim to have become indigenous, albeit as later additions to African societies (when compared with African Traditional Religion). Mbiti argues that it is obvious that – in their encounter with indigenous religious traditions – Christianity and Islam have succeeded in converting many Africans. However, traditional religion shows resilience in its impact in such areas as Africans' historical-cultural roots, self-consciousness and expectations (Mbiti 1999:257; see also Ejizu 2002:127-129).

The influence of Christianity on African Traditional Religion and African Christian religiosity was achieved through the evangelisation of Africans by returnee African Christian slaves and Christian missionaries from the West. At the same time, it was the African Independent Churches (AICs) that introduced African traditional religious practices in African Christian religious communities (Kalu 2010b:5; Onunma 2002:68-69). These churches (AICs) are identified with the Pentecostal type of churches generally known as *Aladura* among the Yoruba (in West Africa) (Metuh 2002:xiii), *Zion* (in southern and central Africa), and *Roho* (in eastern Africa) (Kalu 2010b:5).

The emphasis of the *Aladura*, *Zion* and *Roho* churches is on prayer, dreams, prophesy, faith-healing and providing solutions to existential problems. The *Aladura* of West Africa, for example, strongly believe that the spoken word can be endowed with 'Agbara emi' (spiritual power). This idea is derived from Yoruba traditional beliefs but finds biblical backing in 1 Thessalonians 5 and 1 Corinthians 4:20. The *Aladura*, like other AICs, believe in witchcraft, demon-possession, and in the link between sickness, misfortune and the activities of evil spirits – which are also familiar themes in the New Testament and correlate with traditional beliefs (Kalu 2010b:5; Metuh 2002:xiii; Ejizu 2002:127-129).

The influence of the beliefs and practices of the AICs on mainline and Pentecostal churches in Africa and the African diaspora is substantial (Adogame 2013:60-78). Although the emphasis on prayer, healing, the power of the spoken word and music and dance is rooted biblically, these liturgical activities derive from traditional religious practices. The impact of these practices in sustaining a vibrant Christian faith and promoting the growth of the church in Africa and in the diaspora is indeed undeniable (Kalu 2010c:84; Adogame 2013:60-78). Whilst the influence of Christianity on traditional religion (and vice-versa) is significant, especially as this concerns attaining a meaningful indigenous African Christianity, the mutual influence of religion and the socio-political and economic life of Africans should not be underestimated.

Admittedly, just as religion influences the socio-political and economic spheres, so is religion also influenced by these spheres (Kalu 2010a:11-15). African political and economic elite have often resorted to religion in their intense competition for the diminishing resources of wealth, political power and prestige. In African societies such as Nigeria, the state provides a source of power and wealth, more so than any other institution in society. The power and wealth provided by the state is usually competed for with enormous ferocity. Religion is used in this contest as both a contested field and as an instrument of competition. The religious dimension in socio-economic and political contestation in Africa could be said to be both pervasive and complex (Kalu 2010d:36). Kalu argues that the intrusion of spirituality in contemporary political dynamics is, firstly, given impetus by the claim of African politicians that African political ethics are rooted in an African traditional worldview. Secondly, religion is employed in the political and economic spheres by those who legitimate their power by appealing to ritual sources to be found in traditional religion and culture. These two factors "enable traditional secret societies such

as *Ogboni*, *Nyamkpe*, *Owegbe*, and *Ekine* to serve as instruments for mobilising economic and political power” in contemporary African society (Kalu 2010d:37). Whilst Christianity and Islam, like traditional religions, serve as instruments for the mobilisation of political and economic power, they are also wrongly used by the elite as “instruments of political conflict” (Kalu 2010d:37). At the same time, however, if religion is so entrenched in the socio-political and economic lives of Africans, it is unimaginable that it does not also have a vital role to play in the transformation of the continent.

Endemic Poverty and Corruption in the Wake of Overt Religiosity

The recent economic performance of African countries has clearly not done enough to promote economic diversification, job growth and social development in order to lift millions of Africans out of poverty (UNECA 2013:4). And whilst poverty persists on the continent, corruption is also rife (Kolade 2001:79-84).

Definitions of poverty are varied and there is no consensus on the definition of the concept (Laderchi *et al.* 2003:243). According to Peter Townsend, in a more recent discussion on the concept of poverty initiated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “people can be said to be in poverty when they are deprived of income and other resources needed to obtain the conditions of life – the diets, material goods, amenities, standards and services – that enable them to play the roles, meet the obligations and participate in the relationships and customs of their society” (Townsend 2006:5; cf. White & Tiongco 1997:22-26). For his part, Stan Burkey (1993:3-4) defines poverty in terms of basic needs and he distinguishes between absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty refers to the inability of an individual, a community or a nation to meet basic needs such as the need for food, shelter, potable water, healthcare and education. Relative poverty refers to conditions where basic needs are met, but where an inability persists to meet perceived needs and desires. Most African countries fall within the absolute poverty category.

