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Biblical Interpretation and the Moral Function of Religion: Towards the Building of a Just and Equitable Society in Ghana

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Abstract

Christianity has become commonplace in Ghana today, but there is something unique about its realisation and expression. Among Ghanaian Christians, the Bible is applied as a document of faith and conduct in ways that pay minimal attention to the separation between religion and morality. This practice is like allegorical interpretation, which reads the Bible as a resource for learning about Christian religious values and how they influence what people do, how they live, and the effect of both on the development of an equal and just society. But naturally, allegory presupposes the age-old question about the moral function of religion generally, and, in this case, of the relationship between religion and morality in 'Ghanaian Christianities'. This paper argues that biblical exegetes in Ghana can lead the way toward a more systematic reading of the Bible from a moral perspective in the complex context of contemporary Ghana and the pluralism of faith it represents. It is suggested that a fruitful fulfilment of this difficult task can contribute significantly towards building a just and equitable Ghanaian society.

Keywords: Ghanaian exegetes; hermeneutics; Bible; morality; ethics

Introduction

Ghanaians profess the Christian faith with significant enthusiasm today, but like the early Christian community of Jerusalem, ordinary Ghanaian Christians worry less about critical questions about the Bible or its historicity. They live and believe with little attention to the historical materiality of Christianity. Ghanaian Christians transform and contextualise biblical faith beyond the cultural and historical(time-based) differences that separate biblical texts from contemporary life and culture. By applying texts of the Bible as spiritually authoritative and long-lasting documents, Ghanaian Christians find meaning and purpose in their day-to-day experiences. Theirs is a way of relating with the Bible that presumes unmediated similarities between biblical and Ghanaian cultures.[1]

However, understanding this unique way of relating to the Bible requires an examination of how Ghanaian Christians read and apply the Bible as a document of faith and conduct. On this premise, it is possible to understand popular approaches to biblical interpretation in Ghana as allegories[2] for a Christian perspectival value-praxis. This approach mimics the tradition of the Alexandrian school traced to Origen (ca 185 – 253CE)and promoted by the Church Fathers in early Christianity. Today, scholars believe that the meanings deduced from biblical literature using the allegorical method rarely convey the meanings intended by the text. However, for the early church, allegory served as a platform for understanding the Bible as both a standard of faith and conduct. Allegory allowed patristic exegetes to deduce moral lessons from the Bible.

Contemporary exegetes generally admit that the New Testament has elements of allegorical deduction of Old Testament ethics, such as Matthew's use of the golden rule in Mat 7:12 (see

[1]J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Beyond Text and Interpretation: The Bible as a Book of Sacred Power in African Christianity, "*Journal of African Christian Thought*, *10*(2) (2007), 18-23; J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, "Growth and Trends in African Christianity in the 21st Century", in *Anthology of African Christianity*, eds. Isabel A. Phiri & Dietrich Werner, Chammah K. & Kennedy Owino, (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2016), 65-75.

[2] Allegory is a technique by which concrete details in a text – people, events, places in which things occur – are explained as representing abstract ideas, entities, virtues or vices, or philosophical doctrines.

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Tobit 4:15a) or the law of love of God and neighbour in Deut 6:5 and how Mark's use of it in as the interpretive parameter for the Ten Commandments, or Decalogue (see Mk 12:29-31). Thus, though exegetes point to the difficulties and misappropriation of the allegorical approach given contemporary critical methods, it does not mean that biblical interpretation for morality purposes should be abandoned. While patristic allegorical methods may not be the best fit for the modern Ghanaian context, there are historical and contemporary reasons why Ghanaian exegetes may want to advance context-relevant and scholarly-tested approaches to biblical interpretation that have space for morals.

Biblical interpretation in Africa dates to the beginnings of Christianity in places like Alexandria and Hippo[3]. From these North African beginnings, the allegorical interpretation of the Bible spread to the West and continued until the period of the Enlightenment. Historical critical methods developed in the 18th century and by the 20th century, other related critical approaches to biblical interpretation had developed. By this time, however, there is a reversal of the flow of biblical scholarship. Critical methods for biblical interpretation develop in the West and spread to Africa and other places until recently. Today, biblical scholars in Africa have come up with their own context-specific methods.[4] Unlike Western methods which concentrate on authorship and text, contemporary African scholarly methods are identifiable through their emphasis on "the communities that receive the text".[5]

Justin Ukpong identifies three phases of African methods of biblical interpretation: a) reactive-apologetic using comparative approach (Joseph John Williams approach, 1930s – 70s); b) reactive-proactive, using the African context as an interpretive resource with inculturation method and liberation readings (black theology, 1970s – 90s); and c) proactive exegesis with emphasis on the ordinary reader and context as subjects of interpretation (1990s – present times).[6]All three approaches relate in one way or another to the close connection between African Christianity and African

[3]Justin S. Ukpong, *The Bible in Afric: Transactions, trajectories and trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 11-28.

