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5. LOCATING RELIGION IN GHANA: EXPLORING THE CONTOURS OF SPIRITUAL CAPITAL

5.1 Introduction

‘The Ghanaian is by nature highly religious.’¹ This is the way the eminent Ghanaian anthropologist and celebrated Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kumasi, Rt. Rev. Dr. Peter A. Sarpong, describes the average Ghanaian. Indeed, the view that African societies and religiousness are synonymous has become a given assumption upon which many ethnographic works on Africa begin and end. In recent times this view which has assumed the status of a paradigm has begun to be challenged.² However, while the bold attempt to challenge what is almost an entrenched view in scholarship is commendable, the extent of the influence of religion in all areas of life in Ghana is too clear to be denied. A central concern of this chapter is to gauge the scope of religion’s influence in the affairs of Ghana.

Our focus is, however, not on specific traditions or institutions; what we identify and discuss are religious beliefs and ideas that have been part of the world view and language of public discourse, especially at the popular level. Increasingly, the value of religious ideas is being recognised in the analysis of the role religion plays in societies in the South.³ The chapter attempts to map out the contours of religion in contemporary Ghana and analyse its value as ‘spiritual capital,’ a resource in the process of inculturating human rights.

5.2 Religion as Capital

In 1999, James Wolfensohn, (at the time the president of the World Bank), acknowledged the importance of culture in development work.⁴ Since then, the awareness has been demonstrated among development workers of the necessity of paying attention to issues of culture. Yet, religion as a defining component of culture is often ignored, leading in some situations, to ‘grave consequences.’⁵ The pervasiveness and influence of religion in Ghana make it an important ‘spiritual capital’⁶ that affects issues of both private and public life.

The concept of ‘religious capital’ or ‘spiritual capital’ follows the rather trendy sociological coinages such as ‘human capital,’⁷ ‘social capital,’⁸ and ‘cultural capital.’⁹ Indeed discussions of

¹ P. A. Sarpong, *Religion in Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Information Service, 1977) 1.

² See Jan Platvoet & Henk van Rinsum, ‘Is Africa Incurably Religious? Confessing and Contesting an Invention,’ *Exchange* 32/2 (2003) 123 – 153.

³ Notable among such works are Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004) and Paul Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising Economy* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004); see also Harry Englund, *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2006) 176ff.

⁴ World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), 2001.

⁵ K. Marshall, ‘Development and Religion: A Different Lens on Development Debates,’ (www.wfdd.org.uk/articlesandtalks.html#marshall).

⁶ John Mensah, *National Problems* (London: 1933)12 -13. Cited by Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) 160.

⁷ Gary S. Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis*. (New York: Columbia University Press for the National Bureau of Economic Research.1975).

‘religious capital’ or ‘spiritual capital,’ used interchangeably in this work, have mostly built on these earlier concepts. For example, following the household production and human capital approach of Becker, Laurence Iannaccone defined ‘religious human capital’ as ‘skills and experiences specific to one’s religion, including religious knowledge, familiarity with church ritual and doctrine, and friendships with fellow worshippers.’¹⁰ He argued that, in the same way as the skills known as human capital enhance the production of household commodities, religious human capital enhances the production of religious practice and satisfaction. Stark and Finke build on Iannaccone’s definition, moving beyond knowledge and familiarity to emotional attachment. This is because while they acknowledge the importance of religious knowledge, they think that religious experiences often ‘form an emotional bond that enhances the productive capacity of religious capital.’ They therefore define religious capital as consisting ‘of the degree of mastery of, and attachment to, a particular religious culture.’¹¹

As much as the above definitions are important, they do not sufficiently capture what is meant by spiritual capital in the context of the present work. The widespread belief in Ghana that spiritual power resides in the invisible world and can be accessed for improving the quality of life, and the influence this belief has on private and public life in Ghana, is what is referred to as ‘spiritual capital’ in this work. We take our point of departure from a statement reported to have been made in a book on Ghana published by John Mensah in 1933 and quoted by Kimble: ‘to the African the whole universe breathes of God...the extent of this faith...is a locked-up spiritual capital...’¹² In Ghana, belief in God is linked with the belief in spirits who are regarded as real and powerful, though subject to God. In our definition, spiritual capital is literally ‘spiritual’ in the sense that it refers to a belief in a world of spirits regarded as real with which believers may relate for their benefit.

Religious or spiritual capital has implications for both private and public life. Aspects of such implications have been noted with regard to Ghana. In a paper exploring the importance of ‘faith-based’ associations (FBAs) in Ghana, Richard Crook observes that religious groupings are among the most vigorous elements in Ghanaian civil society, with ‘probably the largest and the most socially rooted and widely distributed membership base of all civil society organizations.’¹³ According to official statistics, 94% of all Ghanaians are affiliated to religious traditions. However, aspects of spiritual capital such as religious ideas and emotional attachments are also present and widely influential in Ghana, though it is not every form of spiritual capital in Ghana

⁸ James S. Coleman, ‘Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital.’ *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1988) S95-S120; Partha Dasgupta and Ismail Serageldin, *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective* (Washington, D. C.: World Bank 1999); Robert D. Putnam, ‘The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life.’ *American Prospect*, 13 (1993) 35-42.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Forms of Capital,’ in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1983) 241-258.

¹⁰ Laurence R. Iannaccone, ‘Religious Practice: A Human Capital Approach.’ *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 29 (1990) 299.

¹¹ Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000) 120.

¹² John Mensah, *National Problems* (London: 1933) 12 -13. Cited by Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) 160.

¹³ Richard Crook, ‘The Role of Faith-Based Associations in Political Change and Development,’ Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), *Policy Brief*, 5, (November 2005) 1.

that be found to enhance human rights and governance. Some aspects are clear liabilities to the growth and enjoyment of human rights in Ghana. Nevertheless, this is only one of several reasons why it is important to pay attention to the religious factor in private and public life as a matter of policy by government and other institutions of governance. This shall be taken up again in a more detailed manner in chapters eight and nine.

5.3 Religion and the Nation-State

Religion is an important feature of public and private life in Ghana. It connects with most aspects of life; and in the public sphere, it is explicitly recognized and dealt with, albeit in a way not completely unambiguous: the constitution of the republic makes the country a secular state but not an atheistic one. It acknowledges and proclaims belief in God.¹⁴ It also makes clear provisions that ensure that no religion is imposed on the nation or has predominance with state support. There is a clear constitutional separation between politics and religion. However, in recognition of the pervasive religiosity of the people of Ghana,¹⁵ the constitution also prescribes representation of religious constituencies on certain statutory bodies.¹⁶ In practice, prayers are offered at important state functions; and institutions such as Parliament and the Judiciary begin their daily or annual sessions with prayer or, in some cases, with elaborate church services. At the level of the citizens, most people tap religious resources in their attempt to live a life of dignity and address life's challenges.

Assimeng outlines six significant phases of what he describes as 'national religiousness,' which have occurred within the social, economic and cultural changes that have taken place in the country since independence.¹⁷ The first is the phase of formal subordination and marginalization of religion in public life (1957-1966 under the government of Dr. Nkrumah) and the second phase was characterised by official attempts to 'bring back God' to the centre of national life (1966-1969 under the military regime of the National Liberation Council). The third phase was marked by a conscious 'God-fearing posture' on the part of public officials, led by Dr. Busia, the prime minister (1969-1972). Religious life, especially, church going became fashionable at the level of national leadership. The fourth phase was one of 'psychological insecurity and extreme superstition' (1972-1979, under the military regimes of the SMC I & II). The fifth phase, according to Assimeng, was the period under Dr Limann's presidency which was marked by economic and social difficulties which were said to be capable of solution 'only by God;' and the sixth phase was the phase of 'Holy war' when under Rawlings' second revolutionary government, radical attempts were made at socio-economic transformation (1981- 1992).¹⁸

The formal place of religion in the political history of the country since independence has been determined by the ideological inclinations and the value orientation of particular regimes. In the period immediately after independence, the state under its first president, Kwame Nkrumah and his Convention Peoples Party (CPP) government marginalised institutional religion in national affairs. However, the effort to weld together the various ethnic states into a united country and

¹⁴ E. K. Quashigah, 'Legislating Religious Liberty: The Ghanaian Experience' *Brigham Young University Law Review*, 2 (1999) 597.

¹⁵ See Elom Dovlo, 'Religion in the Public Sphere: Challenges and Opportunities in Ghanaian Lawmaking, 1989 – 2004' *Brigham Young University Law Review*, 3 (2005) 636.

¹⁶ E.g. 1992 Constitution, Article 166(1) a, IV and v.

¹⁷ Assimeng, *Salvation*, 5.

¹⁸ Assimeng, *Salvation*, 5 & 6.

create a national consciousness of identity and loyalty to the new nation was underpinned by a quasi-religious ideology. This ideology called, 'Nkrumaism,' was a kind of 'political religion,'¹⁹ which employed several metaphors borrowed from religion to express its tenets.²⁰

Nkrumah described himself as a 'non-denominational Christian and a scientific Marxist.'²¹ Projecting himself as Africa's Messiah, he encouraged the virtual deification of his person. In this enterprise, he was actively supported by his party's official newspaper, *The Accra Evening News*, which presented him to the masses as the redeemer, a Moses, appointed by God to lead his country to the promised land of the 'Political Kingdom.'²² For example, the issue of February 4, 1960 carried a commentary, part of which read as follows: '...the whole phenomenon of Nkrumah's emergence is second to none in the history of world messiahs from Buddha and Mohammed to Christ.'²³

In March, 1960, the newspaper ran a series with the title, 'Seven Days in the Wilderness,' in which it reported a seven day fasting and meditation by the president. This process of virtual deification was also characterised by the spread of stories about him that made him look more than an ordinary person in the eyes of his people. While some of these stories were officially published, others circulated as rumours. Such stories helped to build a sense of legitimacy in support of Nkrumah as a ruler in a newly contrived nation whose peoples for ages had recognized the authority of their own chiefs as their natural rulers. Nkrumah, in the words of Pobe, an 'upstart commoner,'²⁴ had real problems of legitimacy in that context. The idea of a political leader, whose source of legitimacy was located outside the traditional customary laws and conventions, was novel.

