



# The Role of Religion in Transforming Ghanaian Society: A Christian Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Globally, while some scholars assert that religion is anachronistic and inhibits the human rights of people and frustrates the social progress of society, others are of the opinion that religion can be a catalyst for the transformation and development of individuals and groups. In Ghana, the role of religion in society is very much ambivalent. On the one hand, religion is a force for change and transformation in the lives of individuals and society. On the other hand, religion has also been the basis of intractable violence, conflict and turbulent divisions within families and among groups. This article, which is based on archival materials, seeks to investigate the role of religion in Ghanaian society and to determine what extent it can be a force for change and transformation. The article argues that, religion has the potential to bring about change and transformation in society, but this can only happen when the different creedal persuasions, especially Christians bring their faith to bear on their actions in the practice of everyday life. The article concludes that, the power of religion to occasion change and transformation in the different sectors of society depends on how Christians surmount the challenges of everyday life and synergize faith and works in the private and public spheres of life.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the global discourse about the role of religion in society, some Western scholars have asserted that religion has become anachronistic and that it inhibits human freedom/rights and frustrates the social progress of society. This assertion seems to resonate with the thoughts of Karl Marx who argued many years ago that, “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people”.<sup>1</sup> It is Marx’s view that people can be influenced by religion to the extent that they can begin to do unthinkable things all in the name of religion. For instance, in some parts of Africa, there are cases where believers of some churches are asked to eat grass for healing and deliverance purposes,<sup>2</sup> while others are told to drink the bath water

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, “Introduction to a Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” trans. Joseph O’Malley, (London; Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>2</sup>“Church People Eating Grass”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry3uyum2Rz6M>, Accessed March 2, 2020.

from their pastor so they can be anointed for prosperity or protected against evil or malevolent forces.<sup>3</sup> These examples bring to the fore very worrying truths about Christianity, a religion that ought to refrain from different forms of abuse and to be more prophetic in upholding the teachings of Jesus Christ about showing love towards a neighbour, sharing and goodness to all.

Ghana is a secular country and has all the major religions in existence; Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religion which play their expected roles in the society. Given this strong presence and the socio-development orientation of these three major religions, Ghana is well-placed to benefit from their services in a myriad of ways.<sup>4</sup> However, religion alone cannot handle the social challenges of society. It will require the contribution of families and communities, and coordinated efforts, interventions and professional guidance from state and nonstate institutions.

Radcliffe-Brown acknowledges that religion is important as morality and law promote social cohesion in an orderly arrangement of social relations.<sup>5</sup> Thus, no matter the form of religion, the effect of its performance or practices may be socially valuable because they have the potential to produce specific positive benefits such as good health and long life, sons to carry on the family name, wealth, success in occupation, good rainy season, bumper harvest for both crops and livestock, success in battle and transition to eternity. Radcliffe-Brown goes on to advocate that a sufficient number of diverse religions or religious cults must be studied in terms of their relationship with the particular society in which they are found.<sup>6</sup> Thus, what constitutes religion must be identified.<sup>7</sup>

Using Ghana as a case, this study seeks to investigate the role of religion, and how it may be a good vehicle for changing and transforming society. The paper focuses on Christianity, although Islam and African Traditional Religions, which are also major religions in Ghana will be touched upon. The paper argues that, while religion has the potential to bring about change and transformation in society, this can only happen when the different creedal persuasions, especially Christians bring their faith to bear on their actions and vice versa in the practice of everyday life.

### The Concept of Religion

Religion is a difficult concept to explain or define because of its application to different public and social contexts. However, in conceptualising religion, most scholars take into consideration elements such as belief in a supernatural being, worship, rituals, priesthood, practices, a set of moral codes and conduct and communion.

In this paper, the concept of religion will be largely inspired by the works of scholars such as Emile Durkheim, Jon Abbink, and Robert Bellah among others. For Durkheim, Cosman, and Cladis, religion is “the self-validation which is made up of the feeling of having recognized, confirmed, or established one's own worthiness or legitimacy through its myths and rituals. Thus, religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things.”<sup>8</sup>

Abbink conceptualises religion as “a belief in the existence and workings of spiritual beings or divine forces, and the recognition of an invisible order or reality that affects humans and their behaviour. The order always has a transcendental, supra-individual dimension and refers to perceived ancestor spirits, creator beings or, forces “beyond”.<sup>9</sup> In both concepts, Abbink sees religion as value-neutral and as such may not be directly connected to any particular faith or creed. Durkheim's concept

<sup>3</sup> “Church Members Drink Pastor's Bathwater for Anointing”, accessed March 3, 2020.

