

***Religion, Politics and Ethics: Moral and Ethical Dilemmas Confronting Faith-based Organizations and Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century -Another View***

Sylvester Chima, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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**Abstract**

Religion plays a predominant role in Africans spiritual worldview and belief systems. However, this affinity for religion has often been exploited in an unethical manner by political demagogues, religionists, and ‘surrogates with interests of their own’. Africans’ religious proclivity is often misused as a pretext for colonization or perpetuation of poor leadership and governance in African states, by introducing dominant foreign religions and ideology into traditional societies. These interference with the African cultural ethos led to ‘things falling apart’ with abandonment of the African spiritual worldview. This paper argues that in this season of anomie, characterized by failure of the usual social and ethical standards in many African states, it may be time for Africans to embark on a journey of rediscovery regarding the African moral and existential philosophies of good character, tolerance, brotherhood, and communalism; exemplified by the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, lately replaced by the Western ideology of rugged individualism and sometimes the extremist ideology of annihilation of ‘the other’ as practised by extremist religious groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram. One could argue that while Western intellectual tradition and industrialization, may have introduced modern technologies and development to Africa, the natural affinity to religion and need for developmental aid, predicated by poor leadership and corruption, should not be used as an excuse for the re-colonization of the African mind, through the mechanism of faith-based organizations (FBOs), which have re-emerged as new partners in international development. This may stall the advance of democratic ideals and perpetuate the cycles of underdevelopment, poverty, and marginalization of African peoples.

Keywords: Africa, Religion, Politics, Ethics, Faith-based organizations, Morals, Philosophy

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## Introduction

Faith based organizations (FBOs), which can be described as “formal organizations whose identity and mission are self-consciously derived from the teachings of one or more religious or spiritual traditions” (Berger, 2003). FBOs have recently re-emerged as new partners in international development. International organizations such as the World Bank, WHO, UNESCO, DFID and USAID, involved in providing aid to developing countries have in recent times endeavoured to channel some of their development aid through FBOs (James, 2009). This renewed interest in FBOs have been fuelled by observations such as: “...one cannot fight poverty without tending to people’s spiritual dimensions...” and “...the enormous political voice of faith communities and their equally significant role in delivering social services suggests that they are critical development partners and agents of change” (James, 2009). Moreover, religious leaders and institutions appear to have more trusted in developing countries (James, 2009). Advocates of increased aid for developing African countries argue that “for African states to become more effective, they need to understand what it is about religion that builds enormous loyalty in adherents, creates infrastructural benefits, collects tithes and taxes and fosters a sense of belonging that builds material and spiritual benefit” (Alolo, 2007). It has also been observed that the worldview of the most in Africans is rooted in religion and spirituality, with up to 99.5% of Africans being religious, and large numbers converting to Christianity and Islam. (Alolo, 2007; Dan Fulani, 2001; Kitause & Achunike, 2013, Mbiti, 1969, Mbiti, 1970;)

However, it must be noted that while religious entities have assisted with provision of healthcare services and education to underserved populations (James, 2009; Kagawa, 2012), perhaps based on benevolence, morals values and altruism, the religious worldview of Africans and their intense spirituality may have been exploited in an unethical manner. The introduction of Christianity and Islam into Africa was accomplished with strong paternalism (Chima, 2009), and hegemony which required complete abandonment of the African spiritual worldview and African traditional religions (ATR), medicine, and belief systems (Chima, 2015). (Achebe, 1967; Alolo, 2007, Dan Fulani 2001) Thereby causing things to fall apart in African traditional societies with the advent of colonialism (Achebe, 1967; Dan Fulani, 2001; Dronen, 2005; Mbiti, 1967). The introduction of foreign religions into Africa and other developing countries while purportedly based on the best interests of the natives, might have been morally contaminated by the ‘myth of the disinterested other’, whereby ‘surrogates with interests of their own’ misused religion in advancing their own personal interests and objectives whether it be colonization, apartheid, slavery or religious expansionism. The control and domination of native populations have often been accomplished by unethical means such as trickery, deception or by introducing modern benefits such as healthcare, education, etc. which recipient populations have been unable to resist due to their vulnerability. (Achebe, 1967; Dan Fulani, 2001; Dronen, 2005) This ‘race for souls’ in Africa and elsewhere by competing religious entities and denominations have also been accompanied by traditional religious rivalry resulting in many forms of ‘structural violence’<sup>11</sup> including wars, terrorism, etc. (Chima, Mduluza & Kipkemboi, 2013; Galtung, 1990), “*recognizable in the forms of annihilation of the ‘other’, of forced assimilation of individual historical identities, of presupposed uniqueness of a falsely universalizing thought*” (Cacciatore (2011, Chima, 2015). This is consistent with the Marxist interpretation of religion