Ghanaian chiefs draw their legitimacy partly from the close connection between them and the spirit world of the gods and the ancestors.²⁵ One could argue that the long period of British colonialism must have sufficiently re-oriented the peoples toward the civil government of the new nation-state. But any such argument would be made only if one ignores the contradictory British approach that sought to preserve the traditional political systems while at the same time tending to undermine the ground of legitimacy upon which the authority of the chiefs rested.²⁶ To re-direct the people's sense of loyalty from their small ethnic-based political chiefdoms characterized by a high level of homogeneity to a new law-government overseeing the disparate ethnic groups then being welded together as one country, there could have been few alternatives to the use of religious imagery and symbolism. Therefore, the use of religious language by Nkrumah did not seem to have religious intent; it was meant to serve political ends.

¹⁹ David Apter, 'Political Religion in the New Nations' in Clifford Geertz, *Old Societies and the New States* (New York: Free Press, 1963) 57 – 104.

²⁰ Geoffrey Bing, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1968) 125.

²¹ Bing, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 124.

²² One of his famous statements was, 'Seek ye first the political kingdom and all other things shall be added unto you.'

²³ Cited in K. A. Dickson, 'Religion and Society: A Study in Church and State Relation in the First Republic' in Kwame Arhin, *The Life and Work of Kwame Nkrumah* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1993) 140.

²⁴ J. S. Pobe, *Religion and Politics in Ghana* (Accra: Asempra 1991) 31.

²⁵ Abraham A. Akrong, 'Religion and Traditional Leadership in Ghana' in Irene K Odotei & Albert K. Awedoba (eds.) *Chieftaincy in Ghana: Culture, Governance and Development* (Accra, Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2006) 193 – 212.

²⁶ Harvey, *Law and Social Change*, 351, 352.

When later Nkrumah became increasingly dictatorial and some members of his regime were seen as corrupt, wild rumours alleging his involvement with the occult began to spread. One of such rumours alleged that he engaged in rituals involving human sacrifice to his god, *Kankan Nyame*, imported from Guinea. The veracity of most of these rumours could not be established; yet after his overthrow they grew wilder. One of his former ministers, Mr. Tawiah Adamafio, giving evidence before the Apaloo Commission, which was set up by the military junta to investigate aspects of the Nkrumah regime after its overthrow, confirmed that Nkrumah had sought the protection of the Akonnedi shrine at Larteh and a Moslem marabout from Kankan in Guinea.²⁷ Newspapers carried cartoons of the body of a pregnant woman alleged to have been used for rituals of human sacrifice.

Apparently, the soldiers who overthrew his government believed some of these stories and took them so seriously that the new head of state, Lt. General J. A. Ankrah contracted a Pentecostal prophet to perform a cleansing ritual at the Castle, the seat of government, before he took up residence there.²⁸ It was this prophet, Prophet Wovenu of Apostles' Revelation Society (ARS), who officiated at a Special Service of Rededication, held in the forecourt of the Castle. It was the first time a minister from outside the mainline Churches had officially functioned as the main celebrant in a religious service organized by the state. Not surprisingly, Rev Prof. Baeta, an eminent clergyman from the mainline Churches, expressed misgivings about the sidestepping of their ministers and priests.²⁹

However, what seems to have escaped Baeta's attention was the then emerging attitude of choosing between different types of spiritual resource-persons for different purposes. In the situation of the then growing religious pluralism within Christianity, the people had come to assign special areas to the various categories of Churches. The mainline Churches were, in the minds of the public, competent in ceremonies and formal rites such as christening, weddings, burials and formal prayers at state functions. But in crisis situations, when there was a felt-need for special divine intervention, most Ghanaian Christians trusted better the competence of the then newly emerging 'Spiritual Churches,' referred to in academic literature as African Independent Churches (AICs). It was this attitude, which showed in the decision of the government to choose Prophet Wovenu over the others.

Nkrumah was generally believed to be a powerful man, with a great spiritual support-base. A more spiritually powerful person was needed to handle any spiritual threat that might still hover around the Castle. It is interesting, in this direction, to learn that when the government wanted somebody to handle their credibility issues in international circles, it was Baeta whose help they sought.³⁰ It was a simple matter of assigning competences! In fact, rumours were rife that the coup-makers consulted the same Wovenu before their operation.³¹ While the truth or falsity of most of the rumours about Nkrumah could not be established, it is possible that the soldiers who

²⁷ *West Africa*, 18th June, 1966.

²⁸ J. W. Fernandez, 'Rededication and Prophetism in Ghana,' in *Cahiers D'Etudes Africaines* X/2 (1970)229 -305.

²⁹ Pobee, *Religion and Politics*, 93.

³⁰ Pobee, *Religion and Politics*, 93.

³¹ Pobee observes what he describes as 'striking' about attempted coups d'état in Ghana during the Acheampong regime. He reports that those who attempted coups always consulted spiritualists. (see Pobee, *Religion and Politics*, 45).

overthrew his government played on public perceptions in order to further discredit him and strengthen their own legitimacy in the eyes of the Ghanaian public.

In Ghana, both traditionally and in modern times, the resort to spiritual means to enhance one's fortunes is not only an accepted, but also, the usual way of dealing with life's problems. However, spiritual power is categorized into good and bad. In many traditional areas, the use of bad spiritual power, also called, bad 'medicine,' is an offence that exacts severe sanctions if found out. In extreme cases, if the culprit is not a citizen of the area, he or she is expelled from the community.

In the modern era, this traditional attitude continues to inform the attitude of most Ghanaians. Therefore, it has become an important weapon in the contest for power between political rivals. To succeed in projecting your opponents in the public eye as those who believe and indulge in 'evil medicine' is to fatally damage them. In the early days of the New Patriotic Party administration, the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) newspapers alleged that the president, John Kufuor, had paid a secret visit to neighbouring Togo where he indulged in 'satanic rituals.' In spite of official denials, a section of the opposition embarked on a sustained propaganda to keep the story in the public domain. In the era of the dominance of Charismatic Christianity, which has become an important source and vehicle of ideas of political significance at the popular level, presenting your opponent as one who draws his or her power from evil spiritual sources can indeed be a deadly weapon.

Nkrumah's regime was seen as one that actively pursued an ideology that undermined the 'fear of God,' which for many Ghanaians is an important 'Ghanaian value.'³² Organized religion, especially Christianity, under the auspices of the Christian Council of Ghana and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church often engaged his government in protracted controversies over several issues. His constant indulgence in Marxist-Leninist rhetoric raised suspicion in Church circles that he was out to pursue an atheistic agenda as a national policy. This, coupled with alleged 'brain-washing' strategies aimed at weaning Ghanaian children from the 'fear of God' through the Young Pioneer Movement, caused considerable tension between the government and religious leaders. Things got to a head when the government deported the Anglican Bishop of Accra, Richard Roseveare. The bishop had, on behalf of 'all heads of Churches in Ghana' condemned 'the incipient atheism,' which Nkrumah was alleged to have been promoting among the youth of the country through the Young Pioneer Movement.³³ In response to a protest by the Christian Council, the government withdrew the deportation order and the bishop returned to post. On another occasion, he caused the arrest of Fr. Vincent Damuah, founder of the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), which had been specifically founded by the Roman Catholic Church to counter the 'ungodly influence' of Nkrumah's Young Pioneer Movement on Ghanaian children.

These were issues that caught national attention and forced a public debate on relations between religion and politics in the then new nation. However, it seems that Nkrumah's real concerns

³² For a more detailed analysis of how the 'fear of God' as a Ghanaian national value has become important in contemporary Ghanaian national politics, see Elom Dovlo, 'Religion and Politics in Ghana's Presidential Elections' in *Uhuru Magazine*, 5, (1993).

³³ K. A. Bediako, *The Downfall of Kwame Nkrumah*, (Accra: 2RMcHill, n.d.), 11.

were to boost his legitimacy in the context of the transition from a political system, sanctioned in part by religion, to a modern democratic system that was formally secular. The object was to forge national unity by transferring the people's loyalties from the previously autonomous small ethnic chiefdoms to the new nation-state.

It seems that it was also Nkrumah's aim to create the right conditions for the co-existence of the different religious traditions and break the established and prestigious position missionary Christianity enjoyed in the era of colonial rule. This showed also in his educational policy. There was a 'deliberate move to take over primary schools where Church influence had been strong.'³⁴ E. K. Quashigah, a law professor of the University of Ghana confirms this and explains that section 22 of the Education Act of 1961 represented a conscious effort on the part of the government to 'eliminate religion as a controlling factor in the public educational system.'³⁵

Kwame Nkrumah did not set out to destroy religion. He saw himself as a Christian, though a 'non-denominational' one. This is evident in the policy concerning prayer at state functions. Instead of only Christian prayers, Islamic prayers as well as the libation prayer of the indigenous religion were to be offered at functions such as Independence Day celebrations. Initially, the Christian Council protested against the inclusion of the pouring of libation but gave up when Nkrumah insisted on this decision. The evidence may also be seen in the decision to change the name of the Department of Divinity at the University of Ghana to the Department for the Study of Religions.³⁶

The religiously pluralistic nature of Ghana was recognized and consciously promoted by the government at the birth of the nation. One of the earliest laws passed in Independent Ghana was the Avoidance of Discrimination Act, 1957, which made it illegal for any person or group to engage in 'ethnic, regional, racial or religious propaganda to the detriment of any other community.' It also prohibited political groupings based on regional, ethnic or religious affiliation. His trans-denominational background, together with his Marxist orientation, influenced his preference for a secular state in which no religion had predominance over others. He wrote, 'Religion is an instrument of bourgeois social reaction. It is essential to emphasize in the historical condition of Africa that the state must be secular.'³⁷ This set the pattern to be followed with varying degrees of commitment by succeeding regimes.³⁸

The National Liberation Council (NLC) government, which succeeded Nkrumah's Convention People's Party saw as part of its task, the restoration to the country the traditional value of the 'fear of God.' Several steps were taken toward bringing God back 'to the centre of national life.'³⁹ For example, the words of the national anthem were changed to begin with 'God,' and church-going became an important trend for public officials. This trend continued into the civilian regime of the Second Republic led by the former Oxford professor and Methodist lay-

³⁴ E. A. Haizel, 'Education in Ghana: 1951 – 1966' in Arhin, *The Life and Work*, 61.