African communities also have definitions, anecdotes and proverbs that depict both the meaning and implications of poverty. For instance, among the Olulumo (Okuni) people of Cross River State in Nigeria, poverty (*okpak*), besides referring to a lack of possessions, financial incapacity and the inability to meet the basic needs of individuals and the community, also denotes a state or condition devoid of people, happiness and good health. This understanding is reflected in proverbs such as *okpak oni okor* (“the poor has nobody”), *kelam ka okpak a dima koide* (“the speech of the poor is heard in the evening or when it is late”), and *okpak oradoma kenyam* (“the poor has a stench”). These proverbs clearly imply a real awareness of how poverty as an undesirable state or condition of human well-being not only leads to exclusion from communal life but also to an undermining of the ‘good life’ that gives meaning and purpose to human existence.²

According to Ndem Ndiyo (2008:175), corruption “is the offering, giving, receiving or soliciting, directly or indirectly, of anything of value to influence improperly the actions of another party”. He goes on to argue that corrupt practices vary enormously in kind from place to place, but usually include fraudulent, collusive, coercive and obstructive practices. Given the levels of poverty on the African continent, Omosogbon (2010:55) supports the acceleration of Africa’s development through diversification but maintains that challenging

² The first author is from Olulumo (Okuni). His understanding of poverty among the Olulumo (Okuni) people is based on personal insights, experience and exposure to his community.

issues such as corruption, civil strife and bad governance – recurring factors in many African nations, such as Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Congo, Egypt, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa and many others – should be taken into consideration.

The perceived notoriety of Nigerians, Ghanaians, Congolese, Cameroonians and other Africans (Okafor 2009:117; Svensson 2005:25) in terms of corruption, both at home and abroad, is irreconcilable with the significant presence of religious centres and activities in those societies. Referring to the example of Nigerian Christians, Ben Kwashi (2008:42) for instance has remarked: “This nation of Nigeria is blessed with every conceivable missionary church and para-church, and the number of prayer ministries is uncountable... And what have we achieved?” In similar vein John Onaiyekan (2010:2) has also commented on the palpable religiosity of Nigerians as evinced by the number of churches and mosques and by the religious noise experienced in Nigerian towns. For him this feature of intense religiosity should be contrasted with the enormity of corruption in Nigerian society.

The enormity of corruption in African society in the midst of intense religiosity inevitably raises serious questions about the kind of Christian, Islamic and traditional religious morality that exists in this predominantly religious continent. Moreover, one may ask: What are the consequences of this form of religiosity? How does the moral experience and performance of Africans conform to the requirements of biblical, Quranic and African traditional religious morality? If Christianity, Islam and traditional religion are the norm, how, then, should the remarkable rise in instances of corruption, the looting of public treasuries, electoral malpractices, cultism, bribery, armed robbery, kidnappings and other forms of criminal activity in so many African societies be explained? What constitutes the actual moral authority of Christians, Muslims and traditional religionists? Is it expressed through the media, the internet, through secular values, reason, tradition or the scriptures? Why have Africans, both in moments of crisis and when in political or elevated positions, failed to live up to their religious vocation, especially in terms of enacting sound moral values? In as much as these are extremely difficult and disturbing questions, they clearly call for deep reflection on the part of religious scholars and practitioners.

Religious Complacency in the Wake of Endemic Poverty and Corruption

Whilst the endemic problems of African poverty and corruption should first of all be blamed on the African political elite, the blame rests in the second place on religious leaders who are part of the elite and have done little to stem poverty and corruption (Gifford 2009:250). Indeed, it could well be said that religious groups – Christian, Islamic and African Traditional – and their leaders have by and large been compliant as far as these problems are concerned. With reference to the case of Nigeria, for instance, Agbiji and Swart (2013) have pointed out that religious and political leaders have through the centuries derived their leadership ideology from similar ideological sources. In doing so, the religious, socio-economic and political spheres have continued to influence each other both positively and negatively. As a result, religion has been used in particular instances by politicians, political institutions, religious leaders and religious communities to foster and sustain the structural entrenchment of poverty and corruption in the continent in a number of ways.

