

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN BRINGING ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract: Religion has remained one of the most influential forces in shaping human society and directing patterns of social behavior. There have been diverse opinions and arguments regarding the role religion play in the lives of people and on societies at large. Whereas some believe that religion is one of the key drivers of social transformation, others are of the opinion that it stifles development and progress. The method applied in this paper is historical and analytical approach. This paper examines the role of religion in bringing about social change by analyzing the relationship between religious beliefs, cultural values, and societal transformation. It begins by exploring the concepts of religion and social change through the perspectives of notable scholars such as Edward Tylor, Immanuel Kant, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. It investigates the close connection between religion and culture, arguing that religious values often become embedded within social systems and consequently influence ethical conduct, communal relationships, and institutional structures. The study finds out that key factors determine the extent to which religion can influence social change, namely: epistemic orientation, communalism, spirituality, rationality, self-definition, and the perception of time and material reality. The paper, thus, concludes that religion possesses the capacity to inspire both positive and negative social change depending on the worldview and social values it promotes. Ultimately, religion remains a significant ideological force capable of shaping human development, social institutions, and cultural transformation.

Keywords: *role, religion, social change, transformation.*

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Introduction

It was Immanuel Kant who noted that the colour of one's spectacles influences the colour with which such a one perceives objects. He thus emphasized the significant role which ideas and belief systems play in shaping a people's society (Kant, 1781). If the above is true for all ideas, then it is truer for religious ideas, one of the strongest ideological forces driving human actions and choices down the history. Hence, religion, as a lived experience, has become an active director, formator, and transformer of the lives of individuals and communities at individual, social, and communal levels. Most times, in offering motivations and directions to members of a society, religious values metamorphose into the fundamental worldviews and ideological orientations of such people. Religion thus affects choices made in the metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic spheres. Through its means, religion often engenders social change. The burden of this write-up, therefore, is to present the role which religion plays in bringing about social change in societies.

Understanding the Concept of Religion and Social Change

Religion

As known, there is no generally accepted definition of religion. Hence, religion has been conceived in diverse ways by different people. Etymologically, however, the term comes from the Latin verb *religare*, which means 'to bind,' and its noun *religio*, meaning 'obligation,' 'bond' or 'reverence.' Hence, it can be defined as a "people's beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of God, a god, or gods, and divine involvement in the universe and human life" (Microsoft Encarta,

2009). It is an organized collection of belief systems, cultural systems and world-views that relate humanity to spirituality and to moral values (Anameje, 2023).

In scholarly circles, there have been both positive and negative conceptualizations of religion. In positive terms, it has been defined as: the "belief in spiritual things" (Tylor, 1871); the "recognition of all our duties as divine commands" (Kant, 1781); or as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim, 1965). Still, for Arinze (2008, p. 14), it can be defined "subjectively as the consciousness of one's dependence on a transcendent being and the tendency to worship Him...[and] objectively, as the body of truths, laws, and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent Being." Ekwunife (2014, p. 7) sees it as "man's awareness and recognition of his dependent relationship on a transcendent Being – the wholly other – expressible in human society through beliefs, worships, and ethical or moral behaviour." For Paul Tillich as reviewed by Midgley, religion is understood as the state of being grasped by an "ultimate concern," a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life (Midgley, 1966).

Seen negatively, Ludwig Feuerbach through the lens of Ekwunife (2014) defines it as "a dream, in which our own conceptions and emotions appear to us as separate existences, being out of ourselves." Similarly, Milton Yinger as cited by Ekwunife (2014, p. 10) conceives it as "a system of beliefs and

practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problem of human life.” Lastly, and most unfortunately, Karl Marx understands it as “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiments of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions... the opium of the people” (Marx, 1844, p. 54).

In all, one sees that religion provides the avenue through which human beings acknowledge their finitude and the need to incline on the ultimate reality for the realization of their being.