³⁵ E. K. Quashigah, 'Legislating Religious Liberty,' 593.

³⁶ Dickson's efforts to find evidence of such a directive from the then President drew blank; however, it is true that after Independence the name of the department was changed. (See K. A. Dickson, 'Religion and Society', 131).

³⁷ Nkrumah, *Consciencism*, 13.

³⁸ Dovlo, 'Religion in the Public Sphere,' 634.

³⁹ Assimeng, *Salvation*, 6.

preacher, Kofi Busia.⁴⁰ Religion gained considerable significance in public life, but attention was on the mainline traditions to the almost complete exclusion of the newer groups. The military regime, the National Redemption Council (NRC) and the Supreme Military Council (SMC I) that followed Busia's short-lived administration was marked by what Assimeng has described as 'psychological insecurity and extreme superstition.'⁴¹

General Acheampong, the leader of the military junta, had special preference for churches on the fringes of Ghanaian Christianity. Pastors that belonged to these 'fringe groups'⁴² were the frontline players of public affairs in which the government thought there was the need for a religious leader. For example, Bishop Blankson of the Bethany Church was made the Chairman of the University Council of the state University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. In 1977, when there had been a long drought and the crops had failed resulting in a serious famine, there was the usual general feeling of divine displeasure, characteristic of the Deuteronomistic writer of the Old Testament. Most people felt there was the need to seek divine forgiveness and intervention. So a 'National Week of Repentance and Prayer' was proclaimed by the government. For the second time in the history of the nation, an official state religious programme had a preacher from outside the circles of the mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches. It was Rev. Abraham De-Love of the Philadelphia Mission, one of the many religious leaders who stayed close to the corridors of power, who preached the sermon on that occasion. It seems that awareness of non-acceptability of his government by the elite sections of the public, including the mainline churches, compelled the General to court the friendship of religious groups on the fringes who themselves felt marginalized by Churches in the mainstream.

The perceived general collapse of public morality and the failed economic policies caused considerable public frustration that seemed to have fed the rising religious ferment of the times.⁴³ Acheampong's successor, General Akuffo, who led the SMC II government, presented an image of a pious Presbyterian, determined to undo the harm caused by their regime under his predecessor. His reign was so short that it is not easy to assess his attitude toward religion separately from that of his predecessor. The general perception was that he was not going to be effective since he was part of the regime that had caused the mess. By 1979 when Ft. Lt. Rawlings and his Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) burst with the force of a volcano onto the political scene there were many who interpreted their rather extreme approach to justice in terms of divine judgment.

The era of the Third Republic under Dr. Hilla Limann was marked by widespread pessimism, caused by the immediate past experience of the people with regard to the performance of the political leadership. However, underlying this pessimism was a deep ocean of hope and many Ghanaians believed that a fundamental change was possible. Among intellectuals, especially students on the university campuses, many believed that a dramatic change for the better was

⁴⁰ Assimeng, *Salvation*, 6.

⁴¹ Assimeng, *Salvation*, 6.

⁴² J. S. Pobee, *Religion and Politics in Ghana: A Case Study of the Acheampong Era* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1992) 8.

⁴³ It was the era of the non-denominational evangelical Christian fellowships that believers preached the born-again message and maintained that the surest way to national redemption and prosperity lay in the inner transformation of individual citizens. See, Abamfo Atiemo, 'The Evangelical Christian Fellowships and the Charismatisation of Ghanaian Christianity' in *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, 2, (July, 2007).43-65.

imminent. But the path to this change became a matter of contestation between two main groups of intellectuals. There were those who believed that the best path to change was ‘scientific socialism.’ This was in keeping with the general political trend in other parts of Africa. Inspired by the Libyan regime of Gaddafi and the Haile Menghistu revolution in Ethiopia, such young intellectuals advocated a Marxist-Socialist path to national recovery. The second group was made up of ‘born-again’ Christians who believed that evangelical Christianity offered a better remedy to the ills of the nation.⁴⁴ There was a third group that was inclined toward political Islam, but it was not influential for two reasons. First, its support base was insignificant in terms of numbers; secondly, their concerns seemed to have been subsumed under those of the scientific socialism camp. It was made up of a small minority of young Muslim intellectuals, who took interest in studying and propagating ideas from the *Green Book* of the Libyan Revolution.

Against the background described above, the description by Rawlings of his 1981 coup d’état as a ‘Holy War,’⁴⁵ and the popular nick-name ‘Junior Jesus’ he acquired are significant. In those imageries he seemed to have captured the sentiments of the protagonists of all the camps. Actually, attempts were made to enlist the support of the various Christian youth groups in the ‘Holy War.’⁴⁶ An umbrella organization, the positive Christian Movement (POCRIMO), was put together with the aim of mobilizing the support of Christian youth for the revolution. But the attempt failed rather quickly. The confusing signals transmitted through certain events and decisions of the government raised deep suspicions about its intentions and thus, it gradually lost the support of religious constituencies. Among these events were the formation of the Afrikania Mission by Vincent Damuah, a former Roman Catholic priest and a member of the PNDC; the persecution of Christian groups in various parts of the country; the attempt to stifle freedom of religion through the banning of sponsored religious programmes on state radio and television; and the ban on the playing of gospel music on the state radio.

The Afrikania Mission came to be detested by most Christians because of the persistent attacks it made on Christianity in its weekly radio programmes. The consternation Christians felt was underpinned by a sense of betrayal because it was Damuah, who was regarded by many as a moderating influence on the radical government, representing a Christian voice, who had become the severest critic of the Church. A Christian newspaper, *The Believer*, edited by Apostle Barnabas Akrong, a former ally of the regime, led in the hostile response to the Afrikania challenge. The paper described Damuah as ‘the accuser of the brethren.’

Then, in their revolutionary overzealousness, some of the agents of the revolution caused many irritating moments for Christians in several communities. This created the impression that the revolution was anti-Christian. Reports came from several parts of the country about how government operatives had forced Christians to engage in communal work on Sunday mornings instead of gathering for worship. In Kumasi, an attempt by a soldier to interrupt a worship service and get the worshippers to go out and join in a community pot-hole-filling exercise on a

⁴⁴ Atiemo, ‘The Evangelical Fellowships,’ 55.

⁴⁵ Assimeng, *Social Structure of Ghana*, 201.

⁴⁶ An attempt was made to bring together all Christian youth groups under the banner of an organization called Positive Christian Movement (POCRIMO) in which Apostle Barnabas Akrong and Rev Fr. Damuah played pivotal roles. However, the refusal by the mainstream Churches to allow their youth to participate led to the collapse of the movement. Later, when Fr. Damuah formed the Afrikania Mission, Apostle Barnabas fell out with him and became his unrestrained critic.

Sunday morning resulted in the death of several people, including the pastor and a pregnant policewoman, who was a member of the church.⁴⁷

The most far-reaching move that set the government and the Church on a collision course was the passing of the PNDC Law 211, (1989) which, among other things, required all religious groupings in the country to register with the National Commission on Culture (NCC). A Religious Affairs Committee was set up to advise the NCC on the issue. The NCC was to register only groups whose applications had been passed by the Religious Affairs Committee. The information required by the law about any group that applied for registration was rather comprehensive. Section 6 required the following information: a copy of the group's constitution, the names and addresses of its trustees and principal officers, details about the emolument and other benefits of the principal officers, and the location and address of the headquarters of the group. Other information required to accompany an application were: evidence of the numerical strength, specifying male and female populations, evidence of the suitability of the place of worship, a declaration that the places and the mode of worship did not constitute a health or environmental hazard to the members or the general public, and a statement about the social and community involvement apart from evangelistic work or religious programme. Groups were also to furnish the Committee with their statement and intended source of funds.⁴⁸

Section 3 of the Law made it mandatory for 'Every religious body in Ghana' to register within three months 'from the commencement of this Law.' This meant that all religious groups, including the well-established Christian churches, were required by the Law to register. Failure to register was to attract very severe sanctions, which ranged from outright prohibition to confiscation of property to the state. The NCC decision as to whether a group qualified to be accorded the status 'religious' or not was to be final.⁴⁹ There was no provision for appeal to any court. Sections 1(7), 9(3) and 10 left too much power in the hands of the NCC; especially as the definition of a 'religious body' in the Law was vague and open to arbitrary interpretations.⁵⁰ In a memorandum submitted to the government by religious leaders, a request was made for a clear interpretation of what the term, 'Religious Body,' included.⁵¹ Section 20 defined 'religious body' as

- any association of persons, or body or organization –
- (a) Which professes adherence to or belief in any system of faith or worship; or
 - (b) Which is established in pursuance of a religious objective.

It was the NCC which was to determine whether a group had been 'established in pursuance of a religious objective' or not. The fear of possible arbitrary interpretation of the Law was not a mere academic question. Within the political and social climate of the period, such fears were

⁴⁷ Mike Oquaye, *Politics in Ghana: 1982 – 1992*(New Delhi: Thompson's Press, 2004) 412 -414.