[4]Nlenanya Onwu, "The Current State of Biblical Studies in Africa," *Journal of Religious Thought, 41*(2) (Washington: Howard University Press, 1984), 35-46; Jurie Hendrik Le Roux, *A story of two ways: Thirty years of Old Testament scholarship in South Africa*(Pretoria: Verba Vitae, 1993).

[5] Ukpong, *The Bible in Africa*, 11.

[6] Ukpong, *The Bible in Africa*.

indigenous religious cosmologies and beliefs,[7] and especially the cultural, economic, social, and political contexts of Christian communities. The full implications of the development of scholarly biblical exegesis for the intuitive/allegorical common practice of the buzzing African churches under trees, tents, and temples cannot be fixed too quickly. But it remains a necessity to propel the process of synchronising the narrative of both traditions of biblical exegesis towards a deliberate and functional morality-oriented reading of biblical literature in Africa.

The Bible and Values

Despite the backdrop of increased Christian fervour, the media, civil society organisations, religious groups, and political parties in Ghana show tremendous concern that something is profoundly negative about the value motivations underlying the social, political, economic, and religious behaviour of people in Ghana. As observed by Kudaji, a Ghanaian ethicist, "there is irresponsibility, dishonesty, corruption, subterfuge; people of all walks of life … engage in … cheating, fraud, misappropriation, embezzlement, [and] nepotism".[8] A cursory look at social, political, and religious literature today will reveal that Kudajie's concerns are as current now as they were twenty years ago. Concerns about value orientations and motivations suggest that people in Ghana are failing in how they deal with ethical challenges in private and public life.

Beyond the specific context of Ghana, there are other reasons why critical discussions about the place of values in development are receiving renewed attention. For example, the current global agenda is to achieve sustainable development, intercultural dialogue, national and international peace, and global citizenship. Therefore, even amid contemporary Western liberalisation of values, the United Nations (UN) proposed the incorporation of values education as a core component of sustainable development education. This suggests the need for some generalisable instance of moral motivation and orientation for global sustainability.[9]

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[7] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

[8]Joshua N. Kudajie, *Moral renewal in Ghana: Ideals, realities, and possibilities* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, Christian Council of Ghana,1995), 48.

[9]UNESCO, "Education for Sustainable Development: Sourcebook," *Learning & Training Tools No.4* (Paris: UNESCO, 2012), 13. https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/926unesco9.pdf

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The term '(human) values', invariably means many things, but by it, we mostly imagine those desires and goals, which we have internalised as socially accepted standards, and which motivate our actions and judgment. This means there is something "communal" about values. Through upbringing in the family, church, school, and other socialising environments, we develop beliefs about what is desirable or undesirable and identify for ourselves judgments and skills of morality. Once formed, values govern our ways of behaving, communicating, and relating. Mostly, we have a value system rather than individual and unconnected values.

Our values are different from our attitudes to the extent that the latter consist of many beliefs coming together to form a disposition about one situation, object, or person. Values, on the other hand, are usually based on one's belief that enjoys relative stability, but which transcends specific situations, objects, or persons. Schwartz defines values "as desirable transsituational goals, varying in importance, that serves as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity."[10] This definition is, for our purposes here, rather broad, and more inclined towards social scientific or, specifically, social psychological perspectives of values.