Social Change

Social change involves alteration of the social order of a society. It may include changes in social institutions, social behaviors, or social relations. It can refer to the notion of social progress or socio-cultural evolution or to a paradigmatic change in the socio-economic structure. Social change refers to the alteration of mechanisms within the social structure, characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behavior, social organizations, or value systems. Different forms of social change include: gradual and reformist increment, radical change, revolutionary change, transformational change, continuous change, top-down change, and/or bottom-up change (Wikipedia, n.d.). Indeed, change is an ever-present sociological reality within society. It can be induced by outside factors impinging on a society or be a result of evolving realities within such society.

The Relationship between Religion and Culture

Ultimately, religion and culture are inseparable in many ways. This relationship between religion and culture forms the background to our discourse on the role of religion in bringing about a change in society, a change that oftentimes does not fail to affect the culture of such a place. For thousands of years, various societies have had some form of religion at the centre of their cultural beliefs and practices. Frequently, also, the practices of religion become so ingrained into the belief systems of citizens that the religion and culture of the society in question are indistinguishable.

Indeed, religions become cultures because the creeds of religion dictate and direct social behaviours. For instance, all Muslims pray five times a day, facing Mecca. This has become a culture for a greater number of them. On their part, the virtue of charity demanded of Christians greatly influences their social relations. In fact, examples abound in all religions. When, therefore, religion and social system (culture) are seen as closely related, then, the role of religion vis-à-vis social change is all the more discernable.

The Substructure-Superstructure Interplay in Social Evolution

There has been a debate over which factors better account for a society's transformation. This is a debate that has been in place since Hegel's postulation of consciousness as the primary determinant of social change and Karl Marx's insistence on material resources as being the determinant factor. Since the time of Marx, therefore, the scene has been set for scholars to divide themselves into externalist and internalist camps on the theories of development and social change. The externalists argue that the factors that chiefly determine a people's development are external to the people themselves (such as geography, biogeography, history, material resources, etc.), while the internalists insist, rather, that it is the internal factors such as ideology, worldview, culture, belief system (religion), and so on, of a people that better account for their rate of development (Robertson, 1983). Hence,

there was set a dialectics between the value base and the material base in accounting for change in a society.

Summarily, while Marx and Marxists hold that the substructure (that is, material and economic forces) of a society are the determining factors of social change, Hegelians and idealists insist that it is, rather, the superstructure (that is, immaterial forces such as ideas, worldviews, religion, value system, and so on) that causes social change. However, for us, internalism (superstructure theory) proves a better theoretical stance, given that “a people cannot endow itself with mineral resources that it does not have...but can always change or transform the way it envisions the world in order to enhance its developmental capacities” (Agbakoba, 2009, p. 575).

However, it was Max Weber (1958), in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, who specifically implicated religion as the driving force of social change. In the West, Weber noted that it was the openness to earthly prosperity upheld by the Protestants that caused the social change from material indifference to capitalism. Indeed, human individuals constitute the subjective dimension of a society's evolution, while material resources are only objective conditions which are inert and lifeless. Hence, the religious values of a society invariably affect the decisions and actions of the members of such a society. In all, the above substructure-superstructure dialectics forms the immediate context (foreground) on which our discourse is based.

The Role of Religion in Bringing About Social Change

There are a wide variety of opinions as to the relationship between religion and social change. Functionalists and Traditional Marxists, on the one hand, have generally argued that religion prevents social change, whereas Neo-Marxists and the Social Action theorist Max Weber, on the other, have argued that religion can be a force for social change.

Those who argue that religion prevents social change (such as Malinowski and Parsons) maintain that it does so by helping individuals and society cope with disruptive events that might threaten the existing social order. Karl Marx (1844) believed that religion helped to preserve the existing class structure. According to him, religious beliefs serve to justify the existing, unequal social order and prevent social change by making a virtue out of poverty and suffering. For him, religion teaches people that it is pointless striving for a revolution to bring about social change in this life. Rather, he claims, it teaches that it is better to focus on ‘being a good Christian’ (for example) in order to receive just rewards in heaven. For Marx, indeed, religion was an opium of the people.