⁴⁸ *P.N.D.C.L. 221. Religious Bodies (Registration) Law, 1989,*

⁴⁹ Section 1(7).

⁵⁰ As pointed out in Chapter one of the present work, definitions of religion for legal and administrative purposes tend to be broad in order to ensure maximum level of inclusion. The definition offered by PNDC Law 221, is broad enough to take on board most groups that claim the tag religion. However since the decision of whether a group qualifies as 'religious' or not was left in the hands of the commission in absolute terms, there was a high probability of arbitrariness in the application of the law.

⁵¹ Memorandum submitted by the Christian Council and the Catholic Bishops Conference to the PNDC Government through Mr. Justice D. F. Annan, PNDC member, dated 2nd October, 1989.

real. As soon as the Law was announced, the government suspended the activities of two foreign religious bodies: the Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), better known as the Mormons. They also disbanded two indigenous religious movements: the *Nyame Sompā* Church of Ekwam-krom and the Jesus Christ Church of Dzorwulu in Accra. They were described as 'sects,' and were accused of crimes that were clearly unsubstantiated. The indigenous groups were said to have been engaged in indecent forms of worship; while the JWs were accused of unpatriotic behaviours. The LDS suffered apparently on the basis of suspicion and alleged misdeeds in countries where they had been before coming to Ghana. It is clear also that public sentiments against these bodies played an important role in influencing the decision of the government. One of the official reasons given for the promulgation of the law was to protect the public from 'too many bogus churches' and to control corruption.⁵²

The law, as should be expected, attracted resistance, especially, from the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCBC) and the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG).⁵³ Churches affiliated to these organizations refused to register, maintaining that the law directly contravened the freedom of religion enshrined in the UDHR.⁵⁴ The religious leaders were not happy about placing a tool in the hands of the government by which it could easily control 'the activities of all the religious bodies, and especially Churches.'⁵⁵ In a joint Pastoral Letter to their members, the two bodies reported the steps that had been taken on their behalf since the announcement of the Law. They included copies of letters sent to the Government and reports of their meetings with representatives of the government. In that letter, they expressed concern about reports that some people were already interpreting the law in their own way and, on that basis, harassing congregations.⁵⁶

After some time, the negotiations between the government and the religious bodies discontinued and the law remained in the statute books until 1992, when a new constitution with strong human rights provisions was promulgated. However, during the whole of that period when the law was deemed to be in force, the GCBC and the CCG continued to defy it by refusing to allow their members to register; and the government had to tacitly suspend the enforcement of the law by keeping quiet over the churches' refusal to cooperate.⁵⁷ The insistence on the right to freedom of religion by the religious bodies was typical of the mainline churches in Ghana. They have always been in the forefront of resistance against misrule and human rights abuses by governments. As early as 1968, Geoffrey Bing, a former colonial official who also served in the Nkrumah government, wrote about Christianity in Ghana,

Christianity as a religion of revolt is so remote from European conception that its impact on Africa often goes unnoticed. Yet, it was the non-denominational Christian rather than the Marxist who had provided much of the ideology for the anti-colonialism of the previous generation.⁵⁸

⁵² *News from Africa Watch*, (May 18, 1990).

⁵³ Assimeng, *Social Structure*, 70.

⁵⁴ Dovlo, 'Religion in the Public Sphere,' 629.

⁵⁵ Dovlo, 'Religion in the Public Sphere,' 629.

⁵⁶ Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Christian Council of Ghana: *Pastoral Letter* (October, 1989) 8.

⁵⁷ Quashigah, 'Legislating Religious Liberty,' 595.

⁵⁸ Bing, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 125.

Although Bing was referring specifically to how Christianity aided the anti-colonial movement by supplying most of the ideas for the articulation of the aspirations of the people for independence in that era, the idea that religion plays such a role is still true in the recent history of the country.

5.4 The Contemporary Religious Scene

The vibrancy of the religious scene in Ghana is indicative of the central place religion occupies in the consciousness of the people. This relatively small country of about twenty-two million people presents a kaleidoscope of several different religious manifestations, all of which, to different degrees, have affected the way people attempt to understand and relate to the world around them. According to the final report of the 2000 population census, there is hardly any Ghanaian who does not profess some form of religious belief. Only 6.1% of the population claim to belong to no religion; 69.8% claim to be Christian; 15.9% Islam; 8.5% African traditional religions; and 0.7% belong to other religions.

Thus, majority of Ghanaians consciously identify with one religious tradition or another. Nevertheless, the importance of religion in Ghana does not only lie in its demographic distribution but also in its private and public influence. Therefore, religion in Ghana is not only important because of the number of citizens that claim religious adherence but also because of its intense manifestation in the daily lives of the people and the extent of the impact of its ideas.

Religious activities are among the deepest and the most manifest passions of Ghanaian people. Both in the city and in the village, Ghanaians demonstrate a religious consciousness that suffuses their entire life. Most public and private events are turned into religious ones or, at least, are accompanied by some form of religious activity. This is not in reference only to the elements of religion contained in the daily activities of the people that are carried out as a matter of custom.⁵⁹ It is also in reference to the other versions of such practices that have continued into the more modern religions such as Islam and Christianity. For example, in many workplaces, both public and private, there are regular times of prayer before the start of work or during break time once or twice every week. In a recent survey conducted by the 'Religion in Ghana' class of the University of Ghana, it was discovered that work place Christian fellowships that were so common in the 1970s⁶⁰ have re-emerged. In some of these workplaces, the Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) were regular participants in the prayer meetings.

When businesses seem to suffer slumps, religious functionaries such as pastors or evangelists or *malams*⁶¹ are invited to offer divine help. The case of the defunct Ghana Airways is the most well-known example of this practice in recent times.⁶² On the campuses of the various public universities, religious activities take much of students' time. Gardens and open spaces such as parks turn into prayer grounds in the night and at dawn. At the University of Ghana, prayer

⁵⁹ As examples, we may cite traditional practices such as seeking protection from the gods and ancestors at the start of an undertaking such as a journey, the building of a new house, the cultivation land, and marriage and in the time of illness or some other crisis.

⁶⁰ Abamfo Atiemo, 'The Evangelical Fellowships,' 47.

⁶¹ *Malam* is a corruption of *mu'alim*, 'teacher'. In West Africa the *Malam* is not only a teacher but, most importantly, a ritual specialist who performs magico-religious services for people, often for a fee.

⁶² See report by Kwaku Sakyi-Addo, 'Ghana Airways Seeks Divine Intervention,' <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2978026.stm> (June 30, 2003).

activities increase during examinations period. Sometimes, they set in motion what they call 'prayer chains.' This is an arrangement in which students offer a fraction of their time each day to be praying in turns during the examination period. Usually, students who are not writing examinations at a particular time pray for their friends as they write.

Prayer and other religious activities in Ghana are not simply a means to enhance one's spiritual life; they are, in the first place, a means to achieve material ends such as health and healing, good marriage, guidance in life's pursuits, success and protection. The belief is widespread that success in life in general and in specific endeavours may be attained more easily with the aid of benign and powerful spiritual forces. Life in this world is believed to be filled with several hidden and threatening dangers of which people ought to be mindful in order to avoid or overcome them. This is captured in the popular maxim *wiase yâ hu* (the world is full of mysteries).

In times of crisis, especially when there is a perception of an emergency situation, such as illness or when one or one's relative is in trouble with the law or threatened with the loss of job or faced with the prospect of public shame, Ghanaians characteristically, do not mind going outside their normal range of religious activity in search of spiritual assistance. If necessary, people resort to religious functionaries with a reputation for spiritual power such as prophets, *malams*, priests, or diviners, outside their normal religious traditions. This means the Ghanaian religious scene is characterized by a high level of clientele behaviour. People go to seek divine help where it may be found without necessarily becoming members of the helpers' religious group or tradition.⁶³ In several cases, once people achieve their aim, their relationship with the functionary or the group seldom continues.

An important factor that makes this kind of religious behaviour possible is the belief that the real arena where issues of life are settled is the spiritual realm. It is this belief that underlies the attitudes and practices of the phenomenon which Paul Gifford describes as 'Ghana's New Christianity.'⁶⁴ Although Gifford deals mainly with aspects of contemporary Ghanaian Christianity, the core element he identifies goes beyond the aspect of Christianity that he studies. The belief that spiritual favour or disfavour determines the success or failure of nations and individuals is an important feature of religion in contemporary Ghana, especially at the popular level.

5.4.1 Institutional level religion and popular level religion

Usually religion manifests at two levels in societies: the formal institutional and the popular. Religion manifests at the institutional level in the form of well-established groups, whose long existence has led to clearly recognised structures, well-defined doctrines and conventional ways

⁶³ These functionaries that are consulted may be found in any tradition, including the established religious bodies such as the leading mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic or Pentecostal churches. In his book, appropriately titled, *Pentecost outside Pentecostalism*, Cephas Omenyo reports about the presence of prophets, healers, and exorcists or deliverance ministers in the Roman Catholic and the mainline Protestant Churches. He also reports about the activities of Prayer and Healing Camps that form part of the Charismatic renewal in those Churches. See Cephas N. Omenyo, *Pentecost Outside Pentecostalism: A Study of the Development of Charismatic Renewal in the Mainline Churches in Ghana* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Publishing House, 2006) 2231 -237.

⁶⁴ Paul Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004).

of doing things. In the Ghanaian context, these include denominations of the various religious traditions in the form of churches, mosques and traditional shrines.