Firstly, the complacent attitudes of religious leaders towards African governments in power (Agi 2008:133) have often resulted in religious leaders’ abdicating their prophetic role. A few examples will suffice in this regard. During Ibrahim Babangida’s regime as a

military despot in Nigeria from 1985-1993, religious and traditional leaders were used to support his schemes. They were lodged in hotels in Abuja and were given briefcases stuffed with money – after endorsing his projects. When Sani Abacha was Nigerian head of state from 1993-1998 and was finding a way to keep himself in office, foreign and local clerics of various religious persuasions likewise travelled to Abuja at Abacha's invitation and expense. In the end, with the exception of the Roman Catholic Pontiff (Pope John Paul II), who insisted that Abacha should release all political prisoners, all other clerics went back to their destinations singing the praises of Abacha (Agi 2008:133). Likewise, in 2010, during the health crisis of late president Umaru Yar'Adua of Nigeria, Christian and Muslim religious leaders were invited to Aso Rock (the Presidential residence) to pray for the ailing president. Whilst the entire nation was kept in the dark with regard to the state of health of the president, none of the religious leaders came out to declare the true state of his health (Agbiji 2012:71, 74-75).

Whilst it could have been argued at the time that these leaders were not medical practitioners and that there was no pastoral obligation on them to declare confidential information, the least those religious leaders could have done was to declare that the president's health was still in a critical state, instead of keeping silent – especially since they knew the unjust way in which Nigerians had been treated with regard to the issue. In all three cases, religious leaders were used to cover up for the political elite.

The cases of religious and political patronage by politicians and religious leaders in Nigeria (cf. Adigwe & Grau 2007:98-101; Afolayan 1994:12) are similar to those found in a number of other African countries – a noticeable case being Zimbabwe. Terence Ranger (2002) has reported on the way in which religion was used by politicians in the build-up to the 2002 elections in Zimbabwe. Whilst ZANU-PF and its president, Robert Mugabe, were routinely intimidating and attacking religious leaders such as Archbishop Pius Ncube³ for criticising the bad policies of government, Mugabe sought to woo other Christians. At a prayer day in Harare in February 2002, Mugabe addressed an audience that included a large contingent from the sect known as African Apostolic Faith;⁴ they held placards inscribed with ZANU-PF political messages, whilst singing and dancing. For his part the leader of this sect, Madzibaba Nzira,⁵ announced a prophecy that Mugabe was the divinely anointed king of Zimbabwe and that no person could dare to challenge him. Whilst patronising the Christian churches, ZANU-PF members also requested spirit mediums to call upon the ancestors in support of Mugabe. ZANU-PF leaders thus used religion (both Christian and African Traditional) to promote their political interests, even when these contradicted religious values such as freedom, justice, the sanctity of life and peace.

For its part a delegation of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), headed by Morgan Tsvangarai, visited the Njelele shrine in the Matopos during the build-up to the 2002 elections. This visit by representatives of the MDC similarly demonstrated how political leaders resorted to religion to promote their political ambitions. Whilst some religious leaders have consistently maintained a critical stance against unjust political leaders, there are others that continue to “sway wherever the political wind blows”. For instance, in the 2002 elections in Zimbabwe, whilst Archbishop Ncube declared Robert

³ Archbishop Pius Ncube is a Roman Catholic Church leader from Zimbabwe.

⁴ The African Apostolic Faith sect is a Zimbabwean-based church that derives its membership mainly from among the poor. It practises polygamy. Women in the sect always dress in white and the men have long beards and shaven heads.

⁵ Madzibaba Nzira (now late) was the leader of the African Apostolic Faith Sect.

Mugabe's new election as president illegal and refused to attend the inauguration, two other Catholic bishops attended. It is also common knowledge that politicians in many African countries patronise pastors, imams and traditional medicine men in seeking spiritual power to win elections, keep themselves in positions of authority and even to undo their opponents (Ranger 2002; Rodrick 2002).

Secondly, historically (during the industrial revolution, colonial expansion and there-after) religious bodies in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa have often relied on welfare and material aid in the form of poverty-relief programmes (Swart 2006a:17; Agbiji 2012:116-117; Nieman 2010:39; Clarke & Jennings 2008:9). Poverty is often accompanied by psychological and physical indignities. Although relief programmes are helpful in at least keeping the body and soul of the poor together as an interim measure, this does not amount to actual empowerment. Ultimately, this approach to poverty has a long-term negative impact on the poor, and especially on women, as it creates dependence and detracts from the ability of the poor to develop latent skills (White & Tiongco 1997:133). In this sense, religion has in some ways contributed to the social disempowerment of the poor in African societies.