However, there are those who argue that religion causes social change. Max Weber's (1958) *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is one of the best accounts of how religion can bring about social change. Weber pointed out that capitalism developed first in England and Holland, taking off in the early 17th century. Just before capitalism took off, Protestantism was the main religion in these two countries, unlike most other countries in Europe at that time, which were Catholic. Summarily, Weber argued that the social norms instilled by Protestantism laid the foundations for modern capitalism.

Weber's findings became a truism for other instances like the influence of Liberation Theology in engendering social change in Latin America; the role played by the Baptist Church (led by Rev Martin Luther King) in the 1960s Civil Rights movement in the USA; the role of religion in the Arab Spring of the Middle East

and North Africa; etc. Asia is not left out. Imbued by centuries of Confucianism and Zon Buddhism, with such qualities as a strong commitment to order/discipline, sense of family/collectivity, and sense of duty, the Asian Tigers emerged (Thompson, 2018).

In fact, the findings of the history of religion, especially Christianity in most places, can be understood in the light of the many faces of this sociological reality called change. In the Middle Ages in Europe, Churches did not just direct social change, but directed society as a whole. However, social change is not always a positive force. For instance, the ISIS uprising in the Middle East is social change, although a negative one (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.).

Following Durkheim, Robertson (1983) has argued that religions promote social change by guiding their followers to share or 'live' their views. By encouraging the outward expression of religious views, the views become a vehicle for social change. For Robertson, the more important values and norms of a society—for example, those relating to human life, sexual behavior, and property—tend to be incorporated not only in law but also in religious doctrine. The teachings found in sacred scriptures such as the Bible and the Koran would have far less force if they were regarded as the work of ordinary mortals. By powerfully reinforcing crucial values and norms, religion helps to maintain social control over individual behavior.

Also, regarding social change, Horton and Hunt (1964, p. 507) have noted that "all societies change continuously. New traits appear either through discovery and invention, or through diffusion from other societies." Indeed, religious values provide moral standards against which existing social arrangements can be measured and perhaps found wanting. Many religions promote social action and, in doing so, create and promote social change. The beliefs and calls to action inherent in these faiths are a recipe for social change, whether it be in a positive direction, negative direction, or anywhere in-between.

The Extent of Influence of a Religion Vis-À-Vis Social Change

Religious values act as "the internal control mechanisms that determine, direct and channel our responses to physical and social factors, enabling the individual, not to be a passive element buffeted by these factors but an active being that interprets and controls them" (Robertson, 1983). Hence, religion as a worldview affects individuals' thoughts and actions, societal structures/institutions of thought and action, by determining both prohibited and recommendable actions. These values thus constitute the motivators that shape basic desires and attitudes and develop/shape the internal control mechanisms of individuals, providing a given sort of interactive abilities or skills. It follows from this that social change is a product of a given value-resource interface.

There are some yardsticks for determining the extent to which a religion could cause social change. These include:

Degree of Conception of Utility of Matter

This has to do with the extent to which sacredness is attributed to beings and the mode of beings. While some religions view material beings as moderately sacred, others view them as extremely sacred. The implication is that religions with a high sense of the sacredness of being do not allow for material harnessing of resources towards social advancement. For example, in many parts of Igboland, where some mountains are regarded as sacred, mineral mining is prohibited.

Kind of Epistemic Orientation

This means the predominant knowledge acquisition, presuppositions, and processes that a religion offers its adherents. There are three sources of knowledge: the senses, reason, and intuition. The predominant kind of knowledge in every society has much impact on social change and development, determining the form of resource knowledge available for application in technology. It has been argued that "the orientation of the religious ideology, Christianity, at the epistemological and ontological levels was very instrumental in the emergence of the empirical sciences" (Agbakoba, 2005a, p. 116). Indeed, "science arose largely because of the epistemic outlook of Christianity...an outlook that forbade the use of methods that fostered intuition, such as divination and séance, in the process of obtaining knowledge" (Agbakoba, 2005a). Conversely, in Africa, the intuitive epistemic orientation offered by African Traditional Religion (ATR) stifles almost every social advancement. Because native doctors (*ndi dibia*) are the custodians of the African knowledge system, often acquired through divination, one sees why science and technology is slow in the continent (Agbakoba, 2004).