based on a self-interest theory, whereby religion is used as an ideological tool by the ruling class to maintain political control and domination of the oppressed, ‘the opium of the people’. (Dronen, 2005; Cacciatore, 2011). The concept of “*religion as an opiate not only implies sedation from the pain of a life of exploitation, but also suggests a systematic and strategic attempt to deaden or absorb any critical impulse to liberation*” (Cacciatore 2011, Chima 2015). This longing for escape from a life of suffering and pain by marginalized and oppressed peoples can be visualized in a popular rap song which goes repeats the anthem “*I gotta make it to heaven, for going through hell... I hope I make it to heaven...*” (Jackson et al, 2003; Chima 2015). This longing for escape by the poor and oppressed is exploited by religionists by painting a picture based on faith and belief in a better life, summarized by a quotation from (Wittgenstein’s, 1963): “*A picture held us captive, and we could not free ourselves from it as it is inexorably repeated in our language.*”

It is this picture and promise of a better life which keeps adherents enthralled by faith and belief in things unseen. Therefore, “*religion is not simply an idea, but [becomes] a medium of transmission and control, with its own organizations, networks, and mnemotechnic devices of indoctrination [and] remembrance*” (Cacciatore, 2011).

## **Discussion**

While it is recognized that religion and faith have an enormous capacity for good, there is also the alternative view that ‘faith can be misused to justify violence’ according to the Archbishop of Canterbury (Welby, 2013). Others have suggested that “we should realise that there is good religion, bad religion, and very bad religion” (Berger 3). Accordingly, FBOs have been described as heterogeneous religious entities produced by very different world faiths with radically different interpretations of faith in differing cultural, social, geographic, political and historical contexts (Berger, 2003; Olarinmoye, 2012). Based on their different objectives or functionality, FBOs have been classified into a five-fold typology ranging from faith based representative organizations or apex bodies to faith based radical, illegal or terrorist organizations which promote radical or militant forms of faith identity or engage in armed struggle or violent acts justified on the grounds of faith (Olarinmoye, 2012). Recent examples of such extremists FBOs include ISIS, Boko Haram etc. Many recent conflicts in Africa, Europe and America can be traced to religious intolerance and extremism. Other moral and ethical dilemmas and controversies surrounding religion including FBOs are shown in Table 1. Based on these observations, opponents of the new protections and liberalism given to religious and faith based entities in Europe have argued that the extra protections given to faith based entities are likely to lead to increasing conflicts within the Western cultural values and the secular arrangements of European liberal democracies (Grayling, 2007; Nazir-Ali, 2014). Some of these concerns have manifested in the recent bombings in France, England and USA, which have been perpetrated by extremist FBOs. In Africa, current challenges facing FBOs include their ability to practice faith in a non-paternalistic and hegemonic manner, within domination of the local populations and annihilation of African traditional religions. Ideally, faith should not be misused as a means of exercising control over traditional communities because of their vulnerability. Vulnerability is defined by the UNAIDS as the inability to obtain alternative means of healthcare, poverty low education, etc. (Chima, 2007). FBOs should be encouraged to provide aid in an inclusive, non-discriminatory and non-judgmental manner. Faith

should also not be used to induce intolerance and incitement against other religious points of view. The liberal ideology which allows Western population groups to either accept or reject religion leading to dwindling numbers of churchgoers and practicing religionists must also be encouraged in African communities to avoid double standards and stigmatization especially against individuals who choose to practice traditional religions or no religion at all. The inherent competition between Christianity and Islam in Africa has perpetuated conflicts in places such as CAR, Sudan, DRC and Nigeria, leading to a negation of the stated objectives of development assistance in Africa. FBOs in recent times have also been challenged by their financial needs and poor management practices, leading to instances where their faith-based activities and direction maybe dictated by funders, rather than organizational mission or religious doctrine (Ahmed, 2009).

