REMAKING AFRICA THROUGH THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF RELIGION: A FOCUS ON POVERTY REDUCTION

Rev Edwin Otubo Nwanchor (PhD)
oe.nwanchor@unizik.edu.ng
08037508681
&
Kalu Ndukwe
ka.ndukwe@unizik.edu.ng
08064153488
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria
Department of Religion and Human Relations.

Abstract
During the precolonial period, dating back to early nineteenth century, when Africa had established empires, kingdoms and states, there was both poverty and affluence. The poverty of that time, however took a different form. In general, traditional Africa was fairly governed by traditional, mores, customs and laws that regulated the economy of the people and the nation- states in precolonial indigenous societies. African beliefs and indigenous system had real and symbolic meaning and granted protection to African children, women and the poor. Reinvigorating these practices and traditions was an important aspect of long-term poverty reduction in Africa and the Africans in diaspora. However, in the colonial period some of these traditions lost their power as colonial rule and laws were introduced. Africans began to lose their sense of religio- cultural identity as a new group of elites emerged to replace the traditional rulers and to collaborate with the colonial powers. Despite its natural resources and riches, Africa is now known to the world as a poor continent. Though materially poor, Africa is spiritually wealthy. It is a continent where African traditional religion, Christianity and Islam are well established. The data for this research was collected through primary and secondary sources, and interpreted through descriptive method. This focuses on religion and poverty. There is a strong link between religion and poverty. There are two major forms of poverty, the structural and spiritual. Structural or material poverty is what Africans are faced with today. Poverty is described in its severe sense as food shortage, malnutrition, inadequate housing, disease and illiteracy etc. The findings of this research, is that poverty is as old as Africa, the church and government had fought and is still fighting poverty. This research recommends that the church, government, NGOs and other international bodies should join forces to fight poverty in Africa.
Keywords: Religion, Poverty, Africa, Instrumentality, Colonial, Precolonial, Remaking.

Introduction

In analyzing the historical causes of poverty, we must look critically at the historical process and evaluation of the continent from precolonial times through the colonial and postcolonial periods and examine the political economy of African states, the local and global forces that play central roles in the unfolding of the contemporary social life and situation of the people. No amount of synchronic understanding or ethnographic analysis on the present state of poverty on both sides of the African Atlantic society will do justice to topic of our deliberation if we fail to acknowledge, even tangentially, the historical trajectory of poverty in Africa and African diaspora communities. While the centuries-long transatlantic slave trade laid the foundation for the current of poverty in Africa and the African diaspora, the colonial legacy and the postcolonial conditions of African people provide the background for the endemic nature of this crises in Africa today. The slave trade led to the destruction of family, family values, communal and peaceful coexistence and intergroup relations. As the demands for slaves increased exponentially in response to the instable demand for the Americas, warfare increased and the continent was deprived of its able-bodied men and women. The social disruption and depopulation that warfare and human trafficking wreaked on Africa over several hundred years gravely affected the human, social and cultural development of the region. One can argue that Africa and the African diaspora people have not recovered from this human tragedy, a telling point that makes the request for reparations even more keenly felt.

A more recent response to the crises of communal and group poverty in African villages today is the growing link between ethno-religious identity and development. In Nigeria, Ghana, and other parts of Africa, for instance, village and town associations grow and meet in economic unity and social development. This often involves the reinvention of traditional value systems (of sacred kingship, totem concepts, old lineage gods, and ancestors reinvented and reimagined in modern secular idioms). Although these groups are not necessarily linked to the worship of traditional dities their members having largely converted to Islam and Christianity, they have established a platform for advancing economic unity and social development by appealing to the community as the sacred source of life. By invoking tribal myth and historic symbols and by galvanizing members of their communities at home and abroad to contribute to village, town and community economic growth, they are responding to a crises using their own metaphysical and epistemological worldview, social, economic and symbolic capital is rallied and tailored toward fighting communal poverty. These limited successes unfortunately not matched by African governments, many of which have centralized control over natural resources.

The Concept of Poverty

Poverty has recently been conceptualized as going beyond income poverty to include cultural poverty. Accordingly, economic deprivation results in the exclusion of individuals from opportunities and choices that are basic to human development. The united-nations development Programme has therefore shifted its focus and now address poverty in relation to human rights and from a sustainable human development perspective. Poverty can mean more than a lack of what is necessary for material well-being. It can also mean denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development, leading to a long, healthy, creative life, to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem and respect for others."