<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Church-members-drink-pastor-s-bathwater-for-anointing-816991>.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Baffoe, and Mavis Dako-Gyeke, “Social Problems and Social Work in Ghana: Implications for Sustainable Development,” *International Journal of Development and Sustainability* 2, no. 1 (2013): 347-363.

<sup>5</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, “Religion and society.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 75(1/2), (1945): 33-43.

<sup>6</sup> Radcliffe-Brown, “Religion and society.” 33-43.

<sup>7</sup> John Beyers, “The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Transforming Society,” *Acta Theologica*, no. 41 (2021): 52-69.

<sup>8</sup> Emile Durkheim, C. Cosman, and M. S. Cladis, *The elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London; Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Jon Abbink, “Religion and Politics in Africa: The Future of “The Secular,” *Africa Spectrum*, 49(3), (2014): 83-106.

of religion emphasizes the role of religion in moulding a community of believers. Religion fosters unity and sanity in human relationships as well as ensures conformity to societal codes and rules that promote peaceful coexistence among societal members.

In a related development, Bellah argues that religion is “a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate human beings to the ultimate conditions of their existence”.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Haynes sees religion as comprising religious establishments (i.e., institutions and officials), as well as social groupings and movements that champion the course of their religion.<sup>11</sup> The Opus Dei, a conservative Roman Catholic organisation, the reformist Islamic Salvation Front of Algeria, and India's Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party are all examples.

Drawn from the above, religion may be conceptualised as a set of organized beliefs, practices and traditions related to the belief and worship of a spiritual force such as a personal god or Supernatural Being. The beliefs and practices are rooted in the cultural practices, worldviews, texts, prophecies, revelations, and morality that have spiritual meaning to members of the particular faith. However, in everyday practice, religion is practically expressed through sermons, rituals, prayer, meditation, visits to holy sites, trance experiences and festive activities.

In this sense, Therborn, argues that religion can influence the world through doctrine and what they do (i.e., as a social phenomenon working through variable modes of institutionalization, including political parties and church and state relations, and functioning as a mark of identity).<sup>12</sup> Thus, religion serves a wide range of purposes, including being a source of comfort and guidance to its adherents. It is also a source of morality, good behaviour and a sense of community, conviviality and sharing.

In this article, as the authors draw on the concept of religion espoused by the scholars mentioned above, they conceptualise religion as belief in a Supernatural Being who influences a person's attitude, i.e. the way and manner a person makes a positive impact by the conduct of his/her life here on earth. The definitions emphasize collective adherence to a belief system and living according to the belief. It regulates the way of life of believers and makes them conform, and adhere to societal norms and practices that foster social equilibrium.

### **The Notion of Transformation**

Transformation is an everyday word.<sup>13</sup> A generic definition of transformation is applicable to all domains and if it is not arbitrary then it would at least serve the purpose of making common aspects of changes in different domains of life apparent.<sup>14</sup> Religious transformation is a change or complex series of changes that enable a person or society to move from one state of being to another. The transformation may require movement from one religious tradition to another or a new way of relating or being within a particular tradition.<sup>15</sup> Religious transformation involves change within a person or society in relation to the religious beliefs and practices of a particular religion. Admittedly, religious transformation is driven by factors of social change. According to Klaus Hock as in Ramharter,<sup>16</sup> there are exogenous and endogenous factors that cause religious change. The exogenous factors affect a religion from the outside and thus lead to its transformation while the endogenous factors develop in the domain of religion itself. Furthermore, Hock differentiates between ‘religious’ and ‘contextual’ phenomena as sources of religious change.<sup>17</sup> Society is characterized by common interests, and

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<sup>10</sup> Robert N. Bellah, "Religious evolution", *American Sociological Review*, 29, (1964).

<sup>11</sup> Jeff Haynes, "Religion, Secularisation and Politics: A Postmodern Conspectus," *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1997): 709-728.

<sup>12</sup> Göran Therborn, "Another way of taking religion seriously: Comment on Francis G. Castles." *European Journal of Political Research* 26, no. 1 (1994): 103-110.