In Christian ethics, scholars are more concerned with the extent to which values serve as motivations for virtue; they are interested in discussing what social scientists might single out as moral values, which are at the heart of any discussion about the Bible and values. It is here that the Bible emerges as an important resource for critical discussions on values and their relevance for the attainment of individual and national goals such as self-preservation and transformation, respect for human dignity, systematic development of a fair and just society, and the promotion of life beyond material development to the realisation of personal and communal spiritualities (ways of life) of magnanimity and peaceful co-existence. The cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, shared by classical philosophy and Christian theology, form the basis of the virtue theory in ethics. However, these virtues are not necessarily a monopoly of Western thought even if they have received much more systematic elaboration there. African communities hold similar virtues. They are taught at home to children in stories, daily instructions of good

[10]Shalom H. Schwartz, "An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values," *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2*(1) (2012). http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116

upbringing, and especially at liminal phases of developmental transitions such as naming, puberty, and marriage ceremonies. Other ceremonial realisations of these virtues are revealed at the making of chiefs and other traditional office holders and other such occasions. There are suggestions in the study of African religions that some of the factors for the attainment of ancestorhood are calculated against the extent to which a person realised these virtues.

The perspective of biblical interpretation as a resource for learning about values and how they influence what people do, how they live, and the effect of both on the development of an equal and just society naturally presupposes the age-old question about the moral function of religion. Different societies and times have had to answer the question about the role of religion in social integration. Do we need a shared morality? And if we do, to what extent can religion be the source of that morality? Does Christianity provide a source for values, and can it act as a resource for their realisation in the pursuit of a just and equitable society in Ghana? These questions are not new, but they recur differently in each age and time because of varying needs and contexts. In the paragraphs that follow, I seek to discuss the question of the Bible and values from the perspective of the moral function of religion in social contexts and briefly consider related issues that should be of interest to the exegete and Christian ethicist.

African Christianities and Challenges of Biblical Interpretation for Morals

As a site for Western scholarship on values and ethics, secularism provides the opportunity to raise the question about the importance of religion to social integration. Among other things, secularism was experienced as a democratisation of values, a heightened sense of individual moral agency, self-determination, rejection of (institutional) religion or belief, and/or the reorienting of Christian ethics to suit the utilitarian ethics and egoistic psychology of society. Today, the literature[11] describes a new situation that is plural and post-secular. An elementary way of understanding secularism is to think of it as a philosophy in which the question about the validity of Christianity or religion generally is considered to have been successfully taken out of the social

[11] Jürgen Habermas et al., *An Awareness of what is missing: Faith and reason in a post-secular age*, trans. Ciaran Crown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

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domain and restricted to the individual and private sphere.[12] There is a higher concern for humanistic values and the need to make room for as many, and as varied, different realsations of values in a shared global space. This means that in the West, emphasis on pluralism is challenging previous paradigms of universality and objectivity.[13] This historical note on the context of the West is important because of the tendency to quickly extend the secular/post-secular perspective to societies in Africa in unqualified ways.

However, one wonders whether the experience of modernism in the West and the characteristics that qualify the experience fully explain the contemporary experiences of communities in Africa. The critical interrogation of the globalising influence of dominant Western social theories and philosophies and their effect on social processes in the Ghanaian context may, therefore, be one of the major challenges facing exegetes who seek to engage in a systematic and scholarly reading of the Bible from a moral point of view. They will have to navigate the intricate environment of Western domination of Africa and the domestication of the West in African religiosity.

There is a flourishing of what is now referred to as 'African Christianity'; or to specify its varieties, the term 'Christianities' is used,[14] usually, to refer to the mission churches, Africa Initiated Churches (AICs), and the Charismatic and Pentecostal Christian traditions that are growing quickly across the continent. Mission churches such as mainline Protestant and Catholic churches in Africa may complain about losing members, but this loss, unlike in Europe and America, does not spell the slackening or rejection of Christianity generally. It is richly compensated for by the impressive numeric growth of Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Independent churches. At churches on Sundays and other specified days, but also, nearly all days of the week, at markets, bus terminals, and places set aside for faith healing, one cannot miss the pulsating religious fervour of the average Ghanaian. Scholars

[12]Charles Taylor, *A secularage* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); Bryan Wilson, "The Secularization Thesis: Criticisms and Rebuttals," in R. Laermans, B. Wilson and J. Billiet, eds. *Secularization and social integration* (Leuven: Leuven University Press).

[13]Simon K. Appiah, "Thinking Africa in Postmission Theology: Implications for Global Theological Discourse," *Exchange*, *51*(4), (Brill: Leiden, 2022), 343-360.