In its 1997 human development report, the UNDP introduced the concept of human poverty and made a distinction between income-based or consumption-based poverty, on one hand, and human poverty or poverty of lives and opportunity, on the other, the latter being more closely linked to notions of human development. This perspective relates not only to the impoverished state but also the lack of opportunity to lead valuable and valued lives due to social constraints as well as personal circumstances. Income and human poverty are therefore inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing.

The human poverty perspective is seen as multidimensional and diverse in character, rather than uniform in content according to the 1997 UNDP report. Critical dimensions of human poverty that are difficult to measure have been excluded from measures of poverty and these include "lack of freedom, inability to participate in decision making, lack of personal security, inability to participate in the life of a community and threats to sustainability and intergenerational equity.

In making assessment of the human poverty the UNDP includes deprivation in three essential areas of human life- Length of life, knowledge and standard of living. The last area is based on overall economic provisioning and takes into account access to health services and to safe water and malnutrition in children. The UNDP contends that these are more reliable indicators of human poverty since private income is not an adequate indicator of an individual's access to economic facilities, which also include critical public services.

In this essay poverty is defined not so much in terms of material deprivation but more in terms of social exclusion and human degradation. In relationship to the first concern, I posit that poverty is structural and in many instances results from hegemonic economic relationships at both the global and local levels and, in terms of impact at the local level, is mediated through social hierarchies of race, class, and gender – but with the latter having and overarching effect so that the face of poverty in many cultures is primarily female, as was the case in countries visited on this journey.

In relation to my second concern, based on observations made on the journey and secondary sources reviewed, I conclude that whereas ecumenical initiatives at global, regional, and local levels have been strategic in orientation, targeting structural and policy reform, those at the level of the local church are more tactical and practical responses to the immediate needs of the dispossessed. A concern that emerges is that in the face of unequivocal evidence of the feminization of poverty in the countries visited, for the most part, the discourse on issues of poverty was gender-neutral and few initiatives specifically focused on the unique needs of women. The catalytic

effect of the international women's movement on existing gender relations in the social, economic, and political spheres, as well as women's access to social capital and personal agency, are therefore posited as alternatives that women in situations of poverty depend on to alleviate their plight.

In addition to its material and cultural dimensions, poverty can also be seen as essentially racial, geographically circumscribed, and intergenerational and therefore and inevitable trap from which individuals rarely escape this was the perception of persons from Etwatwa, a black township in south Africa, who participated in a study sponsored by the world council of churches (WCC) of the churches response to poverty and wealth: " there is sense threat poverty is something into which one is born. This is especially the case if one belongs to a racial group that is known to be poor, such as rural blacks. The identity between ones family and poverty means that it is rare for someone to move out of poverty as an individual. Poverty is shared life experience and it stretches through generations. The poor are likely to be born in poor families. The condition of poverty is inherited and passed on to children and is perpetuated over generations."

Religion and Poverty

Religion is not a simple phenomenon. Rather, in all of its many forms, it is both diverse and complex. This is true of Islam, traditional African religions, Rastafarianism, and Christianity. For example, the diversity of Christianity is manifested in its denominational structures, cultural variations, and theological and ethical understandings. Relative to our inquiry, however, the complexity of Christianity is seen in its ambiguous relation to poverty.

In his essay titled "Poverty among African People and the Ambiguous Role of Christian Thought," the church historian Kossi Ayedze from the Republic of Togo argues that Christian beliefs may lead to either improving or diminishing the lives of their adherents. This is vividly seen in the improved economies of Christian colonialists on the one hand and the oppression of the Africans on the other hand. Ironically, however, Ayedze points out that while many colonial Christians accumulated much wealth for themselves, many Christian missionaries in Africa viewed poverty as a moral virtue. Unfortunately, many African Christians embraced that teaching, which, he contends, has helped slow down Africa's economic growth. Ayedze does counter such teachings, however, by appealing to such major Christian theologians as Saint Augustine and John Calvin, who did not condemn wealth as such but, rather, criticized its means of acquisition and the purposes it served. Thus, he concludes that African Christians should rethink their views on wealth and poverty as a first step in the process of eradicating poverty from Africa and throughout the world.