Religion at the institutional level has been influential in several important ways in Ghana since pre-colonial and colonial times. With their well-organised administrative structures, religious institutions, especially the mainline churches,⁶⁵ have an almost ubiquitous presence in the country. In many cases, they collaborate with government to provide social amenities such as schools, healthcare delivery institutions and agricultural extension services. But they have also consistently been central players in keeping civil society alive. They have contributed in several important ways to carving out and protecting a critical space for civil society in the public sphere. They have always put up fierce resistance to attempts by the state to ‘encroach on the public space for civil society.’⁶⁶ At the national level, Muslim organisations often collaborate with Christian ecumenical bodies to play such important roles. The significance of institutional religion to the nurturing of a human rights culture in Ghana is immense.⁶⁷ This constitutes one form of ‘spiritual capital.’ However, it does not represent the major focus of this work. Our primary concern is with another form of ‘spiritual capital’ which consists in the manifestation of religion at the popular level. Yet, popular religion as a phenomenon in Ghana is not altogether unrelated to institutional religion.⁶⁸

Religion at the popular level or ‘popular religion’ is not easy to define.⁶⁹ The temptation into which many have fallen is to define ‘popular religion’ in terms of the socio-economic status of the people involved in it. This trend has been noted by Pace among Italian scholars who see popular religiosity as a ‘class phenomenon which most especially involves subaltern classes and most predominantly, though not exclusively, agricultural classes.’⁷⁰ Levine, speaking from the Latin American context, confirms Pace’s observation, when he points out that a ‘focus on the poor’ seems to recur in all the case studies that engage the concept of ‘popular religion.’⁷¹ However, such definitions that have carried with them the derogatory connotations of the religion of the ‘marginalised,’ of the superstitions of the ‘common’ illiterate mass of believers as

⁶⁵ These are the Churches that Pobebe refers to as, ‘Historic Churches.’ See J. S. Pobebe, *Kwame Nkrumah and the Church in Ghana: 1949 – 1966*, (Accra Asempa Publishers, 1988) 54.

⁶⁶ Prof E. Gyimah-Boadi, Executive Director of the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development- CDD-Ghana catalogues the contributions of the Church to the building of civil society in Ghana. (E. Gyimah-Boadi, ‘Civil Society and National Development.’ Remarks at a Symposium on *The Church and the State as Development Partners*, organized by the KNUST Chaplaincy to Mark its 40th Anniversary, October 13, 2006).

⁶⁷ Donald I. Ray, *Ghana: Politics, Economics and Society* (London: Frances Printer, 1986) 32; see also Kwame Ninsin, *Ghana’s Political Transition, 1990 – 1993: Selected Documents* (Accra: Freedom Publications, 1996) 38 - 53; Mike Ocuquaye, *Politics in Ghana: 1982 – 1992* (New Delhi: Thompson Press, 2004) 413ff.

⁶⁸ Moreover, several scholars have dealt with the direct contributions of these Churches to the development of democracy and human rights in Ghana. Pobebe’s two books, *Kwame Nkrumah and the Church in Ghana* and *Religion and Politics in Ghana*, for example, deal comprehensively with such issues. Then also, several works of more recent origin, including, Mike Ocuquaye’s *Politics in Ghana*, Kwame Ninsin’s *Ghana’s Political Transition* touch on the subject.

⁶⁹ For a more in-depth discussion of definitional issues, see Jacques Berlinerblau, ‘Max Weber’s Useful Ambiguities and the Problem of Defining “Popular Religion”’ *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, 69/3, (September, 2001) 605 – 626.

⁷⁰ Enzo Pace, ‘The Debate on Popular Religion in Italy.’ In *The Sociological Analysis* 40, (1979) 73.

⁷¹ Daniel Levine, ‘Religion, the Poor, and Politics in Latin America Today.’ In Daniel Levine (ed.) *Religion and Political Conflict in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 4.

against what is 'rational,' 'proper,' 'true' and 'orthodox'⁷² have raised doubts about the validity of 'popular religion' as an analytical category in the study of religion.

Usually, these derogatory descriptions are seen as polemical categories employed by the powerful to depreciate the religion of the weak segments of the society.⁷³ Thus, 'popular religion' as analytical category in the study of religion has not always enjoyed respectable acceptance.⁷⁴ Research works that focused on it have been described as 'at best irrelevant and at worst reprehensible.'⁷⁵ Indeed it has been suggested that 'the term popular religion...has no explanatory value and must be cancelled...for the study of non-Christian religions.'⁷⁶

But popular religion in contemporary Ghana cannot be said to be predominantly the domain of the poor and the underprivileged. This is because in the Ghanaian context there are many affluent, well-educated and highly placed people who share in the beliefs, practices and behaviours that constitute the realm of 'popular religion.' For the purposes of this work, therefore, 'popular religion' refers to the cluster of beliefs, attitudes, and practices exhibited in the lives of religious people, normally at the unofficial level, but which sometimes intrude also into expressions of piety at the official level. It is the manifestation of religious faith at the informal, unofficial level. The ideas, beliefs and practices associated with popular religion are normally different from the official, well thought-out and clearly-articulated creeds of the official streams of religious traditions. From the European context, Ellen Badone comes up with a similar definition, although, almost all the contributions in the book she edited on the subject focus on the socio-economic status of those involved.⁷⁷ From her point of view, 'popular religion' refers to those 'informal, unofficial practices, beliefs, and styles of religious expression that lack the formal sanction of established church structures.'⁷⁸

The question about whether the realm of 'popular religion' is predominantly populated by the poor and the vulnerable is not a simple one to decide, particularly with respect to societies in a transitional stage between tradition and modernity such as Ghana. In such places the persistence of strong kinship connections continues to nourish filial feelings and blurs social class differentiations. Indeed, when socio-economic differentiations began to emerge alongside the growth of strong individual consciousness in the rudimentary capitalist economy of the first part of the twentieth century, both the high and low in southern Ghana communities were joined together in the same type of popular religious devotion.⁷⁹ Developments that occurred in that period on the religious front laid the foundation upon which later phenomena such as African

⁷² P. H. Vrijhof, 'Conclusion' in P.H. Vrijhof and J. D.J. Waardenburg (eds.) *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies* (Paris/The Hague: Mouton, 1979) 691.

⁷³ Manuel Mejido, 'The illusion of Neutrality: Reflections on the Term "Popular Religion"' in *Social Compass*, 49/2 (2002) 295 – 311.

⁷⁴ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 16.

⁷⁵ Peter Williams, *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 6.

⁷⁶ Vrijhof, 'Conclusion,' 682.

⁷⁷ Berlinerblau, 'Max Weber's Useful Ambiguities,' 615.

⁷⁸ Ellen Badone, 'Introduction' in Ellen Badone (ed.) *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 4.

⁷⁹ Bing, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 128-9.

manifestations of the so-called world religions, and especially the various forms of Pentecostalism, built. It was the new forms of indigenous devotion, expressed most clearly in the ethos of the ‘new shrines,’⁸⁰ that provided the much needed psycho-social stability, which neither missionary Christianity nor the colonial government showed any competence in handling.

The approach adopted by these shrines concentrated much energy on dealing with beliefs in witchcraft and evil ‘medicine,’ and sought to revive indigenous juridical and arbitration systems. In that context, being rich or poor, male or female, or high or low in society was secondary to matters of devotion, especially in relation to existential issues such as protection from spiritual harm, which also had consequences for life in the material world. William Christian Jr. takes a similar view about religion in seventeenth century Spanish society:

I do not think devotion *per se* was a matter of wealth or social class. In the early seventeenth century poor and wealthy peasants alike in the villages in Toledo had a number of religious pictures on their walls. Indeed, joint religious devotions probably helped hold communities together in the face of wracking disparities of wealth and opportunity.⁸¹

The rise of the new shrines had implications for issues such as the role of religion in the growth of a radical sense of individual autonomy in Ghana, and the central importance of spiritual power in dealing with issues of politics and of the administration of justice, which have direct significance for the discussion of human rights. However, the study shall return to properly locate popular religion in Ghana and to discuss these shrines and their relevance to the research subject.

In Ghana, distinctions based on wealth, class or intellectual status with respect to religious devotion are not the norm. In the realm of popular religion, persons of all socio-economic backgrounds are found, though, in certain cases, it is possible to determine the class of those people predominantly attracted to specific aspects of ‘popular religion.’⁸² Yet in the main, it can be observed that the range of people subscribing to popular streams of religion in Ghana cuts across the various religious denominations and socio-economic classes. As with popular cultures, ‘popular religion’ in Ghana does not present itself to us in a single homogenous package. There are many different strands. For example, it is possible to talk about ‘popular Islam’ and ‘popular Christianity.’ It is also possible to find a particular group of people attracted to specific aspects of popular religion and rejecting others. But the common underlying worldview of the various strands of religious expression is the spiritual universe that encompasses the material world and where causal explanations of events in life are located.

Popular religion in Ghana has evolved from attempts by ordinary people to connect with, and draw power from the spiritual realm so as to live better in the context of everyday experiences of

⁸⁰ These shrines have been referred to variously as, ‘new cults,’ ‘new shrines,’ ‘medicine-drinking shrines,’ ‘anti-witchcraft shrines,’ or ‘witchcraft detecting shrines.’

⁸¹ William Christian Jr., *Local Religion in the Seventeenth –Century Spain*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) 147.

⁸² Cephas N. Omenyo and Abamfo O. Atiemo, ‘Creating Space: The Case of Neo-Propheticism in Ghana,’ *Ghana Bulletin of Theology*, N.S. 1/1 (July, 2006) 56.

the swinging fortunes of life. This process has been affected in an in-depth manner by the historical context of religious pluralism, which has been characteristic of most communities in Ghana. Most of the concerns that feature in popular religion are ignored or not tolerated at the official, formal level, though, as observed earlier, some of these elements eventually pass on into the official stream.