[14]Paul Kollman, "Classifying African Christianities: Past, Present, and Future: Part One," *Journal of Religion in Africa, 40*(1), (Brill: Leiden, 2010), 3-32; Asenzo Ukah, "African Christianities: Features, Promises and Problems," in *Arbeitspapiere/Working Papers Nr.* 79, (University of Mainz: Mainz, 2007).

believe that these expressions of Christianity thrive and thrive so well because they base fundamentally on Ghanaian indigenous religious worldviews that mission churches previously dismissed or gave little attention to.

In indigenous African worldviews, there is a union of the spiritual and material, and the expectations of the benefits of religion are equally envisaged to be both material and spiritual. Material wellbeing, freedom from the harm of physical and spiritual evil, success in business and life generally, the absence of calamity and tragedy, and harmony between the living, the ancestors, and the yet-unborn in a balanced relationship with the gods and other spiritual beings are among the important characteristics of the indigenous religious cosmology.[15] The spiritual is not the binary of the material, but the vital force permeating life, making all reality and the experience of it more than the ordinary, so that results of religious practice are expected to be active, visible, and, as much as possible, immediate.

This way of understating Ghanaian Christian religiosity paints a rather harmonious picture of things, but it also throws a formidable challenge to the exegete who seeks to read the Bible from a moral perspective, because the religious landscape of Ghana is more complex than it is impressive. The complexity is apparent in the fact that while building strongly on indigenous worldviews, Ghanaian Christianity insists it is not "Traditional Religion." Ghanaian Christianity poses as the liberator of people from the evils and satanic elements of Traditional Religion. Indeed, the ascendancy of African Christianity frequently finds expression through the demonisation of Traditional Religion and, to some extent, by subverting key traditional values that secured social integration in pre-Christian Ghana. For example, scholars who studied Ghanaian values from about 1950 into the mid-1970s found that common cross-ethnic (shared) basic values in Ghana were 'communitarianism', respect for life, and humanism, around which other values revolved.[16]

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[15]J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *African charismatics: Current developments within independent indigenous Pentecostalism in Ghana*. (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Kingsley Larbi, "African Pentecostalism in the Context of Global Pentecostal Ecumenical Fraternity: Challenges and Opportunities." *Pneuma, 24*(2) (Brill: Leiden, 2002), 138-166; Laurenti Magesa, *African religion: The moral traditions of abundant life*. (Orbis Books, 2014), 27; Joseph Quayesi-Amakye, "The Problematic of Exorcism and Spiritual Warfare: A Dialogue with Apostle Dr Opoku Onyinah," *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association,* 37(1), (Brill: Leiden, 2017), 68-79.

[16]Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Values in African Tribal Life," in *Modern Africa,* Peter J. M. McEwan, and Robert B. Sutcliffe, eds, (Ohio: Crowell, 1965), 55-57;

Contemporary research, however, suggests that Pentecostal Christianity in Africa may be transforming the value of communalism into non-communalistic spiritualities fit for today's neo-liberal economies (Freeman, 2012; van Dike, 2012; Piot, 2012).[17]Freeman, for example, clearly paints a picture of the revolution in the transformation of values engendered by Pentecostal Christianity:

> [F]or many Africans one of the main barriers to accumulating wealth is the pressure to participate in traditional practices, such as rites of passage or rituals of commensality, and the constant demands for financial support from poorer kin. Redistribution, in one form or another, is inherent in most traditional African religions and moral systems, and it makes personal accumulation virtually impossible. By linking these traditional practices with the devil, … Pentecostalism makes avoidance of them, and separation from more distant kin, intensely and aggressively moral, and thus enables the emergence of previously impossible behaviours.[18]

Thus, Ghanaian Christianity can be experienced both as a blessing and a challenge in the values landscape. Christianity may be alive and active, but at the same time, it embodies tremendous energies of social change and values transformation in ways unique to our times and context. Since the Pentecostal wave is to be found even in the mission or mainline churches, biblical exegetes in Ghana who seek to explore the Bible as a resource for discussing the role of values in national development must also seek to understand the contours of Ghanaian Christianities and the place of the Bible in each of them. Exegetes must position themselves to respond beyond the euphoria of Ghanaian Christian fervour and reach into

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Patrick Akoi, *Religion in Africansocial heritage* (Rome: Pontifical Urban University, 1970); Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in retrospect: Some aspects of Ghanaian culture*. (Accra: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974).

[17]Dena Freeman, ed, *Pentecostalism and development: Churches, NGOs and social change in Africa* (New York, NY: Palgrave McMillan, 2012);Charles Piot, "Pentecostal and Development Imaginaries in West Africa," in *Pentecostalism and development* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 111-133.