<sup>13</sup> Rolf Reißig, *Gesellschafts-Transformation im 21. Jahrhundert: Ein neues Konzept sozialen Wandels*. Springer-Verlag, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> E. Ramharter, "Transformation" in the Context of Religion and Society. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society*, 6(1), (2020): 193-215.

<sup>15</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Critical terms for religious studies*, (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Ramharter, "Transformation", 193-215.

<sup>17</sup> Ramharter, "Transformation", 193-215.

distinctive cultures and institutions.<sup>18</sup> The basic components of the institution include actors, roles and norms.<sup>19</sup> The norms comprise the unwritten, informal codes of conduct that recommend how people should behave in particular situations and they are considered vital by societal members.

## Theories of Religion

### A. Religion as a Conservative Force

Religion as a conservative force implies that religion is an inhibitor of social change. Thus, it is a way of maintaining the existing order of Society and the Status Quo.<sup>20</sup> Conservatism comes from the Latin word “conservare” which means to “preserve”. In this sense, conservatism, means “let us maintain what we have, be it the institution, the system or the practice; let us preserve what we have for continuity is the best; and if anything at all let us adopt changes minimally and gradually.” It is a force for stability and order. In their analysis of religion, Durkheim and Marx, both agree with the explanation of religion as a conservative force. But other scholars argue against such a claim and rather contend that religion sets social change in motion and does not inhibit change in society.

To evaluate whether or not religion is a conservative force for social change, the authors look at the different roles of religion in society. They argue that religious conservatism stems from the structuralist theories of Functionalism and Marxism. In what follows, they briefly explain what functionalism and Marxism mean in reference to religion and change.

#### i. Functionalism

Functionalism is based on the premise that all aspects of a society including the institutions, roles, and norms serve a purpose, and that all are indispensable for the long-term survival of the society. Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons<sup>21</sup> and Robert Bellah<sup>22</sup> are scholars who support the view that religion is indispensable because it performs important functions in society. For example, in his research among the Aruntas of Australia, Durkheim discovered that in this group religion is perceived as a means for promoting discipline, cohesion, vitalizing society and preventing individuals from becoming anti-social.

Furthermore, Durkheim argued that, every society has a religion because religious institutions perform functions which contribute to the survival of the social system as a whole, just as organs of the body undertake functions necessary for the body's survival.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Durkheim believed “that through the act of collective worship in the form of religious practices, religion helps bond and unite individuals by acting as “social glue” that promotes value consensus and social solidarity. Functionalists see religion as a conservative force in that it helps to integrate individuals and allow them to realize the “collective conscience” (a set of moral codes and values).” It must be said that Durkheim, in his proposition, believed in the eventual secularization of religion and the fact that eventually religion would virtually disappear or be replaced by a new religion and other representations of society such as technology. Bronislaw Malinowski, however, argues that religion or culture performs important functions, but for the individual and not society as a whole. At any rate, there is general agreement among the different functionalist scholars that religion promotes stability and helps to preserve the status quo, prevents upheaval and promotes rapid social change.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Society”, *New World Encyclopedia*, March 2nd, 2020, <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Society>

<sup>19</sup> Thomas W. Martin, "Social Institutions: A Reformulation of the Concept," *Pacific Sociological Review* 11, no. 2 (1968): 100-109.

<sup>20</sup> “Religion as a Conservative Force Essay”, *Bartleby Research*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Religion-as-a-Conservative-Force-PKCV4G6YVC>

<sup>21</sup> Parsons, Talcott. "Cleavage and Conflict in Modern Type Societies." In *Intergroup Accommodation in Plural Societies*, (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1978), 456-466.

<sup>22</sup> Robert N. Bellah, "8. Religious Systems." In *People of Rimrock*, (Harvard University Press, 2013), 227-264.

<sup>23</sup> Robert N. Bellah and Emile Durkheim, *On Morality and Society, Selected Writings*. Chicago (The University of Chicago Press, 1973)

<sup>24</sup> Malinowski, Bronislaw. "The group and the individual in functional analysis." *American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 6 (1939): 938-964.