<p><b>I. Dual psychology of 'Victimhood and domination'</b></p>	<p>Whereby some religions apply the dual psychology of victimhood and domination to advance their religious objectives and point of view</p>	<p>❖ Here everything that is done to one religion is 'bad' and everything that is done to the other religion is 'good' regardless of the consequences or objectives</p>
<p><b>II. Conflicts between science and religion</b></p>	<p>a. Roman Catholic doctrine on use of condoms and contraceptives</p> <p>b. Jehovah Witness doctrine on blood transfusion</p> <p>c. Some traditional religious doctrines against organ transplantation</p>	<p>i. Conflicts with public health goal of controlling HIV-AIDs, STDs, family planning and population growth</p> <p>ii. Both (b &amp; c) maybe in conflict with the goals of medicine, science and society, which consists in beneficence and preservation of life</p>
<p><b>III. Conflicts between politics and religion</b></p>	<p>'multiculturalism' and religious inclusion in Europe</p>	<p>❖ This has potential to impact on liberal democratic processes and governance in Europe and elsewhere</p>
<p><b>IV. Ethical and moral conflict between 'best interests' vs. 'altruism'</b></p>	<p>Moral conflicts between the 'myths of the disinterested other' and 'surrogates with interests of their own' vs. 'best interests' of vulnerable population groups and religious and moral altruism</p>	<p>❖ Whereby some religionists have falsely hijacked the moral altruism and benevolence of religion to enhance their individual self-interest e.g. colonialism, slavery, apartheid</p>
<p><b>V. Conflicts between and within religions</b></p>	<p>Conflict between different denominations, sects and religious ideologies has the potential to degenerate into extremism and violence, whereby religion is misused for violence</p>	<p>❖ Many ongoing and past wars in Africa, Middle East, and Europe e.g. Sudan, CAR, Bosnia, etc. can be traced to religious extremism and conflicts between different religious ideologies</p>
<p><b>VI. Conflicts between 'mainstream' religions v. 'minor' traditional religions</b></p>	<p>Here mainstream religions like Judeo-Christianity and Islam have come to dominate non-mainstream religious groups e.g. ATRs</p>	<p>❖ Domination of religious worldview by 'mainstream' religions has led to the marginalization and cultural domination of believers in non-mainstream religions e.g. traditional African societies and ATRs</p>
<p><b>VII. Financial conflict between religious entities, their funders and believers</b></p>	<p>a) Commercialization of religion</p> <p>b) Financial difficulties facing some religious organizations including FBOS</p>	<p>i. Commercialization of religion in Africa, USA and elsewhere by some televangelists and Pentecostal churches have led to exploitation of believers e.g. in Nigeria many new breed evangelists own private jets at the expense of their poor constituents</p> <p>ii. Arguably financial difficulties affecting some religious entities including FBOs may lead to a situation where religious and moral objectives are dictated by the goals of funders rather than religious or moral altruism</p>
<p><b>VIII. Dual psychology of 'Victimhood and domination'</b></p>	<p>Whereby some religions apply the dual psychology of victimhood and domination to advance their religious objectives and point of view</p>	<p>❖ Here everything that is done to one religion is 'bad' and everything that is done to the other religion is 'good' regardless of the consequences or objectives</p>

**Table 1: Some current moral dilemmas between religion and society**

## Conclusion

Opportunities for FBOs to participate in developmental aid exist in areas such as providing services for emerging middle income countries in Africa where life expectancy is increasing and the socio-demographic characteristics of the population have become more westernized. With the increasing quality of life and improved life expectancy, diseases of the aged will increase in previously unprepared populations. In such cases FBOs may need to shift their objectives from providing only curative health care services to the poor to include providing services such as homes for the aged, orphans as well as hospices for people with chronic diseases and long-term disability. Furthermore, FBOs can be of great assistance in the fight against HIV-AIDS in Africa through encouraging culturally acceptable options such as male circumcision in accordance with traditional belief systems such as practiced in South Africa. There may also be a need for a paradigm shift in the religious doctrine of some religious denominations on issues such as use of condoms, contraceptives for family planning, and organ and tissue donation. This should be done in a non-doctrinaire manner, which respects the human rights and dignity of the local populations and their cultural values. For example, African ethical philosophy is based on the principles of '*sumus ergo sum*' or we are, therefore I am, whereby the needs of community are placed above individual needs (Chima, 2013). in contrast with the rugged individualism of western liberal societies (Chima, 2015; Metz, 2010). Therefore, there is a need to encourage culturally sensitive approaches to funding and developmental aid activities by international organizations supporting FBOs. There should be a positive effort to inculcate African traditional philosophies of Ubuntu, tolerance, brotherhood and communality, rather than individualism (Chima 2015b, Metz 2010). Recommended therapeutic regimes for rehabilitation or treatment should include African belief systems and traditional medicine considering that an estimated 80% of Africans still patronize traditional healers regardless their religious beliefs or inclination (Chima, Mduluza & Kipkemboi, 2013). Finally, FBOs should not be used a Trojan horse towards neo-colonialism, cultural domination, hegemony, or the re-colonization of the African mind.

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**Contact email:** [chima@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:chima@ukzn.ac.za) or [chimasc@hotmail.com](mailto:chimasc@hotmail.com)