[18]Freeman, *Pentecostalism and development*, p. 21.

the conflict of values that naturally attends the transition from African traditional religious culture to African Christian culture.

It cannot be overemphasised that by discussing the Bible as a resource for values, the Ghanaian exegete is faced with answering questions about the moral function of religion because of the complexities of Ghanaian Christianities and their place in an environment of tenacious traditional religious worldviews. In this way, the Ghanaian exegete can promote biblical perspectives on Christian values needed to build a just and equitable society. But the challenge may be how to achieve this goal in a situation where Ghanaian Christianities fully endorse traditional worldviews of blessing, which, according to Freeman, is "generally understood as health, wealth and fecundity – and [minimizing] misfortune."[19] The challenge is even greater when, in addition to the promotion of this immanence and materiality of religious blessing, individualism is emphasised as a legitimate religious value, contrary to the expectations of the indigenous ethos of communitarianism.

In addition to these complexities of Ghanaian Christianity, other contextually contending issues attract the attention of the Ghanaian exegete in studying the Bible as a resource for the promotion of values in society. Consider, for example, the religion-politics nexus and its ramifications in the pragmatics of the motivations underlying pro- and contra-social behaviour. There are multiple levels of contact between religion and politics in Ghana through the provision of social services such as education, health, welfare, and other areas of life. The conduct of citizens is informed by religion and politics together, though anecdotal sources are concerned about the politicisation of religion in Ghana. Social media, especially in the wake of President Akufo-Addo's ambition for the construction of a national cathedral, have been participating in this debate in recent times. But what emerges as a more logical cause for worry and which must be of interest to biblical interpretation for good conduct is the risk of the reversal of roles between religion and politics in the Ghanaian polity. For, it might be possible to consider political values without recourse to religion, but it is a contradiction to envisage a religion built on political rather than moral values.

The social crisis experienced because of a similar subversion of roles, that is, basing religion on political rather than moral values, in the history of the people of Israel, occupies attention in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. What is intended by this

[19] Ibid.

statement is that portions of the Hebrew Bible criticise its audience for rejecting the rule of Yahweh, their God, and desiring to be like other nations that have kings. In this way, they were destabilising the religious principle by which they were constituted into a people; they were choosing a political organisation over a religious organisation. This move is condemned because it invariably ended in practical acts against their social and individual ethics of fairness, equity, and justice (see, for example, sections of prophetic literature).[20]On this point, the exegetes of Ghana, like those of biblical times, have a difficult task to fulfil. Theirs is the responsibility of reading the Bible as a resource for promoting Christian values that are required for building a just society in Ghana because of the conflation of religion and politics. In addition to this is the attendant craving for prosperity, a natural human desire that has found fertile ground in new interpretations of the Gospel.[21] Put together, this situation makes it even more urgent for exegetes to take up the task of proposing the Bible as a resource for discovering important national values.

The Moral Function of Religion

Whether morality requires religion or not is a question that is as old as it is topical. We can, for example, recall the famous question of Socrates recorded in the *Euthyphro* as to whether the gods command something because it is good, or whether something is good because it is commanded by the gods,[22]himself opting for the former view.

However, for most of the time in the history of Christian ethics, it is assumed that there is a direct link between religion and morality.[23]Thus, Dostoevsky, for example, tersely says, "If God does not exist, everything is permitted."[24]Whereas Dostoevsky was concerned with moral psychology (how morality can be enforced without God),for Socrates, it was a question about logic (how

[20]Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, ed, *Priests and cults in the book of the twelve* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

[21]Paul Gifford, *Ghana's new Christianity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[22]Plato. *Five dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*(2nd ed). G. M. A. Grube, trans. Revised by J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002).

[23]Howard O. Mounce, "Morality and Religion," in *Philosophy of religion: A guide to the subject*, ed, Brian Davies (London: Cassell, 1998), 253-285.

[24]Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The brothers Karamazov.* R. Pevear & L. Volokhonsky, trans. (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990, Original work published 1880).

morality could be coherent without the existence of God). Ordinarily, people are not always conscious of these two sides of the dilemma when they raise the question about the connection between morality and religion. One wonders if one would find any direct answer to this question from the Bible without a theological or faith perspective. But the question is not limited to Western Christianity and its Greek philosophical foundations. The question has been considered in different ways across history and has usually been much debated with one faction arguing there is a positive connection between religion and morality and the other that there isn't. A brief discussion of both sides of the debate can improve our understanding of the matter.