## ii. Marxism

According to Karl Marx, throughout the history of class society, religion has performed two essential functions. Firstly, it buttresses the established order by sanctifying it while suggesting that the political order is somehow ordained by divine authority, and secondly, it consoles the oppressed and exploits them by promising them in heaven what they are denied here on earth. At the same time, by holding before them a vision of what they are denied, religion plays at least a progressive role by giving the common people an idea of what a better order will be like. For many people, the thought that after death they and their loved ones will be reunited in a better place helps them to handle better the challenges and disappointments of everyday life.<sup>25</sup>

## B. Religion as a factor of change

According to Neo-Marxist, Otto Maduro, religion has the power to spark revolutionary change.<sup>26</sup> For example, in Latin America, priests such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino were very instrumental in propagating what is known as “liberation theology”. Although the religious views of the liberation theologians were largely opposed by the Church’s hierarchy, they nonetheless challenged the status quo, and their activities led to a revolution in Nicaragua. Also, there are many other examples where religion played a pivotal role in societal transformation. For instance, in South Africa, leading church personalities like Archbishop Desmond Tutu was very influential in the dismantling of apartheid. Other notable examples include the opposition of the Catholic Church in Poland against communism and the role of Protestants in changing European society into a capitalist society as captured in Max Weber’s book (1958), “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.”

## C. Religion as both a conservative force and a factor of change

According to Wallis<sup>27</sup> Emile Durkheim-one of the founders of sociology- developed a theory which tied religion closely to the prevailing structure and values of a society. Durkheim considered religion as a means by which society represented to itself the moral forces which emanated from group life. The common norms constraining behaviour were located beyond the natural and social realm, as emanations from a being or power outside it and greater than man. Durkheim saw religion as providing - through its symbols and rituals – a means for the members of a society to reawaken their common identity, their shared values and commitments. Its role is, therefore, essentially integrative, aiding in the maintenance of the prevailing structure.

## Religion in Contemporary Ghana

In contemporary Ghana, as in the past, religious activities have occupied an important place in the society by maintaining social cohesion and the development of its members. Historically, religion has been a primary driver of social development. Early Europeans shaped their religions through the translation of sacred scriptures.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, religions have also consistently condemned violence and injustice and encouraged the pursuit of peace. Some religious leaders were well-known for fighting apartheid, while others declared support and helped to legitimise it.<sup>29</sup> In some societies, religion has also been a source of conflict and tension leading to loss of life and property. Nonetheless, according to Blackmar and Gillin, religion may lose all its importance if the believer and worshiper of that religion cease to worship together.<sup>30</sup> In addition, religion refers to patterns of social and individual behaviour that believers use to organise their daily lives in a spiritual sense.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Marx Karl, and Friedrich Engels. On religion, (*Courier Corporation*, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Otto Maduro, ed. Judaism, Christianity, and Liberation: An Agenda for Dialogue, (*Wipf and Stock Publishers*, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> R. Wallis, “Introduction: Religion and Change.” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, (1982).

<sup>28</sup> Ron McGivern, “Religion,” *BCcampus*, 2014: <https://opentextbc.ca/introductiontosociology/chapter>.

<sup>29</sup> John Beyers, “The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Transforming Society,” *Acta Theologica*, 41 (2021): 52-69.

<sup>30</sup> Frank Blackmar and John Louis Gillin, “Outlines of Sociology,” *By---and John Lewis Gillin, Macmillan*, 1915

<sup>31</sup> Haynes, "Religion, Secularisation and Politics: A Postmodern Conspectus," 709-728.

Christianity, one of the three main religions in Ghana has been very dominant in affairs of the state. The Church has contributed immensely to the socio-economic development of the country and over 71% of Ghanaians profess to be Christians.<sup>32</sup> The 2021 population census figures indicate astronomical growth among Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians or believers. This group of Christians makes up the majority of Ghana's population with a share of 31.6 percent rounding up to about 10 million people.<sup>33</sup> According to Ter Haar, in the past, Christianity in Ghana was largely monopolised by the former mission churches such as the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, the Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches.<sup>34</sup> Today, this is not the case, things have changed. However, the works of the Church can be seen in the areas of education, health, agriculture and social protection. In the area of politics, the Christian Council of Ghana and the National Catholic Secretariat were very instrumental during the military regimes in providing the context and inspiring many God-fearing persons to put themselves forward for elections to various national offices.<sup>35</sup> Now, the Ghanaian landscape is inundated with an increasing number of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. This epitomizes the importance of religion in the everyday life of the Ghanaian but also points to a certain degree of over-reliance on religion as a primary means of dealing with the existential challenges of life.