Thirdly, through their work as distributors of relief and charity, religious institutions – such as the churches – are effectively providing psychological relief for unjust conditions and political and socio-economic institutions (Swart 2006a:24-25), whilst these continue to impoverish African societies (cf. Dickinson 1975:70). The use of religious institutions as distributors of relief and charity by political and economic institutions and by powerful individuals both locally and internationally further exacerbates the challenges of poverty and corruption in Africa.

Fourthly, religious practitioners have often encouraged 'God-talk' that weakens the resolve of masses to rise up against unjust political and economic systems in Africa. Much of this nonchalance with regard to public issues is initiated by the political elite and given impetus by religious leaders and by the faithful. In the face of socio-political and economic challenges on the continent, instead of Africans rising to the challenge, they resort to prayer. Whilst praying over issues of socio-political and economic importance is necessary, prayer should not replace responsible actions that are geared towards fighting unjust systems. The remarkable indifference of religious institutions in Africa in the face of enormous socio-political and economic injustice runs counter to their ethical claims. Such indifference on the part of religious institutions and practitioners in Africa also distances them from their known roles in overturning social injustice in various contexts such as Europe in the past. In this regard, for example, Paul Tracey (2012:90) reminds us of the role of religion in enabling "the people" to fight oppression between the 18th and 20th centuries in Europe and the United States of America. He asserts that between the 18th and 20th century, religious movements provided the basis for nearly all of the major uprisings by peasant or urban workers in Europe. The importance of the role of religious institutions in overturning unjust social institutions elsewhere lies in the example this presents to African religious institutions and practitioners.

Fifthly, the politicisation and radicalisation of religion in a number of African countries – such as in post-independence Nigeria, Rwanda and recently in Egypt, Kenya, Sudan and other African countries – have led to violence, deaths, injustice, poverty and hardship, which will be very difficult to eradicate from the continent (Kalu 2010e:270-271). Religious riots and Islamic terrorism in Nigeria, Kenya, Libya, Egypt and other parts of Africa all demonstrate the negative impact of religion. These negative trends have not only claimed hundreds of thousands of human lives, but are also responsible for the enormous

destruction of resources (Kalu 2010e:278) that could have been used for the development of African nations. Kalu (2010e:272) has rightly observed that the radicalisation of religion in Africa is accompanied by the scourge of poverty. Instead of being a source of complacency, conflict and poverty, religion could provide a lens through which the public space can be re-imagined (Kalu 2010e:287) and developed.

The Role of Religion in African Political and Social Development

In the nations of the global North or the so-called developed world, the forces of enlightenment and modernisation have distanced religion from socio-political and economic life, relegating it to the private sphere. To provide a philosophical and ideological basis for the modernisation agenda, “reason and faith were constructed as oppositional, mutually incompatible spheres” (Clarke & Jennings 2009:1). During the same era, religion was seen as counter-developmental. It was assumed that religious reasoning was inflexible and unyielding in the face of social and political change (Clarke & Jennings 2008:1). However, over a period of time, and particularly from the latter part of the 20th century, a movement from estrangement to engagement between faith and development occurred. For example, faith-based organisations (FBOs) led mainly by certain Christian churches have actively sought dialogue on development-related issues with donor agencies, whilst donors have also reciprocated (Clarke & Jennings 2008:2).

Unlike societies of the global North, where faith and development were estranged at some point in history, in African societies religion remained central in all aspects of society (Kobia 1978:160; Laguda 2013:27; Adesina 2013:36, 37). Religion, moral values, wealth and social progress were, historically speaking, all communal matters and have remained so in many instances. Poverty was not a pronounced feature of African societies. For example, among the already-mentioned Olulumo (Okuni) people of Cross River State, Nigeria, traditional norms still exist until today that are religiously informed and that ensure there is care for all members of the community. Such norms and practices include that a member of the community or a stranger can harvest food crops from another’s farm for the purpose of addressing his/her need for food. A stranger, on passing by a yam barn when hungry, can stop over to roast yam and eat to his or her satisfaction. When passing by tapped palm trees, a thirsty person that desires to drink palm wine but cannot afford it can drink some wine. A cut tree branch or leaves placed on the spot where the needy person helped himself or herself was sufficient to inform the owner that the wine was not taken by a thief but by a person in need.⁶

The notion of material accumulation for personal gain is foreign to African traditional societies. To be wealthy or rich, means to be surrounded by many people – community. It also means to be healthy and ethically sound, and to be in tune with one’s creator, ancestors and community (Narayan 2001:40). Among the Olulumo people, for example, a rich person is called *efang-ane*, which literarily means “being wealthy of people or having many people”. The concept of honour and shame was also helpful in African societies as it prevented people from stealing in order to gain prestige or win accolades from the community. Stealing was taboo and stigmatised the thief, his family and community, all of whom would suffer shame and stigmatisation on account of such behaviour (Agbiji 2012:150; Magesa 2010:71).