Elements of 'popular religion' in Ghana include beliefs and practices such as faith-healing, demon-/ spirit-possession and exorcism, and communication with the spirit world. It manifests in the proliferation of healing camps across the country; and in the recourse to 'holy people' – prophets/prophetesses, healers, and spiritual guides – to find solutions to life's problems. In normal circumstances, people will mostly visit centres and holy persons of their own traditions for help; that is, Muslims would feel most comfortable receiving spiritual help from a Muslim 'holy person' and Christians would feel likewise receiving help from a Christian 'holy person.' However, as already observed, in emergency situations, many Ghanaians would not mind going outside their normal range of religious activities if they perceive that there is the possibility of obtaining help there. In most cases, people have no worries receiving spiritual help from a different source because the help they receive always comes in recognisable currency. Although the contents of procedures employed to give or receive spiritual help may differ depending upon the background of the functionaries involved, the goals they aim at and their understanding of reality are not dissimilar.

5.4.2 Popular religion, religious discourse and the public sphere in Ghana

Conventional social science theory explains religious revitalization in Africa as an attempt to cope with the anxieties imposed by changes driven by the forces of modernity. Field,⁸³ Ward,⁸⁴ and Douglas,⁸⁵ have all given such an interpretation, which is persistently repeated. However, the African experience reveals religion as a phenomenon that is more than a reactive mechanism to crisis situations. It has been an important factor in social change. It has prompted changes in thought-patterns; provided new perspectives on fundamental issues of ultimate concern; generated alterations in existing worldviews; and provided new ideas and expressions that have challenged, or at least, shaken the older order. In some cases, it has also led to the permanent or temporary realignment of significant social and cultural forces.⁸⁶

While it would be futile to attempt to deny the historically observable pattern of religious revitalization at important crisis points,⁸⁷ it is also too simplistic and narrow to see religious revitalization in Ghana as largely the result of individual and social dislocation. Religion in Ghana is at the core of individual and collective identity.⁸⁸ In most cases, revivals do not occur

⁸³ M. J. Field, 'Some New Shrines of the Gold Coast and their Significance' *Africa* 13/2 (1940) 141.

⁸⁴ Barbara C. Ward, 'Some Observations on Religious Cults in Ashanti,' *Africa* 1, (1956) 55.

⁸⁵ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) 128-9.

⁸⁶ See William B. Harvey, *Law and Social Change in Ghana* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966) 352 – 353; See also Assimeng, *Foundations*, 41.

⁸⁷ C.G. Baeta, *Prophetism in Ghana* (London: SCM, 1962) 6.

⁸⁸ Religious identity becomes important in several situations at the national level and the state manages the tensions and potential conflicts by recognizing the various traditions in aspects of national policy. For example, the various religious traditions are represented on some statutory bodies such as the Council of State and National Media Commission. Perhaps the most important evidence of how seriously Ghanaians take their religious identities is the

primarily because people want to solve a non-religious problem; they occur to protect or rework the plausibility of core beliefs and values when they come under strain. Invariably, such beliefs and values are interrelated with most other aspects of life, which are conceptually regarded as non-religious in conventional scholarship but which, from the point of view of several African societies are simply part of the overall experience of life.

The rise and growth of new religious movements within established traditions are necessarily related to other factors in their context. However, the 'new shrines' that arose and proliferated in Ghana between the 1920s and the 1960s seemed to have arisen to provide new outlets for the expression of indigenous beliefs and not mainly as a 'search for security' prompted by new conditions, as scholars like Field seem to suggest.⁸⁹ In response to Field, Jack Goody has argued that the rise of renewal movements is not a new phenomenon in religious traditions and that there is evidence that British colonialism brought a greater sense of security and not less.⁹⁰ In that sense, a conclusion such as the 'search for security' thesis of Field becomes only partially true. There was very little that was new in the attitude that Field and others observed about the behaviour of Ghanaians in relation to the new shrines. Religion has always been viewed by Ghanaians as having a utility value. What was new was the strain suffered by the indigenous religious traditions because of attacks on them by Christian proselytisers and other forces of modernity.

The fact is that Ghanaians have not divorced religion from public discourse; it is not seen as a necessary option to pursue, though in recent times, government policy on religious and moral education in the new educational reforms has pointed in that direction. However, public reaction to the proposal led to a presidential directive to shelve it. Religious beliefs in Ghana are not a matter of purely personal concerns; they are always part of the issues debated on in public. Conversely, other public matters, such as politics, the economy, health and education are subjects of religious discourse.⁹¹ 'Popular religion' enables wider participation in public political and social discourse in Ghana. It supplies a language of discourse that is easy for most people to identify with. In the public sphere, it contributes concepts that feature in everyday discourse, concepts that are shared across the religious, cultural and social divides of the country, thus providing a common idiom for public discourse. These concepts such as God, Satan, devil, evil spirits, witches, righteousness, forgiveness, reconciliation and transformation appear frequently in public discussions, especially in radio phone-in programmes.

Scholars have already noted how the pre-independence nationalists drew on Christian ideas to push forward their agenda. It was more a matter of ideas than institutional involvement in politics or even civil society, though this was not lacking. Kwame Nkumah especially drew the people to his side, largely because he made creative use of religious language and imagery. As Botwe-Asamoah explains,

disputations that broke out after the announcement of the provisional results of the 2000 Population and Housing Census.

⁸⁹ M.J. Field, *Search for Security: An Ethno-Psychiatric Study of Rural Ghana* (New York, 1970) 87.

⁹⁰ Jack Goody, 'Anomie and Ashanti' *Africa* 4, (1957).

⁹¹ Public commentators on issues – economics, politics, law and education – include those who argue from the religious and moral angles. These include, in some cases, politicians and technocrats. Then also, public prayer meetings held monthly by groups such as the Women Aglow Fellowship and often telecast on national television focus on current topics in the public domain.

Nkrumah's skilful use of the creative culture and folk wisdom...., his use of white handkerchief, horsetail, and a walking stick, for instance, was in keeping with the secular and religious roles of the traditional kings and queens. This was consistent with the authority of the traditional African priest.⁹²

A statement by Pobee clinches the argument for us, 'He (Nkrumah) created a sacral basis of authority by a certain symbolic claim to royalty.'⁹³ As is obvious from Botwe-Asamoah's passage cited above, Nkrumah, in a new era, employed religious ideas and imagery drawn from both the indigenous religion and from Christianity. This is understandable. His era was the era of new forms of indigenous Christian faith expressions that were, largely, a synthesis⁹⁴ of Christian and traditional spiritualities. Nkrumah not only patterned his style after chiefs and priests of the traditional religion; his style was also close to aspects of the then emerging African Independent Church (AIC) prophets. All these were motifs that most Ghanaians could easily identify with.

5.4.3 Religious discourse and the development of the autonomous individual

The evidence of the power of religion in public discourse in Ghana goes beyond the symbolic use of religious motifs by politicians. A fundamental development, partly engendered and nourished by religious discourse, and which has had an irreversible impact on Ghana's political and social life, is the growth of a radical sense of the autonomous individual. This development carried with it revolutionary changes in people's attitudes toward kinship networks, relations of subjects to their chiefs, and attitudes towards economic and labour issues. According to Kimble, for example, Christianity liberated the individual.⁹⁵ That is, in preaching the gospel, which addresses the individual's personal responsibility before God for their own actions, Christianity made people to gradually develop a conscience that was more and more individualistic rather than collective.

Thus, the idea that every individual will appear before God to answer for their deeds caused individuals to begin to focus more on themselves and not so much on the community in certain matters of moral choice. This, plus the basic message that Jesus died for all but his salvation is only for those who believe, followed by a call to decision, practically expressed in the personal submission of oneself for baptism, promoted and contributed significantly to the strengthening of the sense of individual autonomy.⁹⁶

Factors that sustained the growth of such an individualistic consciousness were many. First, the traditional societies in Ghana already had deep-seated individualistic orientations. In fact, the widely held view that African traditional societies were deeply communal is an overstatement; much of it is more an invention by scholars than a fact borne out of historical evidence. The Akan, for example, as portrayed in reliable historical records have been fiercely individualistic;

⁹² Kwame Botwe-Asamoah, *Kwame Nkrumah's Politico-Cultural Thought and Policies: An African Centred Paradigm for the Second Phase of the African Revolution*(New York/London: Routledge, 2005), p. 152

⁹³ Pobee, *Religion and Politics*, p.33

⁹⁴ This was the reason for the term, 'syncretistic' employed by certain scholars to describe those churches.

⁹⁵ David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 66

⁹⁶ Assimeng, *Social Structure*, 60.

having a natural tendency toward competition, they are soundly capitalistic⁹⁷ and militaristic, shrewd enough to take advantage of new trends such as the use of firearms.⁹⁸ In their encounter with Western Europeans, Akans exhibited tendencies that showed clear marks of individualism. The Coussey Committee which was set up by the colonial government to make recommendations for constitutional reforms⁹⁹ emphasised this tendency toward individualism in its report, describing the Ghanaian as ‘a born individualist’ who by nature is ‘intolerant of dictatorial methods in any form.’¹⁰⁰ With such a background, it was easy for the radical individualism of the West that formed part of the socio-cultural paraphernalia of the Christianising and civilizing agents of the colonial powers to take roots.