In a related development, Anderson opines that the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement has made inroads through its spirited missionary effort.<sup>36</sup> This assertion is supported by the proportion of the Ghanaian population that today profess to be Pentecostal/Charismatic believers.

Available records show that there are deep-seated behavioural challenges, social and economic inequalities to address. Generally, the attitude of some Ghanaians to work needs to improve, sanitation is deplorable, and social services such as electricity and water are inadequate. Occultism and 'Sakawa,' for example, are having a significant impact on the lives of young people. The desire for fast wealth and power is the driving force behind juvenile involvement in these practises. Many young individuals are also involved in drug-related activities, prostitution, abortion, armed robbery, and other sorts of deviant behavior. At the same time, one can also see signs of hope in young people who are leveraging their sense of innovation and creativity to improve their lives and that of society.

In Ghana, all citizens are free to believe and manifest any religious faith "a fact that, religious beliefs and practices permeate all aspects of Ghanaian life."<sup>37</sup> Indeed, Ghana's Supreme Court affirms Ghana as a secular state and rules that: "...secularism...allowed and encouraged recognition and accommodation of religion and religious identity by the state."<sup>38</sup>

The Supreme Court's decision emphasises the role of religion in complementing the efforts of the state. It also recognises the distinctive character of religion in explaining social phenomena. Additionally, the proliferation of religious trends and the variety of Christian churches leave a wide range of choices for believers. Nonetheless, how individuals relate to their maker is influenced by their spiritual and material life.<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that religion is a very powerful force for societal transformation.<sup>40</sup> If religion plays a significant role in creating fair and equitable societies,<sup>41</sup> then how has the proliferation of Christian churches and growth in membership influenced the role of the church in bringing about societal transformation in this new democratic dispensation? According to Gussler,

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<sup>32</sup> Beyers, "The Role of Religion," 52-69.

<sup>33</sup> Ghana Statistical Service (2021 November). *Population of regions and districts general report*. Volume 3A

<sup>34</sup> Ter Haar Gerrie, "Standing up for Jesus: A Survey of New Developments in Christianity in Ghana," *Exchange* 23, no. 3 (1994): 221-240.

<sup>35</sup> Elom Dovlo, "Religion and the Politics of Fourth Republican Elections in Ghana (1992, 1996)," 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Allan Heaton Anderson, "An Introduction to Pentecostalism," *Global Charismatic Christianity* Cambridge, *Cambridge University Press*, (2004).

<sup>37</sup> Kofi Quashigah, "Religion and the Secular State in Ghana," *Religion and the Secular State*, (2015): 331-340

<sup>38</sup> Rickard Carmel, "Secularism in Ghana, "obviously encourages state accommodation of religion and religious identity - Supreme Court, (February 7, 2019)

<sup>39</sup> Kofi Quashigah, "Religion and the Secular State in Ghana," 331-340

<sup>40</sup> Marinović Jerolimov, Dinka, Siniša Zrinščak, and Irena Borowik, "Religion and Patterns of Social Transformation," *Institute for Social Research-Zagreb*, 2004.

<sup>41</sup> Ghana Statistical Service, *Population and Housing Report*, 2022.

social change and its attendant stresses encompass expressive behaviour such as beliefs and rituals, and historical changes.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Role of Religion in Ghanaian Society**

Religion plays a very significant role in the social transformation of society and its members. Having examined the various theories of religion and social transformation, attention can now be turned to the role religion plays in the transformation of Ghanaian society.

### **Religion as a Conservative Force**

Olupona reviewing Assimeng's "Religion and Social Change in West Africa: An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion", stated that "certain occurrences in life can be explained and adjusted to in a straightforward common-sense and matter-of-fact way, while certain phenomena that fall outside the 'normal' ordinary explanation, and about which human beings feel impelled to think and behave from a position of awe, wonder, humility and supplication, are usually categorized as falling into the sphere of the super-empirical or super-normal."<sup>43</sup> Notably, Assimeng mentions the normal or the empirical and that which falls beyond the normal or the empirical. It is therefore questionable when even the normal things that happen are explained in terms of the supernatural. It is in this light, that Religion is discussed as a conservative force.

