RELIGION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The relevance of religion for transformation processes

Suedwind Conference

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1. Introduction

o The pursuit of social transformation in Africa cannot be **dissociated from religion**.

o The religious dimension of social transformation looks at how religion **influences positive societal transformation**.

To do that, we want to start with some basic questions:

a. How does religion contribute to the positive transformation of the society?

b. how does the changes in the society (social, economic, technological) affect religious practices?

c. Can religion play a *liberating role* in Africa?

d. Does religion *contribute to the poverty situation*?

e. What is the role of religion in **perpetuating poverty, apathy and dependency** that constitute a handicap for personal and social transformation?

f. How does **religion positively shape society and transform** it?

- For the sake of this presentation, I will limit myself to Christianity.

Because when we talk about religion in Africa, it **encompasses many other religions.** (e.g. African traditional religion)

When it comes to religion, it is commonly known that

"Africans are deeply religious"

❖ Religion includes **beliefs, practices and rituals** that are related to the sacred, to God, to the mystical or the supernatural world.

❖ Religion is **intrinsically linked to aspects of the lives of Africans.**

❖ Africans read many things in their lives from **religious lenses.**

❖ Religion helps people to **find meaning** in their existence.

❖ In Africa, religion is connected with all aspects of the life of the people (social, economic, political, etc). People connect every aspect of their **life to their religious beliefs**.

❖ You **cannot separate** religion from the life of many Africans and all aspects of the life of people are permeated by religious belief.

Religion is a crucial **social capital for Africans**

Not only does it bring people together for spiritual connection, but also for **social connections.**

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3. Social Transformation

o Social transformation is a **way of rethinking how our society functions and we taking action to reshape it.**

o ST Practices and processes create a systemic and **lasting change in individuals, organizations, and communities** for a just world.

❖ Social transformation starts with a **deep understanding** of the system that creates an **unjust world and destructive** forces that play against a just society.

❖ Social transformation positively **affects all aspects of life and society** with the goal of improving **well-being of people.**

Social transformation is a **multi-dimensional concept** that touches on social, political, and economic aspects of the life of people.

Social + **Political** + **Economic**

4. Religion risks

❖ There are risks are associated with some religious practices in Africa

❖ We see these days that religion is manipulated for **personal gains.**

❖ Religion can be used to **control and manipulate people**. We see this manipulation in political and religious circles.

People leverage religious forces for destructive practices. (*Eg the story of the Shakahola massacre wakahola. Paul Nthenge Mackenzie to preach extreme fasting*).

Shakahola Massacre: 22 new mass graves identified, exhumation starts tomorrow – The Standard Newspaper

❖ This is when religion becomes **a destructive force in society**.

❖ When it comes to religion, people are **vulnerable**, and they can be easily manipulated. **The issue of vulnerability is a major issue in religion.**

❖ Religion makes **people complacent** with their situation of poverty and creates **apathy in them**.

❖

o Religion is used to **radicalise people**.

o The challenge we face is to prevent people from **religious fanaticism.**

o Common practices we see on the continent is the **instrumentalisation of religion** to personal interests or ends.

5. Religious Leadership and Transformation

- Religious leaders have a **crucial role in influencing their** followers' personal and social transformation.

- Religious leaders have to assume their **prophetic role** of denouncing and fighting against the forces that create and maintain people in all **kinds of poverty, injustice, and oppression.**

❖ They have a lot of **influence** on their followers. This influence can contribute to their personal and social transformation.

❖ When religious leaders combine the force of faith and social actions for the good of the community, then **faith drives social transformation.**

6. When does religion become a vehicle for social transformation

❖ Considering the importance placed on religion in African society, its energy can be channelled towards the greater good of the society.

❖ Religion is essential in cultivating the values necessary to **build a better society and individual and societal transformation.** (solidarity, justice, integrity, etc..)

o   Religion can be a glue to society, **fostering social cohesion**.

o   Many religious communities play a vital role in **transforming their social reality.**

o   Even though this is not always the case, we see instances where religions contribute to **positive change in society**.

o When people **link their faith to their social engagement**

o Religion can **connect to social reality**.

o When religion enables people to **fight any social injustice** and forms of poverty and enslavement

o It assists in **raising consciousness about community problems** among people who would not otherwise be aware of those problems.

o It creates linkages between social groups that would not normally exist.

o Religious communities such as churches assist in **empowering social groups** that usually have little influence.

o It helps in **mobilising resources** that would not otherwise have been mobilised to address community problems.

Conclusion

o Despite its limitations and derives, religion remains a **powerful force** that we can leverage for the transformation of Africa.

o Social transformation requires **religious leaders to play the prophetic role of leading people to fight against oppression and poverty**.

ENDS