Disconnecting Religion and Morality

Today, scholars of the psychology of religion, cognitive science, and the study of religions contest the view that there is a positive connection between religion and morality for lack of evidence to support it. For instance, Richard Dawkins believes that "faith can be very very[sic] dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong."[25] Like Dawkins, atheists generally are quick to reject any connection between religion and morality. Daniel Dennett, for example, argues that the moral stance of society is sustained by those who do not wait for God to clean up the folly of humans.[26]Others who oppose the argument of a positive connection between religion and morality simply point to the fact that moral inclinations in humans are but a part of their evolution, which develop quite naturally without religious socialisation.[27] For most of the time, however, opponents of the connection between morality and religion invariably point to the paradox of moral and natural evil.[28]For instance, John Mackie argues that if God is absolutely good and the source of all goodness, then, there should be no evil in the world. Since there is evil in the world, we must conclude that there is no God, or if there is, then he is not all good. For Mackie, neither the

[25]Richard Dawkins, *The God delusion*. (London, UK: Transworld, 2006), 348.

[26]Daniel C. Dennett, "The Bright Stuff," *New York Times,* (2003, July 12), 11. Retrieved from http://www.the-brights.net/vision/essays/dennett_nyt_article.html

[27]Ilkka Pyysiaïnen, & Marc Hauser, "The Origins of Religion: Evolved Adaptation or By-product?," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 14* (London: Elsevier, 2010), 104–109. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2009.12.007

[28]John L. Mackie, *The Miracle of theism. Arguments for and against the existence of God* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982).

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logical nor psychological reasons for the connection between religion and morality should apply in the face of natural catastrophes and human wickedness.[29]

Away from the philosophy of religion, empirical research also opposes any positive connection between religion and morality. For example, in the 1ate 1960s, Hirschi and Stark, in their influential study among young people in California, failed to find the alleged relationship between lack of religion and delinquency.[30] According to them, church attendance did not influence how young people thought about delinquency or whether they engaged in delinquent acts. These studies and even those of more moderate inclinations point to the fact that there is no clear-cut indication about the moral function of religion.

However, notwithstanding this strong opposition to any attempt to relate morality with religion, Marquette makes an important point to which we should return when we try to understand empirical studies that disclaim any connection between religion and morality. Based on her review of many empirical studies regarding the moral function of religion, Marquette arrives at the following conclusion:

> attitudes towards deviant behaviour show that individuals' interpretation of messages on moral behaviour is significant in terms of determining their acceptance or rejection of deviancy, but there is little evidence to suggest that the religious will reject behaviour that is 'anti-social' any more than the non-religious.[31]

Marquette's conclusion indicates that the findings of empirical studies explain the relationship between a person's religiosity and their readiness to engage in anti-social behaviour more than they explain the connection between religion and morality as such. This means that the findings of empirical studies cannot be used to deny the application of the Bible as a resource for critical debate on values for nation building. This view finds even stronger support

[29]Mackie, *The miracle of theism*

[30]Travis Hirsch &Rodney Stark, "Hellfire and Delinquency," *Social Problems,* 17(2), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 202-213

[31]Heather Marquette, "Corruption, Religion and Moral Development," in *Handbook of research on development and religion,* ed, Matthew Clark (Cheltenham, UK**:** Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013), 25.

among scholars who argue that literature, sacred or secular, plays a central role in narrative ethics.[32]

Connecting Morality to Religion

Proponents of a positive moral function of religion view the matter differently from those who reject any relationship between religion and morality. That religion has a positive connection with morality, as earlier noted, has been part of the intuition of many cultures. However, the problem is to determine just how this connection works. Proponents of the moral function of religion believe that religious people will craft their moral system from their religion and that non-religious people also have their morality influenced by religion if they share a cultural heritage. Though non-religious people may deny any such influence, they are not for that matter left out, since religion provides the source for morality in society. This means that "the primary social function of religion lies in the area of corporate morality", a thought that Robin Gill holds to be deep seated in the West.[33]

Gill refers to Comte, who thought that since religion is so important for morality in society, it was important to find equally effective alternatives to take the place of religion if there was to be any success in reducing the role of religion in society. For some time, this idea that other social systems could take the place of religion as a key factor in the integration of traditional societies represented the French intellectual tradition. This tradition believed that such substitutes would serve as a vehicle for the masses to internalise social values. But it is not so with Durkheim, who thought that religion has lost social credibility and societies would have to continue without it, proposing reason as the best option out of the situation.

