

Combating Religion of Social Inaction in Ghana- The Role of Religious Education

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Abstract: The introduction of Islam and Christianity in Ghana significantly affected Indigenous Religion as its adherents abandoned it and embraced Western Religions. This notwithstanding, traditional religious thought still permeates social and religious life of Ghanaians. In this paper, I postulate that indigenous religious thought which has been accommodated by Western Religions is to blame for social inaction and that, Religious Education has not done enough to develop critical religious literacy. This conclusion is drawn based on data collected from scholarly articles and my classroom memoir.

The African, and for that matter Ghanaian has been described as notoriously and incurably religious (Mbiti, 1979, Parrinder, 1962). The introduction of Islam in AD 705 and Christianity in 1472 significantly affected the indigenous religion as its adherents abandoned it and embraced the western religions. This notwithstanding, traditional religious thought still permeates social and religious life of Ghanaians be they religious or not. Whether people are battling disease, poverty, or political misrule, Africans turn to religious strategies for interpreting and coping with life's contingencies in ways that the average Westerner would not comprehend (Hackett, 2000 p104). In this paper, I postulate that indigenous religious thought is to blame for social inaction and that Religious Education has not done enough to develop critical religious literacy in Ghanaians. Recommendations are made for the reorienting of RE lessons to combat this phenomenon.

Background

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people have their own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates all the departments of life so it is not easy or possible to isolate it (Mbiti, 1969 p1). Before the advent of Christianity and Islam (western religions), Ghanaians practiced Indigenous Religion (IR). Indigenous Religious beliefs incorporate belief in transcendent Supreme Being or God; Ancestral Spirits who are venerated; lesser deities who are often associated with palpable objects like trees and rocks; as well as charms, amulets and talismans employed for protective purposes. A special nexus exists between people, plants and animals as emblems of a hereditary relationship (Thomas, 2012 p67&68). Indigenous Religious thought emphasized wholehearted commitment to one's deity in return for protection and prosperity. With this thought, human agency is restricted to being devoted to, and showing unflinching allegiance to their deity as all other things such as poverty, life and death, are largely viewed as beyond man's determination.

History has it that the Umayyad invasion of North Africa in AD705 brought Islam into sub-Saharan Africa through the ancient kingdom of Ghana (Boyle et al, 2007). For Christianity, the arrival of the first European Christian Missionaries to the coast of Ghana happened in 1472 and by 1482, Christianity had firmly established itself (stateUniversity.com, 2011). Through

evangelization and other forms of social support such as schools, Christianity and Islam has won huge followers as adherents of IR abandoned it and embraced these western religions. A census in 2000 revealed that, approximately 69% of Ghanaians is Christian, 16% is Muslim, and 15% adheres to indigenous religious beliefs or other religious groups (GSS, 2000). With Christianity being the religion with most followers in Ghana, this paper uses Christianity as the case in point while acknowledging the influence of other religions.

The Problem

Religion is often seen by people to be a prescriptive social belief system that governs the moral fabric of society. With this emphasis on religion as a source of morality, attention is often given to the "dos and don'ts" that it prescribes. The dos often get the better part of religious people as is evident in social welfare programs that religious groups implement. Such motivation given by religion to act partly accounted for the success of freedom and protest movements such as the Indian Independence struggle against British rule, and the Civil Rights Movements of the 1950s and 60s, and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa (Smith, 2012).

The other side of religion's influence on people is what it discourages them from doing. This is what I see as religion causing social inaction. I define 'social inaction' as the feeling of lack of agency by a person or a group which results in their refusal to act in situations, or partake in activities that bring material benefits to them. Another way to look at it is how faith in an omnipotent God can breed sluggishness about our own part in shaping the world; a feeling that if everything is in divine hands, we might as well sit back and enjoy the show (Levine, 2003 p75). The question then of whether to act in this world to further the good is therefore an open question rather than an obvious choice (Schweber, 2006 p24).

Religion in the Ghanaian context has been the cause of social inaction. Biblical scriptures have been used to back off from movements that seek to champion the cause of the oppressed, eradicate poverty and the fight diseases such as HIV/AIDS. For example "...let the dead bury their own dead" (Matthew 8:22, NIV) has been used to decline support to HIV/AIDS victims while "... it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24, NIV) has been used by people to find contentment in poverty. Since Christians identify with Jesus' saying " My kingdom is not of this world..."(John 18:36, NIV), issues relating to politics, environmentalism and anything that has to do with making the world a better place is not on the agenda of some Ghanaian Christians.

In 2005, Sakyi-Addo reported of a Christian church in Ghana as not permitting their members to seek medical care, because they believe solely in divine healing. According to the report, not only do they refuse to visit clinics and hospitals when they are sick, but they also do not accept immunization. What actually sparked a report about them was the refusal of a couple to send their 14-year old daughter who had a life-threatening tumor to seek medical treatment (Sakyi-Addo, 2005). The parents were portraying an unflinching belief in spiritual healing, and therefore saw medical healing as an attempt at subverting God's power and will in their lives.