Religion as a conservative force could be attested to in Ghana by the way religion has led many Ghanaians to literally stick to a particular worldview. Ghanaians are astutely religious irrespective of their religious affiliation, level of education or social standing. The inherent African religious tenets, which are deeply ingrained in the Ghanaian have greatly influenced his or her worldview to the extent that more generally, "everything" about the Ghanaian is explained in reference to the supernatural. The practice of relying too much on religious beliefs in explaining or understanding daunting challenges of life has made the Ghanaian somehow superstitious. Invariably, this has given some pastors the power to deceive their followers into believing that they can do everything for them. In Ghana, people are quick to assign spiritual meanings to positive or negative happenings in their lives or in the community. For instance, phenomena that can be understood medically or technologically are attributed to the work of God, Mallams, deities or other spiritual beings. The causes of sicknesses are also, more generally, attributed to witches and evil forces. Because of this belief, some sick people do not seek medical attention when needed but go to prayer camps for 'spiritual' healing. Eventually, these people may report to the hospital at a time when their health has already deteriorated.<sup>44</sup> In fact, some sick people die in the prayer camps through the negligence or ignorance of pastors who are trying to handle medical issues spiritually. In Ghana, it is not uncommon for a terrible road accident to be attributed to a god who was angry with someone in the vehicle. In this instance, it is argued that it will require a sacrifice offered to the god in question, in order to forestall a future occurrence at the same place. But, what is actually needed is for the right authorities to investigate the cause of the accident, and proffer a solution to prevent any future accident. But, this is not always the case. The inability to properly handle such matters often retards the progress and development of society. The above examples mean that, as a people, Ghanaians, but especially, Christians, rely heavily on both their beliefs in the supernatural and reason in solving everyday challenges of life.

Ghanaians are very religious, but religion is not only about emotions and feelings. Religion is also about understanding what one believes in, and leveraging the beliefs to improve one's personal life and that of society. Science is a good source of knowledge and is not opposed to religion and vice versa, so both disciplines should influence the manner in which issues are handled in life. Once, one

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<sup>42</sup> Judith Gussler, "Social Change, Ecology, and Spirit Possession among the South African Nguni," *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change* (1973): 88-126.

<sup>43</sup> J. K. M. Assimeng, "Religion and Social Change in West Africa," Book Review, *Journal of Religion in Africa/Religion en Afrique* 23 (1993): 355.

<sup>44</sup> "Cancer Patients Report to Hospital Too Late"- KAT Director, *My joy Online*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/2015/April-15th/cancer-patients-report-to-hospital-too-late-kath-director.php>.

of the authors was travelling early morning on a bus from Madina to Tema (surrounding towns of Accra-Ghana). A Christian bus preacher stood up in the bus preaching at the top of his voice. The focus of his preaching was on road accidents, and his intention was to persuade the passengers to believe in God so that their journey may be smooth. He went on to quote copiously from the scriptures to support his message. Not long, he raised a song to entice his listeners to give him attention. When the song was over, he started appealing to the passengers to support him with money to build a church which some of the passengers obliged. When the author later, narrated the experience to his mother; she told him it was good people did not try to stop the preacher, otherwise, they will be termed agents of the devil. What comes to the fore agrees with Meyer's argument that, "sermon practices prove to be potent forms of being religious in the city, testifying to the multifaceted and continuously entangled religiosities in Africa today."<sup>45</sup> This response resonates with the more general view that the Ghanaian religious landscape is full of good religious leaders, but also charlatans who have the proclivity to convince adherents that religion can provide answers to just about everything in life.

Religion and spirituality can blur the objectivity of people. And in Ghana, extreme religiosity is making it difficult to introduce change, especially in the public sphere. The attitude of ascribing every challenge to a supernatural or malevolent force does not promote growth and development as it prevents people from taking personal responsibility for their problems and constructively dealing with them. In Ghana, as in other African countries, religious leaders use religion to exploit the innocent poor to enrich themselves. Today, it is common knowledge that certain persons establish a Church or a shrine because it is one of the most lucrative business ventures in Ghana. It is thus, of little surprise when one reads about the extortion of monies from people by charlatans of these Churches or shrines. In most cases, the central message of the Pastors is that they have the ability to make their adherents wealthy or prosperous. Given the level of poverty and other social challenges in society, the assurances of Pastors may be welcome news, however deceptive and awkward they may be.

