

Chapter 5

Ethico–Phenomenological Appraisal of Religion and Development in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies linking contemporary discussions on human transformation indicate that development faces a number of interrelated challenges, foremost being the neglected importance of religion as a determinant for development. Even though religion poses the capacity of serving as a strong force in boosting societal development and its importance is continuously increasing since the beginning of the new millennium, a number of hypotheses still fail to connect religion to development. Drawing upon an extensive contemporary research on religion and development literature, this study examines the relationship between religion and development in Africa. With an insight provided into understanding the independent layers of religious development nexus in Africa, a criterion on what should constitute an appropriate approach toward societal development is thus supplied. Findings reveal that religion remains one clear option of inspiration and motivation for welfare and humanitarian engagement. This study has significant implication for cumulative research on African religiosity and development.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-4595-9.ch005

INTRODUCTION

Anthropological approaches linking religion to public life around the turn of the 21st century have not only multiplied in recent time and magnetized strong societal engagements, but have attracted the interest of development theorists, actors and practitioners (Chitando, Adogame & Bateye, 2013). This link between religion and development has attracted an increasing scholarly consideration lately. However, the said link is not just a phenomenon of scholarship alone but also corresponds intimately to present-day reality. Empirical studies in contemporary times have shown that religion remains important in many societies and that its importance has been increasing since the beginning of the new millennium (Essien, 2014). This is evidenced in the fact that between 2015 and 2017, more than 80 per cent of the global population was said to be affiliated with one religion or another, and projections predict that this status will boost up in the future (Pew Research Center, 2017). This however lends credence to the fact that human history is replete with examples where the religiously motivated individuals and groups have acted in extraordinary ways to bridge divides, promote reconciliation, and/or advocate peaceful coexistence. In fact, there is a growing body of literature which has been devoted to the question that throughout Africa, one of the greatest surprises of contemporary time is the resilience of religion (Essien, 2014). No doubt, the resilience of religion in human enterprise is evidenced in the fact that in Africa, religion shows no sign of disappearing or diminishing in public importance. Evidently, Africa is a deeply religious as manifest in it being depicted as religiously, linguistically and culturally pluralistic, with major religions like Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion constituting a dominant culture and sources of social mores (Iyer, 2016). Given empirical assessment that religious factors are dominant in all process of development and that all models of development are essentially religious in that they reflect perceptions and responses of the problems faced by society, Africa's development in the twenty-first century is likely to be influenced and shaped largely by religion. The centrality of religion and its interconnectedness with economic, politics and social change have become increasingly apparent in development thinking and practice in contemporary time. Notwithstanding the secularization thesis (Nolano, 2005) culminating into the expulsion of religion from the social sciences during the last two centuries (Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003), on the assumption that modernity has made religion irrelevant in the public sphere and in the political life, relevant empirical research in the last decades reveal that instead of religion declining and eventually disappearing, it has persisted both in the individual conscience and in the public sphere, continuing to shape the political beliefs and practices of a great number of people as well as institutions throughout the world (Tracey, 2012).

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