⁶ These observations are once again based on the first author’s personal insights, experience and exposure to the Olulumo community (cf. footnote 2).

There are critics who argue that the African patterns of social behaviour are basically responsible for the material backwardness of African societies. However, within the corpus of alternative developmental approaches, humankind is being urged to return to communal and sustainable lifestyles, as they are now believed to be the solution to the global economic and environmental challenges (Theron 2008:7-9). Despite the erosion of many religiously informed traditional practices by the forces of modernity and globalisation, religion, whether African Traditional, Christian or Islam, still has a vital contribution to make to the progress of African societies. Religion can provide a frame of reference by which the existing value systems of a society may be examined critically. Religious values have informed local and international law; such values are greatly cherished and have been of immense benefit in the conceptualisation and development of modern democracy and democratisation. These values include the sanctity of human life, human equality and human dignity (Tsele 2001:213). Within the Christian understanding, this is the prophetic function of religion. Besides providing a yardstick by which the value system of society can be measured, religion is indispensable for conveying moral values in a society.

Religion plays an indispensable role in fostering values such as honesty, integrity, openness, forthrightness and tolerance (Kalu 2010d:36; Tsele 2001:210-211). Such values are crucial for the development of good economic and democratic political systems. African economic and democratic political systems are still grossly underdeveloped. Signs of underdevelopment are evident in weak economic institutions and in the almost total absence of robust opposition parties in countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Togo and Malawi, but also many others. The low level of forthrightness and transparency within political and economic institutions and by leaders is hindering social progress as this fosters corruption and stifles the development of civil societies. The indirect influence of religious culture on economic and political culture through the transference of religious values to these spheres (Agi 2008:129-130) could therefore benefit economic and political institutions in Africa. In African Traditional Religion, the fostering of values in society is achieved through the immersion of the individual in the activities of society through participation in the community.

This act of immersion in society through participation in community is the very core of indigenous spirituality and morality. In this light, spirituality and morality are inseparable (Magesa 2010:71). The immersion of the individual into the community begins with the family setting and extends to the house/compound (the extended family), and to the village and clan (the community). All of these levels of immersion into community occur simultaneously and reflect the moral formation of the individual who is also accountable to the community. Both the immersion and moral formation of the individual are carried out by parents and members of the community through religious rituals and teachings. The link between spirituality and morality, and the processes of immersion and moral formation in African Traditional Religion resonate with African Christianity (Kalu 2010c:84). Christianity pays attention to moral formation through Bible study, catechism and through other means of disseminating scripture within the family unit and the church community. Religious teachings that are aimed at moral formation also contribute substantially to developing optimism amidst the deplorable socio-political and economic conditions in African societies.

Religion creates hope and optimism in spite of failed governments and economic institutions in Africa. African Christianity, through African Pentecostalism, offers a typical example of the enormous hope that extends from religion to the society. Hope and optimism are mediated through emphasis on the power of the Word of God in spiritual

formation and in resisting evil forces (Kalu 2010f:77). Illustrating how Pentecostals kindle hope and optimism in worship, Kalu describes how members of the congregation arrive for Bible studies and Sunday worship with notebooks to take down the message or 'revelation' with the intention of applying it during the week. In the process everyone is urged to become a victor and 'demon destroyer'. Kalu describes this way of kindling optimism as a hermeneutics for conscientisation. The aim here is to relate the promises in the Bible to the existential problems being experienced by the people so that no worshipper leaves the service bearing 'the burdens of yesterday' (Kalu 2010f:77). Alongside the building of optimism in the lives of worshippers through the hermeneutics for conscientisation, religion also contributes towards conscientising the religious practitioner to be responsive to the challenges of society. As a result, the religious person becomes a source of social capital.

Religion in Africa is a key source of social capital. Social, cultural and religious or spiritual capital are not mutually exclusive but are interconnected (Adogame 2013:106; cf. Davies & Guest 2007). The concept of spiritual and religious capital is similar to the more general concept of social capital because this is a resource based on relationships that individuals and religious groups can access for their personal well-being. The same resources can also be donated as a gift to the larger society (Adogame 2013:106). Using the case of Africans in the diaspora and the role of religion as source of social capital, Kalu (2010g:207) argues that religious communities assist new immigrants to secure roots; they provide a network of social and economic transactions, spiritual solace, and link to the religion of the homeland (traditional and Christian).