In a related development, Pastors claim to have the power to double monies for people through intense prayer sessions instead of encouraging them to work hard for a living. Thus, in parts of urban Africa, "we are witnessing not just the construction of new churches and mosques, but also the marked rise of preaching personalities who mobilize their charisma, deploy skills and arts of persuasion to build their authority, assemble new publics, and mobilize their audiences"<sup>46</sup>.

Presently, it is observable that leaders of the Churches are growing richer while many of their followers are becoming poorer. These practices lend credence to Marx's assertion that, religion is the opium of the people because it offers them little latitude to think for themselves and challenge what is not acceptable. As a social institution, religion is important because it helps societal members to attain a sense of worth, dignity and growth. But, religion can become negative when it is used to suppress, torture and hold people back. Religion that does not seek the integral socioeconomic progress of people is bad religion. Bad religion stems from the distortions and misinterpretations that believers give to the tenets of their faith. Indeed, in Africa, not least Ghana, one may strongly suggest that bad religion has become a major bane of the continent's slow pace at development. Against this background, some scholars have opined that in Africa, religion is increasingly becoming a disabler rather than an enabler for the social progress of its people.

In Ghana, adherents of African traditional religion teach values of peace and harmony and encourage collective acts of goodness for the good of members and society. Yet, there are others among them such as traditional medical practitioners and diviners who sometimes, exploit those who come to them for monetary gains and other benefits. In Christianity, followers are encouraged to love God and neighbour. At the same time, there are others who think that going to Church and later engaging in social vices is acceptable. Islam preaches faith in One God and peace, but it can also be associated

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<sup>45</sup> Birgit Meyer, and Abdoulaye Sounaye, "Introduction: Sermon in the City: Christian and Islamic Preaching in West Africa," *Journal of religion in Africa* 47, no. 1 (2017): 1-8.

<sup>46</sup> Meyer and Sounaye, "Introduction: Sermon in the City," 1-8.



with some levels of negative practices. This said one cannot neglect the fact that in many ways, religion has also brought some level of development to many local communities where social amenities such as water, schools, and health facilities were difficult to access.

### **Religion and Change**

Change has been the import of the messages of the prophets in the Bible and in the Koran. In Christianity, the message of Jesus Christ is about an individual change of heart, mind and life. This is because God, who is the judge of moral conduct, will look at the way believers in Christ have lived in harmony and cared for one another to determine the state of man's communion with him here and in the world hereafter.

In Ghana, Christianity and Islam are great religions that have impacted greatly on their followers. They complement the efforts of Government in the provision of education from kindergarten to the tertiary level; they provide medical care from health posts to hospitals; they provide relief services, offer employment to thousands of Ghanaians and many other areas of social services to the Ghanaian people. However, these religions have failed to address the glaring difference between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. There seems to be a breakdown of discipline in many sectors of life including the workplace and the family. It appears that the religiosity of the Ghanaian is only in the Church, Mosque, or shrine. There seems to be an apparent disconnect between faith and practice.

### **Religion and Faith**

Here, the authors argue that religion and faith should serve as a guide to professionals, businessmen and women, traders among other persons in the conduct of their businesses and life. In making ethical decisions about life issues or work, the tenets of one's religious ethical contents should guide the process. The Muslims must be guided by the Koran and the Hadith, the Christians by the Bible, tradition and the magisterium, and for the traditionalists the cherished religious and cultural values some of which are enshrined in the sayings and taboos, natural law, and conscience. Arguably, this process has the potential to bring great improvement and transformation to the different sectors of society.

Furthermore, they contend that the common key ethical mandate in all the religions in Ghana for their adherents should be unity, peace and love. These values are needed to bring about personal and collective development. And for this to be achieved, leaders of different religious persuasions may make their topmost agenda to give teachings and innovative programmes to enhance the knowledge and commitment of the people.

According to Evans-Pritchard, religion plays a major role in the maintenance and support of the social order, so it should be given a central place in the social system. Religion can help to address issues such as indiscipline, lack of respect, especially for the aged, illegal wealth, ostentatious living, corruption and deviance. Religion challenges people to change their attitude; and since Ghanaians are said to be religious, it should not be too difficult for the people to change and use religion as a catalyst for transforming the society. The authors argue that, for any process of change to be effective, leaders of the different religious groupings in the country must lead the way. Today, as in the past, there have been initiatives by some religious leaders in the fight against bribery and corruption and matters of sanitation. But, the effort was short-lived. The process of change must be sustained not only through the lifestyle of the leaders but also through the work and practice of their followers. There is an absolute need for continuity and persistence in these initiatives.