Secondly, the substitution of Christian burial for the traditional one made it possible for people to ignore certain fundamental demands of the traditional community upon them. In Ghanaian traditional communities, one sanction that people dreaded was for their ‘dead body’ to be disgraced.¹⁰¹ Those who committed grievous offences against the community were denied all the honour normally accorded people when they died. Those who behaved in ways that separated them from their extended family unit, called *abusua* by the Akan, were also disowned on their death. To die and not have a family (*abusua*) to accord your body a proper burial was the ultimate disgrace. The implication of the Church’s take-over of the burial of its members for the harmony of the traditional societies in such a context is obvious. Subjects who rebelled against their chiefs and disregarded customary norms took refuge in the Church.¹⁰²

Thirdly, Western education that accompanied the missionary enterprise produced an educated elite that led in the articulation of the people’s aspirations.¹⁰³ Some of these stood against some traditional cultural practices and advocated the establishment of liberal democratic institutions.¹⁰⁴ Fourthly, there were seeds of the idea of individual autonomy already existing in the traditional culture. Belief in entities such as the *okra* which upon a person’s death returns to God was easy to connect with the Christian idea of the soul that would appear before the judgement seat of God. Certain traditional proverbs and maxims also supported the growth of individual consciousness. A few examples will suffice. *Eso ro obiara na ne nkrabea* (the destiny of one person is different from that of another). *Nkrabea*, roughly translated, destiny, is an important Akan concept. According to Akan traditions, each person, before they receive their soul from

⁹⁷ See Kwame Arhin, ‘Some Asante Views on Colonial Rule: As seen in the Controversy Relating to Death duties’ *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* XVI/2 New Series 1, (January, 1995) 157. ‘A Note on the Asante *Akonkofo*,’ 26-31.

⁹⁸ S. Tenkorang, ‘The Importance of Firearms in the Struggle between Ashanti and the Coastal States’ in *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, IX, (1968) 1-16.

⁹⁹ Boahen, *Ghana: Evolution*, 163-165; Harvey, *Law and Social Change*, 18.

¹⁰⁰ J. B. Danquah, ‘Obligation in Akan Society’ in *West African Affairs* 8 (published by Bureau of Current Affairs, 1952), 14.

¹⁰¹ Peter Sarpong, *Ghana in Retrospect: Some Aspects of Ghanaian Culture* (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1974) 26-28.

¹⁰² The case of the Methodists converts in Mankesim who provoked the Mfantse people to anger by farming in the sacred forest of *Nananom Mpôw*, see Claridge, *A History*, 466-473.

¹⁰³ Assimeng, *Foundations*, 41.

¹⁰⁴ Arhin, ‘Some Asante Views,’ 157-158.

God and come into the world, would be given their *nkrabea*, which determines a person's life.¹⁰⁵ So the proverb simply means that you do not have to worry so much about other people with regard to certain activities in life since each person has their own destiny. Another proverb to consider states: *abusua te sE kwae, wow□ akyiri a wo hu no sE Ebom nanso sE wo bEn ho a na wobehu sE wosisi nkorkor* (the extended family unit is like the forest; from a distance, all the trees look like one tree, but when you get closer, you discover that each tree stands on its own). The lesson is clear: though the extended family may seem as one unit, each individual within the unit is ultimately responsible for their personal welfare.

The sixth factor that nurtured and sustained the growth of individualism in Ghana was the transformation of the economy with its accompanying rise of urban towns. In Chapter 3, we mentioned the rise of urban centres such as Atebubu, Salaga and Tamale in the north; and then, on the coast towns such as Elmina, Accra and Cape Coast which were basically trading centres. In these areas, people learned new ideas and new ways of doing things. Settlers had to find new ways of doing old things like naming newly born babies and burying their dead away from their traditional communities and homes. Through trading and new forms of labour, commoners became rich and wanted freedom to enjoy their wealth. Such people naturally looked for ways to protect their wealth from encroachment by the traditional authority. The case of the *akonkofo* and the educated elite in Asante, which we mentioned in chapter three, illustrates our point. It was they who led in the agitation for change in the customary powers of chiefs and the establishment of a strong British colonial government in a united country made up of Asante and the colonies.

The seventh and last factor identified is also the most important namely, the power of the colonial government. The support the government and missionaries gave to African converts to Christianity in cases of conflict with the traditional rulers and the communities strengthened the individual's sense of independence. This, for example, was the case with the Methodist converts in Mankesim.¹⁰⁶ In the case of Asante, it was after the extension of colonial rule that individuals, including the new elites, were able to assert their independence.¹⁰⁷ This development had consequences, both for the colonialists and for the traditional political set-up. It combined with other factors to undermine the authority of chiefs and sowed the seeds of the anti-colonial struggle. Subsequently, the youth regarded the traditional set-up as outmoded and yearned for a more open and democratic society.¹⁰⁸

Colonial policy from 1930 onwards made witchcraft accusations illegal and took away the power of the chiefs to try cases involving witchcraft accusations.¹⁰⁹ The period was characterised by weak traditional institutions that had obviously spent themselves out. The forces of the Christian

¹⁰⁵ See Elizabeth Amoah, 'Concepts of Destiny: Nkrabea and Man's Moral Responsibility,' (PhD Thes., submitted to the Department for the Study of Religions, University of Ghana, Legon, 1974) 37 -38.

¹⁰⁶ J. B. Crayner, *Akweesi Egu Nananom Mpow* (Accra: Bureau of Ghana Languages, 1967); see also Claridge, *History*, 469 – 473.

¹⁰⁷ Arhin, 'A Note on the Asante Akonkofo' 26 -31.

¹⁰⁸ It was the youth generally that supported Kwame Nkrumah's radical anti-colonial struggle that seized the initiative from the conservative leadership of the mass nationalist movement, the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC). See John Pobee, *Kwame Nkrumah and the Church in Ghana; 1949-1966*(Accra: Asempa, 1988) 20 – 21.

¹⁰⁹ The Native Customs (witch and wizard finding) Order –in- Council no.28, 1930. (National Archive of Ghana, ADM 11/1/886, 'Witchcraft – Persecution of Persons Accused of.'

religion had seriously weakened chieftaincy and its related institutions, by modernity and by inconsistencies in the British colonial policy toward them. There was an increase in people's awareness of themselves as autonomous individuals who, in certain cases, could stand up against the community or even the chief. For example, a subject could bring the chief of his town to the court of the British Colonial officer.¹¹⁰ This general loss of influence of traditional institutions also affected the indigenous belief systems.

It was in those circumstances that the proliferation of 'new shrines,' already mentioned above, took place. They represented a renewal of the indigenous belief systems. In the situation of a rising sense of radical individualism and the loss of vitality of the traditional religion under a nascent capitalist system, the indigenous religious tradition repackaged itself in the form of 'new shrines' and moved quickly to recapture its own credibility and the plausibility of aspects of its core beliefs and values. They also formed a friendly corridor of shallow waters through which distressed Ghanaian societies at the time escaped to safety from the deep oceans of spiritual and psychological confusion that threatened to overwhelm them. The loss of plausibility of aspects of traditional belief systems left them vulnerable to harmful powers of the spirit-world with no adequate alternative means of protection and deliverance.

By their creative practices they directly and indirectly addressed several of the problems of the time. First they reinforced the emerging sense of radical individual autonomy but with a sense of community responsibility. This was done by their method of initiation. The voluntary decision to submit to the initiation ceremony was similar in concept to certain aspects of Christian baptism. It involved the individual's private and voluntary decision to enter into a covenant with a deity, and to commit him/herself to obeying a specific set of moral laws. They also organised their own burial services for their deceased members and made their members pay voluntary weekly dues. Nevertheless, the shrines also represented an attempt to re-establish a new sense of community and to renew the society's sense of morality.¹¹¹ This was evidenced by people's readiness to go through the initiation ceremonies and submit themselves to the rigorous laws, which carried rather frightening sanctions.¹¹²

A study of these laws reveals insights that underscore the theme of a renewal of the sense of community and morality. To illustrate this point, these laws of *Tigare*, the most popular of the shrines, may be considered: 1) 'Do not show disrespect to the chief of your town/village;' 2) 'Do not walk past a neighbour's farm without weeding a little.' It is obvious that the first one was an attempt to save the chiefs from completely losing their respect in the eyes of their subjects. The second was aimed at restoring the practice of mutual assistance, a long-standing practice in rural societies by way of which people were able to clear land for farming so that there was no need

¹¹⁰ R. Addo-Fening, 'The Native Jurisdiction Ordinance, Indirect Rule and the Subject's Well-being: The Abuakwa Experience: c. 1889 -1912' *Research Review NS*, 6/2 (1990) 30 -32.

¹¹¹ Natasha Gray, 'Witches, Oracles, and Colonial Law: Evolving Anti-Witchcraft Practices in Ghana, 1927-1932.' *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 34/2 (2001) 342.

¹¹² Each of the laws of these shrines was followed by a reminder of the sanctions if they were contravened; and it was almost always, 'death.'

for hired labour. In the then emerging capitalist economy, it was becoming difficult for those without sufficient money to clear their land for farming, hence the social relevance of this law.

5.4.4 *The new shrines as protest movements*

The shrines also represented a certain form of protest. Their polemic against Christianity seemed to have been considerably successful.¹¹³ They accused Christianity of corrupting morality by preaching a judgement that was pushed to the end of the world. They claimed that this aspect of Christian teaching was responsible for the increase in crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour. They explained that their own gods were swift in judgement, thus deterring potential criminals and miscreants in society. One law that illustrates their resentment for the colonialists and the presence of other foreign interests in the country is the *Tigare* law forbidding stealing: ‘you must not steal;’ but then the unspoken aspect of that prohibition was that it did not include items taken from a foreign firm or government department. That is, if you stole from a colonial government department or a foreign firm, you did not break the law. On the face of it, one might question the morality of this provision; however, it is part of the genius of religion to provide outlets for the recovery of a community’s property lost through systematic exploitation.¹¹⁴

The proliferation of the new shrines and the challenge they posed to Christianity fostered a public debate on the significance of religion in ensuring morality. It was a debate situated in a pluralistic context,¹¹⁵ a debate about which religion was more relevant, especially between Christianity and the indigenous religion. Islam at this point was strong in terms of its influence as another source of religious power, but it seems it had not provoked the resentment Christianity had provoked from the indigenous religions and their custodians. As a result, it did not feature much in the debate. Islam’s almost complete avoidance of proselytizing activity, and its deep involvement with client services in the dispensing of talismans and charms, kept it out of conflict with the indigenous faith.¹¹⁶

Christian missionaries reacted to the challenge posed by the new shrines by writing pamphlets and instigating the colonial government against them.¹¹⁷ In spite of that, the shrines grew in influence and created several difficulties for the colonial government.¹¹⁸ Consequently, an important lesson inherent in the experience with the new shrines is that, in pluralistic societies,

¹¹³ See Hans Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana: A Study on the Belief in Destructive Witches and Its Effect on the Akan Tribes* (Kumasi: Presbyterian Book Depot, 1959)142.