The glorification of poverty dominates exaltation of wealth in Christian tradition. This kind of glorification is evident in the New Testament as well as in writing of such church fathers as Ambrose, john Chrysostom, and Prudentius. Throughout its history, the church has tended to exhort believers to despise wealth. African Christians were not left out. During the missionary period, Africans have been introduced to a type of Christianity "which glorifies poverty to the point that Africans converts loathe profit." This "poverty gospel" is unfortunately still prevalent in Africa, especially among the mainline churches, though another brand of Christianity "which glorifies economic prosperity" is being witnessed in every part of the continent. The problem this new trend of "prosperity gospel" poses is the difficulty in the delineating "any observable difference between pastoral ministry and the entertainment industry" and one wonders whether this prosperity gospel is not another tool for exploiting poor people and robbing them of whatever wealth and moral dignity they may still have.

Because they are extremely religious people and strongly believe that life continues after death, Africans appear more than other peoples ultimately concerned about salvation, and they take quite seriously biblical and theological teachings that condemn wealth, exhort them to give up everything to follow Jesus, and urge them to invest in heaven. From the beginning of the church in Africa, African converts have been taught that if they are poor on earth, compensation will come in heaven when they die. The command of Jesus Christ to his followers to take neither silver nor gold and his admonition to disciples to "sell all that [they] have and follow [him]" have been interpreted literally. So while missionaries were becoming traders, Africans were expected to be passive and obedient observers of a Christian faith that tranquilizes their aspirations. Apparently, the New Testament from which these missionaries in Africa culled so much of their teaching must have been the cause of their one-sided premise toward wealth and poverty. Unlike the Old Testament, whose main premise is that all the world and its goods belong to God their creator, the New Testament describes the world as Satan's domain and portrays its inhabitants, especially Christians, as lost people "in the world," who are not "of the world." The natural human

desire to acquire wealth is then regarded as evil or immoral-or worse, as worshipping mammon, the god of wealth, and not as enjoyment of the goods God has created. Thus money changers will be thrown out of the temple on the charge that they are defiling a holy place. Possession of wealth will be presented not only as an irrelevant to people whose kingdom and abode are not of this world but as an absolute barrier to salvation: do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, or blessed are the poor, for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven, and cursed are the rich, for hell is their inheritance! Consequently in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, it is the rich man who looks up from his torment to the poor man in Abraham's bosom. Could it be otherwise? Does not Christ himself bear the features of a poor man? Using and pursuing wealth of all kinds but also demonstrating his own poverty. He was born in a manger because his parents could not afford a room in a motel; he had to borrow a coin to illustrate his teaching to "render unto Caesar" the taxes one owes; apart from his clothes, finally torn up by roman soldiers when he was arrested, he apparently had no private property over which he could claim ownership. Churches of course have been active in charitable programs, working with and for the poor (women, sick, destitute, refugees, street children, unemployed youths, and so on), but most church leaders really "do not share in the lives of the poor. They belong to the ranks of the non-poor and have not really entered the world of the poor." Generally speaking, though ecclesiastical efforts toward the poor appear laudable, churches have failed so far to get at the roots of the problem of poverty in Africa. Another irony is that if "poverty in the sense of deprivation ha various causes which Christianity seeks to address to some extent poverty is also seen as having a religious basis." Indeed, though Christianity has "the ability to liberate, empower, and restore peoples dignity, [it also] has been used as a tool to exploit, oppress, alienate and discriminate it can immobilize people and act as a palliative which tranquilizes peoples aspirations." This latter aspect appears to have been the case in many African churches, where believers have been exhorted to shun wealth in order to deserve heaven. The importance of a religion however lies in its capacity to serve humans and make them blossom, spiritually as well as materially.

In her essay "African Traditional Religion and the Concept of Poverty," the Ghanaian religionist Elizabeth Amoah argues that poverty is a very complex subject in traditional African cultures because their holistic worldviews unite the material and spiritual dimensions of life, thus rendering everything sacred in some sense. Most important, since human well-being constitutes the subject matter of traditional African religions, poverty represents its antithesis. Thus the cause of poverty can only be combated by utilizing peculiar codes and rituals that undermine their efficacy. Amoah claims that traditional African proverbs comprise the locus for such practices. She concludes by calling upon Africans to look to their religious traditions for effective antidotes capable of restoring wholeness by delivering African peoples from the seductive powers of Western individualism and materialism.