According to Gill, the same debate raged on the topic among theologians in the 1960s. For example, H. L. A. Hart and Patrick Devlin argued against each other as did Don Cupitt and John Habgood.[34] In the case of the last two, that is, Habgood and Cupitt, Habgood disavowed Cupitt's tendency to purge Christianity of its

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[32]Athena E. Gorospe, *Narrative and identity: An ethical reading of Exodus 4* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Richard C. Allen, "When narrative fails," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 21(1), (Toronto: Willey & Sons, 1991), 27-67; Adam Z. Newton, *Narrative ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Dan P. McAdams, *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of self* (New York and London: Guilford, 1993).

[33]Robin Gill, *Christian ethics in secular worlds* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 97.

[34]Gill, *Christian Ethics*, 98-100.

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transcendental content and reduce it to no more than a moral code or a guide to living. Habgood insisted that Christianity has a specific and crucial social function, believing that when a pluralistic state comes under threat of disintegration, it is religious values that can protect it more adequately than any other alternative.[35]Similarly, one finds support in more recent literature[36]for the positive connection between religion and morality. Though she contests a simplistic understanding of the connection between religion and morality in her wide-ranging review of literature on the topic, Marquette discusses works that illustrate how what is considered to be a decline in morals can be attributed to "increased secularisation".[37]She refers, for example, to Marijke ter Voert et al., who explain from multi-dimensional perspectives how religion positively influences pro-social behaviour such as disapproval of tax cheating and other financial offences.[38] Some of the reasons proffered for this religion-morality connection include the fact that by locating moral systems in sacred and supernatural realities, religion tends to bolster the authority of moral standards. By so doing, religious people find a reliable and non-arbitrary moral orientation to live by.[39]There is not much room in this paper for comparing this religious imagination of moral psychology with its well-known Enlightenment alternative of the autonomous moral psychology theory of Kant and its development in Kholberg's experimental research.[40] For Kant, the autonomy of

[35]Gill, *Christian Ethics*.

[36]Azim Shariff, "Does Religion Increase Moral Behavior?"*Current Opinion in Psychology* 6 (London: Elsevier, 2015), 108-113; Ali M. Ahmed, "Are Religious People More Prosocial? A Quasi-experimental Study with Madrasah Pupils in a Rural Community in India," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48(2) (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 368-374.

[37]Marquette, *Corruption, religion and moral development*, 8; Will M. Gervais, Azim F. Shariff, and Ara Norenzayan. "Do You Believe in Atheists? Distrust is Central to Anti-atheist Prejudice," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 101*(6) (New York: American Psychological Association, 2011),11-89; Will M. Gervais, "In Godlessness We Distrust: Using Social Psychology to Solve the Puzzle of Anti-atheist Prejudice," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass 7*(6) (Toronto: John Willey & Sons, 2013), 366-377; Rodney Stark, "Religion as Context: Hellfire and Delinquency One More Time," *Sociology of Religion*, 57(2), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 163-73.

[38]Marquette, *Corruption, Religion and Moral Development,* citing Marijke ter Voert, Albert Felling, and Jan Peters, "The Effect of Religion on Self-Interest morality," *Review of Religious Research, 35*(4) (June 1994), 302-323.

[39]Frederick B. Bird, "How Do Religions Affect Moralities? A Comparative Analysis," *SocialCompass, 37* (California: Sage, 1990), 291-314.

[40]Immanuel Kant, *Grounding of the metaphysics of morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Lawrence Kohlberg, "From is to Ought: How to Commit the Naturalistic Fallacy and Get Away with it in The Study of Moral Development," in *Cognitive development and epistemology,* ed, T. Mischel (New York: Academic Press, 1971),

the will defines the capacity of an individual for authoring the moral rules he or she lives by. On such a premise, Kohlberg argues that moral autonomy is the highest level of moral development.