Commenting on the religious attitudes of Ghanaians, sociologist Max Assimeng is quoted by the Ghana News Agency (GNA, 2010) as stating that Ghanaian religious fanatics use most of

working hours worshipping with the hope that their needs would be miraculously provided. To him, Ghanaians have downplayed hard work to religion, and are prepared to participate in religious activities even when they are sick but not prepared to work in similar condition (GNA, 2010).

Perhaps this phenomenon of extreme reliance on deities for the supply of basic needs is not peculiar to Ghana. Working in a fundamentalist Christian school in the USA, Schweber (2006) observed the schools' positing of meta-narrative governing all of history as adhering to two principles: (1) that all events are under God's control; and (2) that because God is good, all events occur for a greater good that the human mind may not be able to fathom initially. 'True Christians,' therefore, accept all events as part of God's plan (Schweber, 2006 p12). These principles reign supreme in the Ghanaian context as well.

It is useful at this point to ask why Christianity for example, is able to help mobilize and fight for civil rights elsewhere while at the same time, remains the cause of social inaction in Ghana. How does religion cause social inaction? What has been the response of RE to this growing trend?

To answer these questions, a literature based methodology was employed; utilizing scholarly materials in the form of books, journals, articles and reports on religion in Africa. After a careful analysis of all the materials, a common theme emerged.

Observations

The study revealed that the social inaction of Ghanaians has some roots in IR and its *world-view*. A *world-view* can be thought of as a system of values, attitudes, and beliefs, which provide people with a mechanism to understand the world in which they live as well as everyday events and occurrences (African Studies Center, 2012). Hackett (2000) and Asamoah-Gyadu (2010) see religion in the Ghanaian context as a survival strategy. They say:

Whether people are battling with disease, poverty, or political misrule, they turn to religious strategies for interpreting and coping with life's contingencies in ways that the average westerner would not comprehend.... Indigenous religious worldviews present misfortunes and unusual occurrences as resulting from the anger of any of the spirit beings ... More importantly, man is presented as powerless in deciding to live or die; to be rich or poor; to be childless or to have children (Hackett, 2000 pg 104; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010 p242)

So pervasive is this worldview to the social fabric of Ghanaians that it did not change with the advent of western religions. Instead, it has been appropriated and found space within new faiths. Asamoah-Gyadu (2010) confirms that Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian churches in Ghana have filled the gap created between Christian world-view and that of IR. This has taken the form of usage of the power of the Holy Spirit to cast out witches and other demons responsible for poverty, war, crime, HIV/AIDS and all vices of society, akin to IR's practice of warding away evil with spiritual powers.

This assertion has been confirmed by Ngonidzashe (1994) who states that:

Christian missionaries with their exorcisms, the use of holy water, the wearing of rosaries, and the use of emblems of Maria to cast out evil were not new to Africans; these things were replacements of their old charms, medicines and amulets. Although the Africans were being asked to embrace new forms of 'charms', the concept behind their use was the same, so they did not find it very difficult to change to this type of religious observance. In Christianity Africans found another way of dealing with their age-old problems of drought, famine, infertility, and the fight against evil (Ngonidzashe, 1994 p3).

With little resistance, Christianity has embraced the indigenous worldview and appropriated it to its ends. Mbiti (1980) describes it as a "Christian Yes" to African religiosity.

Indigenous religious worldviews acknowledge and appreciate power in the name of a deity and this thought being transferred to Christianity means an overelaboration of the power of God to the westerner. According to Mbiti (1980), an African theologian, Gabriel Setiloane, has even argued that the concept of God that the missionaries presented to the Sotho-Tswana peoples was a devaluation of the traditional currency of Modimo (God) (Mbiti, 1980). There is therefore the quest by African Christians to put God in his rightful place, which implies appreciating his powerful nature and displaying an unwavering devotion to him because all events are under his control (Schweber, 2006)

Another visible way of the show of complete reliance on God is through signs and names. Behrend (2011) observed that in Uganda, some shops had signboards with inscription "Protected by the Blood of Jesus" purposely to keep away thieves and robbers. To such owners, hiring the services of security persons would be a display of faithlessness. Other catchy signboard inscriptions that could be observed include: "Miracle Snacks"; Christ-Net Computer and Business Holding'; "End Time Disco"; Holy Ghost Cosmetics"; "Sweet Jesus Hair Fashions" etc. (Behrend, 2011 p85). Do not assume that such signs only show religiosity. Beyond that, there is a belief that the inclusion of "magical" religious phrases protects and makes a business successful.

It would be naive to just laugh off such acts as useless. This age old practice has stood the test of time because it has proven successful. If the sick is healed through prayers; robbers have not broken into the shop which has been protected by Jesus' blood; and business is booming for "Miracle Snacks", it can only be the power of God that has physically manifested in the lives of such believers. My task therefore is not to judge the rightness or otherwise of such acts. On the contrary, the concern is the extent to which such wholehearted reliance on God leads to inaction. If such believers would not be part of social movements; and not take practical steps to end HIV/AIDS, famine, poverty, drought and conflicts, then there is a cause for concern for Religious Educators.