Impact of Poverty in Africa

Poverty is rampant in many African villages and city slums, especially among children, women, and the illiterate and unemployed youths. The situation is such the aspect of poverty in Africa are often presented in terms like "African realities" as if no other realities constitute the world of and life in the old continent and cradle of civilization. The media in the west could not describe Africa without referring to its severe food shortage, malnutrition, inadequate housing, inadequate clothing, inadequate medical-care, disease, high infant mortality, illiteracy, or inadequate system of education. The truth still remains that colonialism, postcolonialism and international financial institution as well as African leaders and intellectual share various degrees of responsibility for this gloomy situation of Africa. All of these are held responsible because they pretend to propose for the eradication of poverty in Africa, while they leave the continent excluded from the new economic trend of this third millennium. This they do by preventing its populations from having their share in the profits of globalization. African leaders and intellectuals are to blame because of their mal governance, undemocratic policies and lack of vision and responsibility. The church is not exempted because they also share some responsibilities in perpetuating poverty in Africa by failing to go beyond their charity missions and propose adequate solutions to tackle the problem of poverty in Africa. Poverty in Africa has far reaching consequences that affect various aspects of individual's lives, communities and nations. Below are some of the impacts of poverty in Africa. Hunger and food insecurity- a significant portion of Africa's population, reaches on subsistence farming. Unpredictable climate condition, poor soil quality and lack of modern farming equipment, ETC has made food production unreachable. Prolonged droughts, conflicts, economic instability often leads to wide spread of hunger and famine. Lack of fund for training activities, purchase of seed, farm tools, for the purchase of fertilizer, herbicides, to hire labour, to care for the farm until harvest. Lack of funds to maintain the farm leads to poor harvest and hunger.

Religion and Poverty Reduction in Africa

A number of policies have been set forward to address the issue of poverty in Africa. In 2005, the developed world pledged to halve poverty in the world by 2015 and ultimately "make poverty history", there was a happy response from the African people that finally the developing world was awakening to its responsibility to aid the world's most impoverished peoples. All indications suggest that not only has the developed world reneged on its promises but has not at all committed to making poverty history. The Millennium Development Goals, as noble as they were, set a herculean task for poverty alleviation because of the fundamental structures of the political, economic and social orders that are entrenched in the world today, which render any meaningful reform impossible. All available statistics suggest that those who are most affected by the world poverty crises are in the regions of Africa and the Caribbean.

Faith-Based Initiatives: This initiative has proven particularly popular and deserve attention. Faith-based organizations in Africa are thus situated to take on significant roles in addressing underdevelopment and alleviating extreme crises. Many of Africa's most impoverished people are also deeply spiritual members of religious organizations. By joining religious support network, many achieved a sense of personal identity, unified community and social solidarity and are able to call upon the combined resources of the faith organizations to address the poverty and disease ravaging their communities. Using ancient religious teachings, religious denominations instill religious values as moral obligations to the faithful, who are obligated to alleviate poverty in ways that may be lacking in secular institutions, international development agencies or local governments. Thus on a global scale religious groups can serve as effective representative for marginalized segments of third world peoples. Religious organizations can also compel national and local political leaders to discourage corruption public, civic and political life, to empower citizens to develop skills, to acknowledge rights, to elect responsible leaders, to address corruption of ethnic and political affiliations and to dissuade Western governments from giving tax breaks to companies responsible for environmental disasters.

In 2000 the Nairobi Conference entitled "Alleviating Poverty in Africa" sponsored in partnership with the Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa and the World Bank, participating in a council of Anglican Provinces of Africa (CAPA) training course for new Bishops in Ibadan, Nigeria.