But while research is not conclusive on the matter of moral motivation, it can be assumed that good conduct will be shaped in some way by the quality of the relationship that people of a moral system have with their source of moral authority. Ethical principles cannot be based on mere inclination or needs and emotions. Morality needs criteria that ground the moral *ought* on some consistent and clear foundation. In the absence of such moral clarity, people must rely on "prevailing circumstances" where morality tends to be relative.[41]

Ter Voert et al. argue that this need for clearly identifiable foundations of morality must be part of the reasons accounting for the assumption that strong Christian believers are more likely to disapprove anti-social behaviour than those who are low on Christian belief. This means religion provides moral spaces within which the moral code can be reaffirmed. People who actively participate in these moral spaces "will adopt more strict moral values."[42]

It is to be expected that some Christian denominations may be more outright in strengthening and enforcing a moral code than others, and Ter Voert et al., citing Bird, locate this interdenominational variation in "the ways and degrees to which they directly foster personal feelings of moral acceptability and moral excellence."[43]In this regard, Marx Weber held that Calvinist Christians were more motivated to adhere to a strict moral code than Catholics.[44]Be that as it may, the proposal is that religion has a role to play in motivating religious people to engage in good conduct. In the case of Christianity in Ghana, exegetes have a contribution to make through the way they promote a moral reading of the Bible.

151-235; Lawrence Kohlberg, "The Claim to Moral Adequacy of a Highest Stage of Moral Judgment," *The Journal of Philosophy*, *70* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1973), 630-646.

[41]Ter Voert et al., *Effect of religion on self-interest morality*, 305

[42] Ibid.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Max Weber, *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), 27-277.

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Conclusion

The debate about the moral function of religion, as presented above, takes its structure from the history of Western philosophy and Christian scholarship. Its relevance to values development and transformation in the Ghanaian/African context must, however, be measured with caution; care must be taken to not superimpose the experience of the West on African communities. But the attempt to comprehend Western thought about how religion and morality relate and to cautiously apply such an understanding for solving a similar dilemma in a Ghanaian indigenous setting can show how the Western approach overlooks the extent to which the culture of a people enables them to live morally. "This is because the religious self-interpretation of a people usually follows as a second step to their cultural and historical experiences. The attribution of elements of their life to some supreme or divine power is more a matter of theological innovation which then sets the tone for their self-interpretation and identity. Therefore culture, religion, and philosophy of life usually converge in a people's ethos. At this level, morality is more relational than rational."[45]

This way of understanding culture and religion is key to biblical interpretation and to other narratives that constitute the communal memory of a people. From the perspective of narrative ethics, there is a sense in which values can be viewed as composites of identity and morality, which are expressed and realised through the stories we tell about ourselves and those others tell about us.[46]

There is certainly a need for a critical discussion about values in Ghana today and biblical exegetes need to contribute to the debate by promoting the Bible as a resource, given the palpable signs of the importance of Christianity in Ghana today. Based on the presumed significance of Christianity for most Ghanaians, it can also be presumed that they see a positive connection between the Christian religion and values. For Christian ethicists, values specifically concern motivations of virtue. Whether the moral function of religion is disputed or not, there is enough evidence from different cultures and religions that people associate religion with morality; it is, at least, taken for granted that religion will promote morality.

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[45] Simon K. Appiah, *Africanness-inculturation-ethics: in search of the subject of an inculturated Christian ethic* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), 59-60.

[46]Dan P. McAdams, *The stories we live by.*

Part of the many challenges that may confront the Ghanaian exegete who seeks to engage in biblical interpretation to promote moral lessons will be the inadvertent transfer of Western constructs to the Ghanaian context. But this may not achieve the desired results because of obvious differences in the cultural and religious histories of different peoples. For instance, the processes of secularisation in Europe and America have led to the conceptualisation of morality and religion as binary operations. But this experience of Europe and America does not necessarily represent the Ghanaian experience in which the connection between religion and morality is part of how the average person appropriates the Bible for daily life. Thus, Christians in Ghana would seem to answer the question about the moral function of religion by adducing evidence of the ability of their Christianity to make them morally capable in line with their indigenous religio-moral cosmology.

Ghanaian exegetes can make significant contributions to the moral transformation of society and to balancing the prosperity narrative with that of moral responsibility. From the perspective of narrative ethics, values can be said to be bundles of ideal stories, and a crisis of values in a society may well be a crisis of interpretation of individual and group narratives. In the field of interpretation, none is more capable than the exegete. Biblical exegetes of Ghana, therefore, have a tremendous role to play in the reinterpretation of values for building a true, just, and equitable society.