The Role of RE

To this end, the challenge has been where to draw the line between the power of God and man. At what point should man act instead of God? How easy should it be for Ghanaians to pursue action without belittling God's power? It would be expected that RE being the sole means of intellectual engagement on religion in Ghana would provide answers to these questions. Unfortunately, it has not done enough to develop critical religious literacy in students.

Wright (2008) identifies two approaches to the teaching of religion -learning about religion and learning from religion. *Learning about religion* requires students to investigate the nature of religion and are expected to focus on beliefs, teachings, practices, ways of life, and forms of religious expression (Wright, 2008 p519). On the other hand, *Learning from Religion* involves reflecting on, and responding appropriately to students' own experiences in the light of their exploration of religion. Students taught using this approach would ask questions about personal identity, values and commitments, relationships with others, the meaning and purpose of life, and ultimate truth (Wright, 2008 p520). From this framework, it appears the best approach at teaching RE to surmount social inaction would be *Learning from Religion*.

Religious Education (RE) in Ghana is an integral part of the elementary school curriculum, making it compulsory for all students through 8th grade. It has a long history that could be traced to the pre-colonial Ghana where IR made provision for the informal training of religious functionaries. The establishment of Castle Schools 1529 saw the introduction of Christian teaching which was the earliest form of Christian religious education, and the curriculum was developed around this basic activity (McCarron, 1986).

To date, the place of RE in the curriculum of Ghanaian schools is to satisfy a dual goal - political and moral. History of formal schools in Ghana is traced to missionaries. They established castle schools and made religion a key component of the curriculum but its emphasis was on recitation and memorization of the Bible that largely aimed for students to obtain functional literacy (Gutstien, 2006). Between the 16th and 18th centuries, schools were owned and operated by religious bodies until the British Colonial government took over the control of education. To date, mission schools comprise approximately 80% of all basic schools in Ghana as a church- state partnership in the management of these schools has proven workable. The presence of RE in the curriculum therefore firstly serves as a means to give religious bodies some form of control over the schools they once owned and to keep a window of opportunity for them to carry on the evangelization agenda. This is what I see as the political function of RE.

The second purpose of RE is to provide a form of moral education; hence it has been named Religious and Moral Education (RME) at the elementary level of education. Although partly contested, the general perception among Ghanaians is that morality could be taught using religion. This coupled with urbanization and the breakdown of the traditional socialization structures has made schools responsible for educating students to be morally upright. RME is therefore expected to incorporate all cultural norms and values from Indigenous Religion, and synthesize that with moral values from Islam and Christianity to form its content.

This dual role of RE has been useful in marketization and justification of RE in the

curriculum but has also made it very challenging for teaching. The approach used in teaching RE in Ghana can conveniently be described in Wright's framework as *learning about religion*. Since RE incorporates lessons from the major religions - IR, Christianity and Islam, at any given lesson, depending on who is teaching and who is learning, there is the conscious effort at talking about religion without any attempt at encouraging action. RE lessons therefore fall short of developing critical thinking and agency in students.

After receiving sermons about miracles and the omnipotence of God at their religious meetings, it would be expected that RE would take it a step further by emphasizing the subjectivity of religion and man's role in making and shaping the world. Unfortunately, this is not the case. With RE in Ghana being taught by priests, nuns and imams who are drafted to teach because of the shortage of teachers (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010) and the desire of the church to maintain its presence in schools, we can at best describe RE lessons as continual dose of sermons about the omnipotence of God. Indeed RE has not done enough to combat social inaction that religions promote.

Way forward

To be able to teach RE to drive up a sense of agency in students, I recommend that the subject needs to be reoriented towards providing critical literacy. This recommendation is based on years of classroom experience as an RE teacher in a religiously diverse secular classroom.

I argue for a comparative approach to the teaching of religion instead of the mono-dimensional teaching about religion. The RE curriculum could be made up of themes such as poverty, oppression, man's purpose in life, environmental protection, the role of churches et cetera, with different religious beliefs presented and discussed under each of these themes. With this approach students do not just learn one religion but different ones under one theme. My experience with this has shown that, not only does it leads to the appreciation of other religions and loosen up fanatic tendencies, but it also affords the opportunity for students to see themselves as significant actors in the world.

Lessons on miracles should emphasize human agency as critical component. The traditional way of teaching about miracles is to show the power of God but this goes to promote inaction. In all miracles, there is a human action that should not be downplayed but rather emphasized as showing man's need to act for miracles to happen. It would be useful when teaching about the healing of the paralytic (Mk 2:1-12 NIV) to emphasize the role of the friends who used unconventional means to get healing for their loved one. Religion should thus be presented in a way that would cause us to act.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to bring to the fore, religion as a cause of social inaction and to open up further studies and experiments aimed at combating the trend. While the phenomenon might not be peculiar to a geographical locality, the case of Africa presents a unique case which

needs further exploration. Research is needed to confirm or deny religion as the sole cause of inaction. Other studies could examine religious messages and writings that inhibit human agency. There could also be an experimental research to devise appropriate teaching methodologies for combating inaction. The desire is for religiously educated people who are balanced in their thoughts and deeds; and are able to make informed decisions to act when and where it matters most.

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