The conference addressed the causes of poverty; political, economic, and social challenges; and ways to fight poverty by raising income and promoting empowerment, security and opportunity in African nations. Seeing the spiritual as an essential component of development, these organizations committed to working with African communities to seek community-driven development, protect natural resources and environments promote good governance by fighting corruption and relieve debt. Further, some religious groups are directly embedded in the struggles against poverty by insisting through their lobbying groups that poverty can be seen as a moral question of world economic policy. The catholic social justice lobbying group, Network, for example, urges religious organizations to ask government and co-operations ethical questions regarding economic policy: How does policy affect the lives of people in poverty? How doe policy improve the lives of people in poverty? How does policy affect their capacity to decide about their lives? Faith-based initiatives are not without problems, however. I, argue that many evangelical and protestant groups should redefine their mission from one that focuses primarily on the saving of souls from eternal damnation to one that directly addresses the misery and poverty lived by many of their flock. They must address spiritual as well as material needs by cultivating a new mind-set similar to the notion of the "mission church" in the colonial era, in which the Bible and the plow were understood as mutually reinforcing. I understand faith-based initiatives as social programs developed by religious communities to eradicate and alleviate poverty, rejecting the popular understanding in the United States that faith-based initiatives, as defined by George W. Bush, are the state-sponsored redistribution of resources using the agency of religious communities. The latter understanding runs the risk of polarizing public opinion and engendering religious bigotry. Overall, however, religious bodies have long been involved in social-welfare and charity without the support of the state. Beyond their peculiar meaning in America, faith based initiatives imply the involvement of civil society at large, particularly in the post military states of contemporary African nations.

The role of civil society plays in poverty alleviation cannot be overemphasized. It has been widely argued that thee chronic corruption in many failed African states has led to the growth of the civil society. The excellent performance of the civil society in the post military era, especially in the struggle for democratization, confirms

that it needs to be strengthened today if nascent democracies in Africa are to survive. Progressive religious institutions constitute a significant segment of any nation's civil society, and developing programs to eradicate and alleviate poverty should be seen in that context. In the African situation, it is counterproductive to build a wedge between religious institutions and other civil society groups, such as trade unions, universities, and other nongovernmental organizations involved in the critical work of social change or social engineering. The western notion of separating the spheres of influence of religion, state, and civil agencies may be foreign to Africans, hence the union of these spheres should not be assumed inappropriate in alleviating and eradicating poverty in Africa today through sustainable development.

An unexpected locus for poverty alleviation may be international monetary bodies (the I M F and the World Bank) in partnership with religious organizations, particularly churches. Regarded as incredible partners, many churches in Africa are forging new partnerships with the world bank, and these partnerships with the world bank, and these partnership may prove beneficial as the bank not only provide expertise in specific aspects of poverty and public policy but also has special access to national and international decision makers. The bank brings a global perspective and financial resources to alleviating poverty, as the largest source of multilateral development assistance to Africa.

Through partnering with the world-bank may make new opportunities available, it is essential that the church always maintain its prophetic voice in such relationships or partnerships. Instead of denouncing partnership with the World Bank or the I M F as some churches have done, the church should insist on its prophetic tradition, which provides meaningful critique of global injustice while simultaneously sponsoring and collaborating with credible organizations. The story of the prophet Nathan related in the Old Testament book 2 Samuel illustrates the possibility of the prophet speaking truth to power. In 2 Samuel, the prophet Nathan was sent to reprimand King David for slaying Bathsheba's husband in order to take Bathsheba for himself to be his wife (2 Samuel 12:1-9). Nathan tells David the parable of a very rich man, who had many flocks and a poor man who had only one precious little lamb and who raised the lamb lovingly as part of his family. Now the rich man, ignoring his many herds, took the poor man's lamb and had it prepared for dinner guests. On hearing the story, David became enraged at the perpetrator of this wicked deed, declaring that the rich man deserved to die because he showed no compassion. Nathan thus delivered the accusation to King David, "thou art the man!" This old biblical story is useful in today's situation of unequal power among the nations, co-operations, and peoples. A skilled communicator, Nathan raised David's consciousness such that David was able, by acknowledging evil in one case, to recognize evil in himself.

The impact of poverty on gender relations in Africa, especially the status of women and the responses of women's religious, cultural, and social institutions to conditions of poverty is also profoundly important in Barbara bailey's contribution to this volume. All available data suggest that poverty in in Africa is disproportionately affects women and children. The council of Anglican provinces of Africa in partnership with the world-bank issued a statement on gender and poverty in sub-Saharan Africa declaring that if Africa is to achieve equitable growth and sustainable development, then women must have access to and control of productive, human and social capital assets.

The church sees the inherit partnership between men and women as originating in creation and its breakdown is simple. But the church's missionary heritage created structured, unequal gender roles. Thus, the church must now provide space for women to express and contribute their resources in a more participatory and equal manner, thus enabling the full range of Africa's human resources to alleviate poverty. The church must increase awareness of injustices against women empowerment programs and gender training for all worshippers. The majority of church members in Africa are women, making gender equality a moral imperative as well as a developmental objective that is central to the Church's survival. The church must remove the rigid structures of its community life in order to improve the status of women. Further, women must secure access to and control of a diverse range of productive, human and social capital.