Among African societies, religion is useful in mobilising resources that would not otherwise have been mobilised to address community problems. It assists in raising consciousness about community problems among people who would not otherwise be aware of those problems. It creates linkages between social groups that would not normally exist. Religious communities such as churches assist in empowering social groups that usually have little influence. According to Adogame (2013:108), these benefits of religious communities as providers of social capital are playing out within African Christian communities in the triangular context of Africa, Europe and North America. In considering the operation of religious and spiritual capital within the broader understanding of social capital, its importance in relation to the development of civil society and democratic life in Europe and North America should be recognised. A nexus between social capital drawn from religious communities, and civil society and democratic life is emerging among African societies (Agbiji 2012:135-136, 333).

A few examples will illustrate the role of religion in terms of social capital drawn from religious communities, civil society and democratic life in Africa. In Nigeria, Kalu argues that all churches have been forced by the economic collapse and the political legitimacy crisis to assume greater visibility in the public space. In the past mainline churches have borne the brunt of building civil society and responding to both the state and the enormous social service burdens (Kalu 2010h:302). In recent times, however, Pentecostal churches such as the Later Rain Assembly, under the auspices of Save Nigeria Group (SNG), are also engaging with civil society (Agbiji 2012:135-136,333). And within the South African context, Ignatius Swart (2006b:2) has shown through socio-empirical research how churches are strategically very important in terms of the formation of social capital to promote social development. This is especially so in light of the high levels of trust still shown in this sector by ordinary people and the way in which churches inspire the activities of voluntary outreach, caring and social services, all of which can be mobilised for social capital interventions (cf. Eigelaar-Meets *et al.* 2010:53). Churches also provided platforms

that enabled civil society to survive even under oppressive regimes such as apartheid and military rule in Africa. As such, religious communities still remain viable platforms for the sustaining of civil society in Africa and for fostering political and economic activities.

Religious communities are creating an effective interface between religion and socio-economic and political development. Christ Embassy and Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria are prominent examples. Olutayo Adesina (2013:40) argues that, like many other churches, these churches have become platforms for business interests which include the banking, publishing, broadcasting, entertainment and hospitality industries. Adesina (2013:40) reports that in 2008 one of the business outfits of Christ Embassy had a monthly turnover of about 10 million naira. With regard to the political involvement of religion, the involvement of Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity in Africa has been felt in various sectors, including politics. It is on record that in the midst of the turmoil accompanying transitions to democracy in Africa through the 1990s, the Pentecostals rallied in prayer for their nations, and interceded in order to save their countries from bloodshed (Asamoah-Gyadu 2010:66). These religious interventions portray religion as a unifying factor in society.

In Africa, religious communities are serving as a unifying factor and as a vehicle for social, economic and political development on the African continent (Tsele 2001:215), which has suffered acute fragmentation as a result of colonialisation, economic globalisation and deepening pauperization. Even though religious fundamentalism represents an important contributing factor to such fragmentation in present-day African society, religious communities provide viable and crucial networks that are able to serve as glue for leverage collaboration and to harness resources for the social transformation of the continent. The role of churches in promoting social cohesion is indispensable. Lamle (2013) (cited in Mang 2014:102) argues that:

[t]hrough the [Pentecostal] church, people that had come together from different socio-political and socio-economic status are brought together into one family. They come together in one brotherhood that helps them to withstand the socio-political and economic chaos in Nigeria. This bond becomes the crutch upon which the people are able to come together into one single-family unit and domesticate their problems together.

Lamle's argument on the important role of churches in society captures the importance of religion in the socio-political and economic spheres of African societies. It shows the scope of religion as a uniting factor, as a source of empowerment in relation to socio-political and economic challenges and as a force for the recovery of collective consciousness from social crises. The role of religious communities such as churches in Africa (but also of other religious communities, including African traditional religious communities) shows how indispensable religion is to the development of Africa. Our view, however, is that religious communities could still play a more prominent role in the transformation of African societies, given the number of religious practitioners on the continent and religion's deep roots in the socio-political, cultural and economic lives of Africans. It is also our view that religion and religious practitioners could play a more transformative role in society – if they were liberated from certain limitations and practices that portray them in a bad light in society.

Regaining the Values and Engaging the Resources of Religion for Social Change

All religious traditions cherish moral values such as virtue, justice, the sanctity of human life, equality and human dignity. There is also the belief in the Supreme Being to whom all beings are accountable. For example, in African traditional societies restraints on leaders were religious. The symbols of justice were respected and belief in restoring justice was very strong (Agi 2008:131). This promoted the well-being of African societies. Religion still has the potential to influence socio-political and economic processes in Africa. Such positive influence could ameliorate poverty and corruption, thereby assisting with the socio-political and economic transformation of the continent. For religion to play its much-needed role in transforming a continent whose sole and major export is religion, Africans must deliberately return to the values of their much cherished religiosity. This is crucial, as religious values are an important resource for religious communities in their quest for the socio-political and economic development of Africa.

