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## Religion and Human Rights

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## RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS: TOWARDS THE INCULTURATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN GHANA

This study explores how local religious and cultural values may contribute, or are already contributing, to the embedding of human rights in contemporary Ghana. It attempts to establish a convergence between local Ghanaian religious and cultural values and international human rights. This is in keeping with the growing recognition of the fact that the international human rights regime needs to be grounded in the value systems of the various cultures of the world in order for it to thrive. The need for this research is due to the fact that human rights violations in Ghana at the grassroots level are mostly linked to religious belief and customary practices such as witchcraft accusations, widowhood rites and citizens' relations with traditional political authority.

The operational definition of religion that guided the research was that religion is 'concerned with the belief in, and presumed relationship with, spirit beings who, though thought invisible, are yet believed to participate in the material world, over which they wield effective power and whose affairs they palpably affect.' This definition suited popular religion, which was the primary focus of the study, as well as official or formal religion. Ghanaian popular religion is a hybrid phenomenon, drawing on sources such as the indigenous culture and religion and various forms of Christianity and Islam.

The thesis proceeded from the position that the concept of human rights though, modern in its normative form, has not been unknown to traditional cultures, including religious ones. It argues that human rights represent 'dream values' common to all humanity, which thinkers, sages, prophets of various nations and eras envisioned and preached. Societies that have not produced known special prophets or individual thinkers also possessed these ideals, which were expressed in proverbs, legal norms and certain forms of taboos. They were also, in some cases, implied in ritual forms.

The thesis develops a model of inculturation of human rights as the main hermeneutical framework. Inculturation of human rights is defined in this thesis as 'the process of providing local expressions of the global culture of human rights in such a way that the particular local version overlaps in meaning and practice with other local versions.' Since the model is also offered as an addition to existing responses to cultural relativism, there is the concern to ensure that inculturated versions of the universal norms do not represent deviations. At the base of this stance lies the conviction that the realm of human rights is the realm where issues of justice and injustice are clarified and sorted out; where liberty is clear virtue over any form of oppression. It is the realm of fundamental equality where exclusion is always a vice and inclusion a virtue.

The Thesis identifies four key elements in the inculturation process. These are: spontaneous or popular dialogue, translation, confrontation, and directional or formal dialogue. These are not presented as stages or phases in the process but as overlapping elements. Spontaneous or popular dialogue occurs in the context of everyday, informal encounters at the grassroots level, independent of the formal or official sectors of society. 'Translation' goes beyond linguistics. It is about the engagement between international human rights and the local culture at the deep level of meaning so that the local expressions will flow effortlessly, from the inner worlds of the

indigenous culture, connecting with its important myths and finding expressions in its core values and symbols.

The element of confrontation is discerned in situations where apparent incompatible elements clash. Contestations, negotiations, rejections and compromises are part of this element and it results in the clarification, re-conceptualization, and rearrangement of aspects of the local culture, which may appear to contradict core values and goals of the international system. It also contains evaluative criteria. Formal interventions to clarify ambiguities involved in the inculturated versions are what have been referred to as directional or formal dialogue. Such interventions may come from human rights workers, technocrats and scholars. Institutions of governance such as parliament and the courts may all be involved at this stage; they may deliberately take into account available local socio-cultural treasures in their efforts to build a human rights culture.

Working within the framework of inculturation requires a statement as to whether or not Ghana has a common culture. The study establishes that, notwithstanding the ethnic heterogeneity of the country, common cultural characteristics can be discerned. At the base of this 'common culture' is a religious worldview, which informs the general interpretation of life's events at both the individual level and the national level.

Findings of the research are the following: First, inculturation of human rights is already taking place in Ghana and there are several points of affinity between local Ghanaian cultural norms and the norms of international human rights, which enhance the ongoing process. In this, the metaphysical linkages implied in the local worldview and the values activated by local ideas of human dignity serve as the basis of a local human rights culture that connects well with the universal system of human rights. Secondly, traditional cultural norms contain original ideas that set apart human beings as unique species requiring a special treatment of respect of their dignity. Examples of such norms are the types of taboo called *egudodoamE* (things that degrade the human being) in the Ewe language. These taboos specify certain acts that are never to be done to any human being. Thirdly, a traditional relish for the values of community stability and harmony makes human rights agencies that employ non-confrontational approaches the most preferred agencies from which victims of human rights violations in Ghana seek help. Fourthly, the religious orientation of most Ghanaians leads them to an understanding of human rights that is balanced with responsibilities. True human functioning, which is linked to human dignity in the Ghanaian context, involves the ability to exercise rights and responsibilities.

The thesis concludes that the ideas, imagery and symbols that popular religion in Ghana supplies constitute a veritable 'spiritual capital' that hold the promise to help make human rights an integral part of Ghana's culture with deep roots in a common worldview.

The relevance of the thesis lies in the contribution to the development of theories and contextual theologies that seek to explain and guide processes of cultural transformation. Specifically, it contributes to the ongoing discussion about the relationship between religion and international human rights; and is set to deepen academic reflection on the links between global trends and local cultures that are underpinned by strong religious currents.

The work is organised into nine chapters. Chapter 1 is the 'introduction' and it introduced the main research problematic, the research questions, and research locations. Methods of data collection and factors that influenced the process were also discussed. It also introduced the hermeneutical model. Chapter 2 discussed general theoretical issues about human rights in relation to religion. It also dealt with concepts such as religion, human rights, secularisation, globalisation, universality and relativism. Chapter 3 contains a fuller discussion of the main hermeneutical model of the study, inculturation. This was done against a background discussion of some approaches to the issue of cultural relativism in current academic discourse on human rights. The chapter outlined the main elements of the model as the framework for the theoretical exploration of how human rights may be embedded, or are already being embedded, in the contemporary culture of Ghana.

The question that chapter 4 sought to explore was whether or not Ghana has a common culture. Answering the question in the affirmative, it proceeded with an attempt to map out cultural features that have come to be associated with the people of the modern nation-state called Ghana. It traced the historical, political, social, and other factors that have marked the evolution of that culture. Chapter 5 attempted to answer the following questions and address issues related to them: to what extent is religion interwoven into modern Ghanaian society. What is the extent of its influence at the various levels of life? Chapter 6 involved a discussion of the understanding and practice of human rights in indigenous societies and their development before and after the advent of foreign political, religious and social forces. Ideas cognate to human rights such as those that define human dignity and the practices they generate are explored. Chapter 7 was concerned about the evolution of human rights as part of the values protected by law and promoted as a matter of public policy in modern Ghana. It also attempted to find out and discuss how traditional elements such as religious beliefs and ideas influence people's views and attitudes toward human rights in contemporary Ghana. Discussions in chapter 8 involved a critical exploration and examination of popular ideas, symbols and imagery that have some relevance for human rights in Ghana. A discussion of the promise such ideas, imagery and symbols hold for the enrichment of the global human rights doctrine was also done, within the framework of an inculturation model. Chapter 9 is the concluding chapter. It pulled together the various strands of arguments presented in the work. It concluded that human rights will find a natural boost if the appropriate steps are taken to link them with important religious values of the culture of Ghana. Social policy implications of the findings of the research were also highlighted and suggestions for future research made.