Religious groups can offer equitable provisions for women to articulate their resources and gifts, to address the female and child culture of poverty in Africa, to raise consciousness-supporting empowerment programs, and to ensure gender-awareness training. Religious groups can change rigid structure of religious community life to

promote women's leadership and to access the impact of religious programs targeted to rural women, encouraging all segments of society to work together to alleviate poverty. Indeed the Anglican Church's mothers union, the women's guild, and numerous other women's group in many Christian denominations are doing precisely that. Peace depends on economic justice, social harmony, and spiritual sanctity of life. Religious groups identify the root cause of conflict in people's refusal to see any "good" in "the other" and its solution in the willingness to accuse and implicate oneself and one's own group as part of the problem. Forgiveness and reconciliation, based on this analysis, is the religious group's comparative advantage. In a conflict situation, religious groups can and should offer a permanent institutional framework that provides continuity and social stability.

In his essay "Africa's Poverty, Human Rights, and a just Society," the Nigerian Christian ethicist and lawyer Simeon Ilesanmi argues that the protection of fundamental human rights is a necessary condition in all attempts to address poverty in Africa. Accordingly, he discusses the 1981 Banjul Charter I adopted by the African heads of state, who affirmed the view that civil and political rights imply social, economic, and cultural rights. Subsequent to the adoption of that Charter, "development rights" became Africa's contributions to the world's discourse on human rights. Following a discussion of Africa's extensive debt crisis, Ilesanmi's argument has three parts; the primacy of social and economic rights over social and economic rights over civil and political rights, three objections to social and economic development rights, and the primacy of civil and political rights over development rights.

The volume closes with my essay "Self-Initiation; A Necessary Principle in the African Struggle to Abolish Poverty." Written from the position of an African Canadian-American social ethicist, it discusses the principle of self-initiation that has motivated all historic African struggles against oppression, including the independence movements in Africa, abolitionism, and the civil rights struggle in America. I conclude that since every significant gain in those struggles originated with the self-initiatives of African peoples, the eventual eradication of poverty among African peoples will be no exception.

Findings

The most important finding of this study was the discovery of much evidence to support the primary assumption underlying this project, namely, that African peoples share common concerns about the relation of religion and poverty in spite of the diversity of languages, regions, ethnicities, and theologies. Thus, we conclude that much common ground exists for continuing moral discourse and cooperative action on this crucial issue.

Second, the group's observations and discussions revealed that there are differences between Western and African understandings of poverty. The latter do not define poverty solely as a lack of material resources. In fact, many Africans who possess very little money or property do not consider themselves poor. Rather, they view alienation from families, friends, and communities as the state of true poverty, the intensity of which is increased by the lack of religious faith. Consequently, those who live in a family that is related to a larger community often do not think of themselves as being poor in spite of their lack of material resources.

Clearly, the countless number of orphaned children on the streets of many African cities is a horrendous reality for all who have eyes to see. Separated from families and communities by the ravages of war and HIV/AIDS, a generation of children is growing up on city streets where they will never have known the loving care and protection of either natural or surrogate families. These are truly poor by African standards. Such a combination of material, familial, and spiritual impoverishment in the lives of tens of thousands of vulnerable children more often than not results in sexual abuse, forced conscription into military service, petty theft, drug dealing, prostitution, and even modern-day slavery.

As Konrad raiser notes, even as the Caribbean ecumenical movement and its agenda for social reconstruction are in decline, the general secretary of the world council of churches (WCC) note that fighting poverty has moved back into the center of the international agenda, conceding that traditionally, the churches' response has been characterized by the work of charity without challenging the political, social and economic structures that are the root cause of poverty."

Raiser went on to suggest however: the geo-political changes during the last decade of the 20th century and the accelerating process of economic have obliged the churches and ecumenical organizations to rethink principles, objectives and methodologies guiding their participation in development

In the year 2000, the WCC in collaboration with its partners in the Association of WCC related Development Organizations in Europe (APRODEV) engaged in a process of case studies in a number of countries, including Ghana, and South Africa, and Jamaica and Grenada in the West Indies, designed to gain a better understanding of how churches, agencies and ecumenical organizations could respond more effectively to poverty in the 21st century. The study included special sector studies of the labour movement, transnational corporations and especially disadvantaged position of women.