With regard to Christian religious values, Kunhiyop (2008:222) has observed that the challenge of African Christianity may be looked at in terms of moral life and practice. A discussion on morality would automatically touch on Christian but also on Islamic and African Traditional religious theology and vice versa, as theology and ethics are intimately connected in both the African continent and elsewhere. Kunhiyop (2008:222) has, therefore, decried the fact that the Christian message that was passed on during the missionary era was wrapped in a culture that was alien to Africans; this meant that both the message and the culture were treated by the messenger as one and the same thing. It is for this reason that the worldview of the messenger was deliberately transmitted to the African Christian with the effect of supplanting the African worldview with a Western mind-set. Such a Western worldview, which is unfamiliar to Africans, includes the compartmentalisation of life and asserts individual moral freedom in total disregard of the community.

Kunhiyop (2008:222) maintains that it is this state of affairs that has impacted negatively on African Christians, leaving them with a moral attitude which is rooted neither in African traditional religious morality nor in Christian morality. His thesis is, therefore, as follows: in order to recover African moral sanity, there is the urgent need to retrieve and restore some positive moral foundations and beliefs which were the moral basis of African societies. These moral foundations and beliefs, transformed through serious interaction with the word of God and inculcated into African Christianity, will save and strengthen the moral stance of the Christian community and indeed of Africa (Kunhiyop 2008:222). As a solution to the African Christian moral crisis which gives impetus to poverty and corruption, African Christians in particular, but also Africans of other religious communities, should approach life holistically, living with a concern for one another as a community, and recapturing the key concepts of shame and honour. In addition, African churches should devise theological and hermeneutical models that are contextually relevant, and that assist religious education to be contextually relevant (Kunhiyop 2008:222). This approach of African Christians forging relevant theologies and ministerial formation could also apply to other religions such as Islam in Africa.

Matthew Hassan Kukah (1996:20), on his part, has also argued that for religious communities and their leaders to be able to regain their values and moral authority, they must liberate themselves from the laagers of regionalism, inter- and intra-denominational or doctrinal clashes, historical antagonisms, suspicions, ethnicity and racial biases. In the same vein, religious communities and leaders in Africa are becoming increasingly embroiled in

the competition for political power, social status and the other rewards that society can offer (Agi 2008:132). Such attitudes on the part of religious leaders are unbecoming. Religious leaders and the faithful will therefore do well to desist from these shameful acts, to be able to perform their prophetic role as the bastion of morality in society. As legitimate citizens of their respective nations, religious practitioners are entitled to political power and prestige. Such political power and prestige should, however, be pursued and acquired legitimately.

The importance of religion includes the fact that religion is the root from which the different branches of life sprout and grow and by which they are continually nurtured. Religion concerns the deepest root of human existence and integrates human life into a coherent whole (Schuurman 2011:273-274). Religion is therefore about sustaining life in its fullness through community. Religion is about virtue and moral values. These values include love and peace, the sanctity of human life, human equality, human dignity, freedom, justice and social harmony. It is when religious communities live in the consciousness of these core values that religion can employ all its resources for the transformation of African societies. Religious leaders and the faithful have a sacred responsibility to engage with the values and resources of religion through the concept of community, which is common to all religious traditions and is part of the created order.

Religious communities should therefore initiate a culture of self-criticism and maintain a critical stance towards African socio-political and economic institutions. Tinyiko Maluleke (2010:157) has used the example of certain aspects of the formation of the South African Christian community, in which ecumenical church leaders have engaged with political institutions, on the basis of the concept of “critical solidarity with the state”, to argue that the church has tainted her image in society by embarking on such a mission. Maluleke argues that this posture of the church towards the state explains the complicity of the church during the apartheid era and in the post-apartheid context in which the church could not speak for, identify with nor act decisively in favour of the poor and oppressed. He therefore urges the church to be in solidarity with the poor who alone deserve this support. In our view, Maluleke makes a crucial point that should be taken seriously by religious leaders in other parts of Africa, as religious leaders and institutions are often tempted to become subject to political manipulation in African societies.