Furthermore, there is a need for the effective exercise of prophetic roles by the different faith persuasions. By prophetic role, they mean followers of different religions, but especially their leaders should be able to speak to issues and call for change and be voices for the voiceless. It must be admitted that, this is not an easy task, but religious leaders should strive to lead the way and be courageous in speaking up so things can change for the good of all, and not for a few. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matt. 5:11).

It is well known that, wherever the Catholic Church is established, they are able to bring rapid development to the area, not only with respect to physical infrastructure, but also health and educational facilities primarily for the benefit of the poor and the underprivileged. This is a positive demonstration of the impact of religion on society. This demonstrates that it is important that religious groups get involved in the affairs of their communities, help the communities to identify their needs and find productive ways to address them. For instance, it will be good for religious groups to develop formation and training programmes to offer employable skills and expertise to the youth in the various communities so they can contribute their widow's mite for the good of their families and society.

Additionally, the various religious faiths can leverage the process of inter-religious dialogue to promote peace and unity amongst themselves and in society. The example of interreligious co-operation among the different faiths may lead to the promotion of a culture of respect, tolerance and belonging in the larger Ghanaian society. The end result of this process will be peace and development.

The use of the media (print and electronic) has proven to be a good source of disseminating educational information and for other purposes. Hackett argues that "the appropriation and use of modern media technologies facilitate the dissemination of the Word to the masses. The use of the media is clearly a tool of expansion, a reflection of globalizing aspirations, but it is also part of a calculated attempt to transform and Christianize popular culture so that it is safe for consumption by 'born-again' Christians".<sup>47</sup>

The various religions can make use of the media in Ghana in one way or the other. The problem however is, how to guide the content of what religious leaders are communicating to the people. It is more about making money out of religion. Some religious leaders exploit their followers by capitalizing on their ignorance about religious matters and the social milieu, which is replete with superstition, witchcraft accusations and xenophobic beliefs.

## SUMMARY

This paper has demonstrated that religion is a strong catalyst for change and development and this outcome feeds into the broader discourse about the role of religion in society. However, it also acknowledges that religion has a dual character in the practice of everyday life. As it helps groups and individuals to change and grow through faith and doctrine, it also has the potential to be used for negative ends. It is partly the impact of this duality that accounts for the slow pace at which religion may be said to be a force for change and socioeconomic development in Ghanaian society.

Additionally, this study has shown that in spite of the negative narratives about the role of religion in Ghana, one cannot ignore the many religious schools and institutions, hospitals, clinics and other social services to people. These services demonstrate that religion is not only about the transformation of individuals or groups, but also the institutions and structures that help to improve the quality of life at different levels.

Furthermore, the application of religious values, norms and doctrines in different social contexts of the Ghanaian society through sustained good leadership by religious leaders and state actors, may further reinforce the potential of religion as a conservative force for change and development. This may lead to good neighbourliness and social cohesion among the different ethnic, religious and social classes/groups in the country and bring them together for the common good.

Media technology has brought about great advancement in the use of the radio, television, and the internet for many good purposes including the propagation of the Christian message through different media outlets. But, at the same time, some pastors or charlatans are using the television, for example, to deceive or woo innocent believers into believing that pastors can change their lives overnight. These charlatans succeed because many believers of the different Christian persuasions believe that a meaningful life is achievable only through reliance on religious leaders or prayer. It thus comes as little surprise that, the Ghanaian religious landscape, especially of the Christian tradition is

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<sup>47</sup> Rosalind I. J. Hackett, "Charismatic/Pentecostal Appropriation of Media Technologies in Nigeria and Ghana," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28, no. 3 (1998): 258- 277.

inundated with leaders whose major interest is their personal interest or benefits than the good of the members and society.

## CONCLUSION

The paper's concluding argument reinforces the potential role of religion to change and transform Ghanaian society. This, however, can happen when there is a synergy between faith and works or when doctrine can be translated into praxis so that the way of life of believers may be a concrete expression of their faith and vice versa. Until believers of various religious or creedal persuasions, but especially the Christians make a concerted effort to foster the social and ethical role of religion for the benefit of the people of Ghana, religion will only remain a theory or slogan.

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