Following on from these studies, the Pan-African Seminar also set out to reach an understanding of the role of churches and related organizations, and considered particular cases and counties. The limits of this research do not allow for a full discussion of the case studies, but based on the outcomes, five priorities and a number of programmatic elements that churches might adopt to combat poverty and create wealth were identified, as were targets intended to complement the United Nations Millennium Development Goals aimed at cutting global poverty in half by the year 2015. Priorities included drawing attention to excessive wealth and greed as well as poverty; directing resources to advocacy on a more equal footing with that for projects and programs; building a strong and effective global alliance to combat poverty and greed; strengthening and renewing local churches and Christian communities to combat poverty and greed and promote social transformation, and clarifying an ecumenical theology of wealth, poverty and justice.

The perspectives undergirding these priorities seem directed at structural change and social transformation. The Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation (ESSET), an arm of the South Africa Council of Churches, for example, seeks to promote socio-economic justice in Church and society; facilitate visible, competent and effective church action in economic life; affirm the wholeness of life; acknowledge God's preference for the poor; and encourage responsible stewardship of resources. Through its work, ESSET assists churches to attain a level of economic literacy that enables meaningful participation in economic discourses in the country. A practical expression of its thrust was the hosting of a conference in 2002 to assess the impact of trade liberalization on the garment industry and the launching of a research project on how these impacts affect women's sustainable livelihoods – a critical undertaking given the impact of SAPs and globalization of free trade zones located in developing countries, and therefore an employment opportunities for women from lower socio-economic strata.

Judging by the material referred to in this project, there is this sense that, even as initiatives at the global, regional and local levels seek to achieve a common goal, there is no intentional coordination of activities at these various levels and each initiative therefore is inherently autonomous. At all levels, however, ecumenical initiatives appear to adopt a more strategic orientation targeting structural and policy reform, whereas initiatives at the local level are more practical and tactical responses to the differential impacts of economic and political structures and systems on men, women and children.

A particularly worrying concern for me, however, has been that even in light of evidence that unequivocally points to the feminized nature of poverty, particularly in countries of the South, the ecclesiastical and secular discourse that we have engaged in around issues of poverty, for the most part, has been gender-neutral and few initiatives have specifically targeted the needs of women and their dependents. I am also acutely aware that on this journey there have been limited structured opportunities to hear the voice of the most destitute. More often we have observed their plight "from a distance," engaged in discussions about factors that affect them and ways in which church and state have sought to combat poverty in the various contexts.
As a result of this "othering" of the dispossessed, an experience common to most minorities, women also have to exercise personal agency in a search for solutions to their situations of hopelessness. In this quest, women – who are the most affected and who constitute the majority in their churches – find support through social capital networks or "an economy of affection" in church, family, and community that function outside of a monetary system. In some churches women (and men) also "demonstrate (a) resistance to the dehumanizing consequences of poverty" through engagement in healing rituals and spirit possession.

Conclusion

Throughout our study it was assumed that all peoples respond to oppression in dialectical forms of adaption and resistance. In our endeavor to discover how religion relates to such responses, we discerned various cultural factors that contained both deliberating and liberating potentialities. These included (a) the conflict between western and African worldviews; (b) the pervasive nature of patriarchy and the gradual change in women consciousness (c) religious rituals are empowering resources; and (d) contemporary agencies for transformation.

The importance of a religion, however, lies in its capacity to serve humans and make them blossom, spiritually as well as materially. Taken either as divine institution or as social organization, the purposes of religion cannot exclude its concern for the full development of humans, in their souls as well as in their bodies. When religion does not reach such a goal or fails to fulfill such a purpose, it becomes a bad religion. With regard to the subject that occupies us, the Christian religion in Africa runs the risk of being declared a "bad religion" if the churches fail kin their special obligation to the poor and the vulnerable, or in their moral responsibility to protect and enhance the dignity of a human person. As they are dealing with embodied souls, African Churches should not ignore the basic questions of existence of their members, nor think about any aspect of the Christian faith without reassessing its impact on the life of the human person. Christian education in Africa should rethink its teaching on wealth and poverty. This would unequivocally be the starting point in our efforts to alleviate poverty among African, people and eventually eradicate it from the earth.

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