Extent of Positive Self-Definition

If a religion can provide its adherents with a positive self-image and self-worth, it becomes a strong motivational factor in engineering social change (Agbakoba, 2004). For instance, Christianity offers its adherents the orientation of being images of God, teaching that they have guardian angels and saints who are constantly interceding for them; that they have a kind and lovely God whom they can call Father, with all its filial implications. Thus, Christians become bold in dealing with the world and enthroning social change.

On the contrary, however, ATR teaches that its adherents are pitiable toys in the hands of their predetermined 'chi,' and must constantly fight evil forces to evade misfortunes and death. Thus, ATR adherents see themselves as tiny objects in the midst of a forces-controlled mystic universe. Little wonder, such religion enthrones mediocrity and passivity, and hence, stifles social development and change. It is observed that, in ATR, the common man had many taboos to observe, and many daily rituals to perform either to appease the community or the divinities. If he was not an indirect or unconscious slave of the dominant conscious, he held perpetual allegiance to one divinity or another. If he was 'free' with men, he was not free with nature or his environment (Njoku, 2004).

Extent of Communalism Allowed

The extent of communitarian sensitivity allowed by a religion influences the level of social change it can permit. For example, Christianity is a global religion, welcoming all human races to commune together and positively influence the religious space. However, ATR allows for a more closed type of communalism, emphasizing relationships between those who claim a common ancestry, thus limiting the scope of influence (Bodourin, 1984).

Extent of Spirituality Enforced

This has to do with the extent of primacy given to ideas and spiritual benefits over matter and material benefits. A religion that emphasizes spirituality—focusing on immaterial entities such as values, integrity, rationality, detachment, austerity, and discipline—promotes more positive social change than an excessively materialistic one. In ATR, materiality is prominent, Vol-3, Iss-5 (May-2026)

and poverty is seen as a curse, whereas Christianity associates poverty with spiritual richness (Aderibigbe, 2015).

Extent of Rationality and Reflexivity

The principles of consistency, universalization and rationalization are essential in the process of social change. Religions that allow for self-critique and rational thinking are more likely to foster social change. For example, Christianity, with its discipline of theology, encourages self-examination and rational thinking (Horton & Hunt, 1964). Conversely, religions that resist self-critique, such as Islam and ATR, are less likely to promote social change.

Degree of Sense of Time

While some religions support the three periods of past, present and future, some others do not purely do so. For instance, according to Mbiti (1969), time in ATR is only two-dimensional: a long past and a present (and no future). Obviously, a society whose temporal worldview has no place for a future has, to say the least, given too much place to the past. The absence of a futuristic sense of time manifests the value system of a people that are not ready for progress in all its implication. Such a people are contented with just maintaining the status quo and sticking to anachronistic traditions and customs. Given this circumstance, such people are not ready and have left no option for a scientico-technological social change, a change that is always progressive and hence futuristic.

From the above, one can easily see some yardsticks that determine the extent a religion causes social change.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is one of the best accounts of how religion can bring about social change. It was Weber who specifically implicated religion as the driving force for social change. In Latin America, the example of Liberation Theology serves as a force for social change. The Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (2010-2014) also demonstrated the role of religion in social change. Islamic groups used social media to highlight political injustices in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt (Thompson, 2018).

Above all, the capacity for engendering positive social change in a religion depends on the kind of relationship such a religion establishes between its adherents and the physical world: nature, water, earth, air, fire, time and space, plants, pets, wildlife, fellow humans, ancestors, spirits, and God. In Africa, religion has sometimes hindered social change by fostering jealousy, superstition, and fear, thereby institutionalizing an attitude that undermines development (Zacharie, 2015).

Therefore, religion possesses the capacity to inspire both positive and negative social change depending on the worldview and social values it promotes. Ultimately, religion remains a significant ideological force capable of shaping human development, social institutions, and cultural transformation.

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