The stance of self-criticism and embracing a critical disposition (to which we subscribe) should also relate to the economic sector which includes businesses owned by churches, corporate institutions and individuals. The religious sector must be critical of the lifestyles of some religious leaders and corporate entrepreneurs. A situation that has religious leaders living in opulence whilst many Africans (including their followers) are living in penury is opposed to the expected stance of the religious community, which should be one of solidarity with the poor and marginalised in society. The situation is made even worse when religious leaders are seen as exploiters of the faithful. When religious leaders are self-critical of their own negative conduct they can renounce the opulence and greed of corporate entrepreneurs and politicians who play such crucial roles in the pauperization of Africans and African nations.

Conclusion

From the outset of this article our concern was to consider the role of religion in combating poverty and corruption, thereby contributing to the socio-political and economic transformation of African societies. However, in order to give a proper account we started by

exploring in what sense religion can be said to be a way of life for Africans. We then proceeded to investigate why there was endemic poverty and corruption in the face of such overt religiosity and why there was religious complacency in the face of endemic poverty and corruption in Africa. Thereafter, we sought to understand the role religion could play in the social transformation of African societies and how the resources of religion could be regained and engaged in the transformation of African society.

We have argued that religion – whether African Traditional, Christian or Islamic – remains a major constituent of the worldview of African people. Unfortunately, the realities of endemic poverty and corruption are enduring challenges in African societies despite the phenomenon of overt religiosity manifested in these same societies. The existence of endemic poverty and corruption in Africa is sustained in part by religious complacency on the part of religious practitioners and by the instrumentalisation of religion by African leaders. This sustains and enhances the structural entrenchment of poverty and corruption in African societies.

Despite its negative exploitation by some of its practitioners and by some African leaders, religion is a positive force that is necessary for the moral, socio-political and economic transformation of African societies. Religion fulfils a crucial moral role through its provision of a frame of reference for the critical examination of existing social value systems. All religious traditions uphold moral values such as virtue, justice, the sanctity of human life, equality and human dignity. These moral values are reflected in the scriptures of the various literary religions – Christianity and Islam – and in the oral tradition of African Traditional Religion. Religious practitioners should therefore be self-critical and maintain a critical stance towards socio-political and economic institutions. In order to sustain a sound moral culture in society, religious institutions and practitioners should be steadfast in teaching and practicing the values they propagate. The practitioners of religion should also initiate a culture of moral accountability. This principle would enable religious practitioners to hold themselves accountable to one another in all matters that involve moral choices and obligations in public and private life. The common belief in the existence of a Supreme Being, to whom all created beings are accountable, should serve as a continuous reminder to religious practitioners of the necessity for accountability in all matters. Such a sense of accountability under the watchful eyes of a Supreme Being should not be used to scare but should rather be a reminder of the fact that we will have to account for both our actions and inactions in all spheres of life. Apart from being a crucial source of moral formation and of the principle of accountability in society, religion is the root from which the different branches of life emanate and are sustained. In this regard religion concerns the core of human existence and integrates human life into a coherent whole. Such integration ensures the outflow and sustenance of life; this occurs within the context of community which embraces relationships with the source of life, which is the Divine and all of the created order. The role of religion in fostering moral values includes values such as openness, forthrightness and tolerance. Such values are important for the development of sound economic and democratic political systems.

Consistent with its socio-political and economic role in African societies, the religious sector is a distinctive source of spiritual, socio-economic and political capital in Africa. This is a very privileged role that religious communities play. It could even be said that no other institution can compete with religious communities in carrying out this role. As community-based institutions with vibrant networks, religious communities will continue to serve as unifying factors and vehicles for socio-political and economic development within the African continent. Whilst the resilience of religion in African societies is evident,

religious communities and practitioners should build on the privileged place that they occupy over and above other institutions, and respond more effectively to the moral, socio-political, economic and technological challenges of Africa.

In addition to the development of moral values, accountability and social capital, religious institutions such as churches should contribute more deliberately to the development of technology, and to enhancing democratic and economic institutions. With the deliberate development of advanced technology and of democratic, economic and civil society, institutions can begin with the development of a relevant curriculum in educational institutions from the primary to the tertiary levels of education. The establishment of educational institutions has been one of the outstanding contributions of churches in Africa. Churches should build on this area of strength by designing curricula that are aimed at addressing the specific needs of African societies, such as the development of political, economic, and civil society institutions, and of technology. Given the crucial role that religion plays in moral formation and as a source of social capital, we recommend the deliberate engagement of these resources for socio-political, economic and technological transformation initiated through education policies that are relevant to the problems of society; this could make a more meaningful contribution to social development. Our point is that religion can no longer be content to see the propagation of moral values alone as its major contribution to African societies: it is the only factor that permeates the whole of the African society, including its political, socio-economic and technological aspects. How religion could foster a more relevant transformation agenda in Africa is a possible area for future empirical research.

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