¹¹⁴ For example, it is reported that as early as 1836, the priests of the Mfantse national oracle, *Nananom Mpõw* were spreading word that the spirits were displeased with new religion (Christianity) and unless it was rejected there would be no rain. (see Mary McCarthy, *Social Change and Growth of British Power in the Gold Coast*(Lanham/New York/London: University of America Press, 1983) 112.

¹¹⁵ Proselytizers of the ‘New Shrines’ argued that Christianity was responsible for the increase in crime and other anti-social behaviours of the times because its ethos removed the restraining fear that the traditional religion used as a check on criminal activities and tendencies toward ant-social behaviour. It maintained that whereas the gods of the traditional religion were fast in punishing culprits, Christianity postponed all accountability to the end of time on the ‘Judgment Day.’

¹¹⁶ It is actually reported that when the powers of the new shrine were perceived as having waned, their owners consulted the *malams* reinforcement. See Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 133.

¹¹⁷ Debrunner, *Witchcraft in Ghana*, 106.

¹¹⁸ Jean Allman & John Parker, *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005) 175.

religious ideas must thrive or survive on the basis of the plausibility of their claims and not by coercion or state patronage.

5.4.5 Current religious discourse in the public sphere

Current religious discourse in the public sphere still hovers around the old themes, which revolve around the following ideas: that material and physical well-being depends, to a large extent, on spiritual factors; that good behaviour is positively rewarded by the spirit-world; that Ghana is a God-fearing nation; and that evil spirits are real and are at work to destroy people, but they can be dealt with through the help of a stronger power, especially God. Such ideas feature frequently in public discourse and apparently shape the attitudes of people to life.

The most recent example of how these ideas influence public debates is found in the controversies raised about the omission of a course on 'religious and moral education' from the syllabus of basic schools in the new educational reforms. At both the institutional level and the popular level, strong arguments were made against the proposal, though a few officials in the Ministry of Education and some social commentators pushed the government to go ahead with the implementation of the proposal. The Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference (GCBC) issued a rather strong-worded communiqué, imploring the government to change its decision and asking their teachers and agents to defy the government and teach the subject in all Roman Catholic schools. The Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) and the Muslim groups also joined in the debate, taking sides with the bishops.

Infact, the debate did not remain at the official level. Soon, the public joined in and radio presenters featured special phone-in programmes in which members of the general public were to express their opinion. One of such programmes was organised by the leading Accra radio station, Peace FM, during one of its most popular Akan language programmes in December, 2007. Among reasons given by callers against the proposal were the following: 'without religious instruction, the future of the country is bleak, because immorality will increase;' 'the president was bowing to pressures from Europe and America where satanic powers influence government policies' (citing the legalisation of same-sex unions in those countries to buttress their point that satanist cults control governments in Western countries). Significantly, the bishops in their communiqué also made reference to 'political and financial institutions from the Western world' that require 'our policy-makers to sacrifice some of our rights, values and traditions, such as the teaching of religion in schools, as a condition for granting financial assistance.'¹¹⁹

The interesting aspect of the whole debate was that pastors made it a subject of their sermons in several churches and church groups made it a prayer topic. This way, the issue was kept in the public domain for weeks. Eventually, the President directed that the subject be reintroduced. This was not surprising to many. The President seemed to share in the popular self-perception of Ghanaians as God-fearing people and held the accompanying conviction that the fear of God did

¹¹⁹ statement by Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference, on 'the new educational reforms' issued on November 9, 2007 and signed by the Most Rev. Abadamloora, Bishop of Navrongo-Bolgatanga and President of the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference.

not only lead to the cultivation of a sound moral consciousness but resulted also in the material prosperity of the nation. In 1996, when he was aspiring to be president, he called for the reintroduction of 'religious and moral education 'to inculcate in children high moral principles.'¹²⁰

The strong hold of religion on Ghanaian minds makes it unwise for any politician to adopt a purely secularist approach to issues. At the very least, they must be perceived not to be completely irreligious or to have the tendency to dabble in 'evil medicine.' This often serves as a temptation for politicians to seek to manipulate religious sentiments to gain advantage over their opponents. We have already referred to Kufuor's pledge when he was not yet president. In the recent debate, Professor John Evans Atta-Mills, then presidential candidate of the largest opposition party, who was vice-president in 1996 when Kufuor was calling for the reintroduction of religious moral education in schools, stated, 'religion and morality have been the backbone of Ghana.' He associated himself with the call by the Catholic bishops for the reintroduction of religious and moral education in the schools.¹²¹

In public discussions of these and related issues, people appeal to religious authority, especially the Bible, more than to any other source. Even when traditional rulers, the chiefs who are regarded as custodians of the traditional culture, have to contribute to debates, they often quote passages from the Bible to support their point. In spite of the pronouncedly Christian and Islamic nature of the popular religious scene, it is widely believed that many Ghanaians still believe in, and continue to use religious resources such as 'evil medicine' and cursing, which were frowned upon by traditional societies. It is widely alleged that aspiring candidates for political offices, when they give money to voters in an attempt to buy their votes, compel them to swear an oath that if they do not vote for them after taking the money, the deity they invoked in the oath should kill them. Often the deity invoked is one with a reputation for taking swift action. This became such a big problem in the then ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) during their 2007 congress to elect a flag-bearer that the chairperson, Mr. Mac Manu, issued a statement warning that anyone caught indulging in the practice would be subject to appropriate sanctions.¹²²

The belief in 'curses' (Akan: *duab*) is widespread. In many instances, the act of 'cursing' is simple. It involves verbally expressing a wish that depending upon certain conditions another person should suffer harm from the spirits invoked. It may also involve going to consult a traditional priest to spiritually, cause harm to another person for a reason that a person considers justifiable. In that case, a small fee is charged. It is believed that people resort to such practices when they are offended by other people and feel that that is the best way to deal with them. Some people who litigate over property and have such beliefs may also resort to such spiritual means in an attempt to obtain justice.¹²³ 'Curses' are believed to result in misfortunes for the people on whom they are placed. In August 2007, elders of Elubo in the Western Region, who believed that

¹²⁰ *Ghanaian News Runner*, March 14 – April 2, 1996.

¹²¹ GNA Report, Accra November 13, 2007, 'Mills Supports Catholic Bishops on Religious and Moral Education'

¹²² *The Chronicle*, August 20, 2007, 'Don't Swear!'

¹²³ Professor S. K. Asare, 'Can judicial inefficiency lead to Mob Justice and Spiritual Justice?' *The Chronicle* (July 6, 2007) 3.

frequent deaths of young people of the town were caused by curses, had to take emergency measures to stop the practice.¹²⁴ This practice has its counterpart in the Christian and Islamic versions of popular religion. Scholars have dealt extensively with the Christian version.¹²⁵

In popular Islam, the *malam* is more than a teacher of the *Qur'an*; he is also a dispenser of material blessings through spiritual means. In the practice of *salaka/sraha* (the term is actually a corruption of *Sadaqat*),¹²⁶ the *malam* is believed to help clients either by prescribing a ritual for them or performing it on their behalf. The underlying assumptions are the same as those discussed above: health, success, prosperity depends on spiritual factors. The belief that spiritual power is available to be tapped and used by those who believe and know how, is the driving idea behind the practice. Their perceived spiritual power has made *malams* quite influential in communities. However, it is not positive things alone that *malams* do for their clients. It is believed that in some cases, they may have to cause the death of a client's enemy or cause some other misfortune to happen to a person considered an obstacle to a client's goal by using spiritual power.

5.5 Critical Perspectives: Gifford versus Ter Haar

Paul Gifford, in his discussion of the transformational value of contemporary Ghanaian demonology has taken on Gerrie ter Haar, who interprets the phenomenon as bearing meanings and imagery of political relevance for Africa.¹²⁷ He expresses serious doubts about any positive result coming out of Ghana's current religious revival. He has doubts because it is not obvious to him what direct or indirect correlation there might be between anything in that revival and the nation's political or economic transformation.¹²⁸ He demands immediate evidence of the claims made by Gerrie ter Haar and those scholars who share her views. For example, he argues with respect to Nigeria:

Yet in what way have charismatics transformed the public sphere in Nigeria? Is the country less corrupt, more transparent, and more governed by law? No evidence is given of such transformation, nor is it indicated what might count as evidence, and how we might assess it.¹²⁹

He shows a similar tendency with respect to Ghana. He is actually of the view that a focus on spiritual or moral interpretations of political issues diverts attention from 'practical effectiveness' in building institutions.¹³⁰

Gifford seems concerned about the chronic institutional weaknesses in Africa that hinder the development of democratic and other modern ways of ensuring good governance on the continent. Since the religious phenomenon under discussion does not seem to provide any conduit for mobilising direct pressure on governments to build strong institutions of governance

¹²⁴ *The Mirror*, August 11, 2007, 'No More Curses Here'

¹²⁵ See Gifford, *Ghana's New*, 110 -111; See also, Omenyo and Atiemo, 'Creating Space,' 62 -66.

¹²⁶ *Sadaqat* is non-obligatory alms-giving in Islam.

¹²⁷ Gifford, *Ghana's New*, 170.

¹²⁸ Gifford, *Ghana's New*, 169 -172.

¹²⁹ Gifford, *Ghana's New*, 172.

¹³⁰ Gifford *Ghana's New*, 168.

in similar ways to Europe they seem to him to be of no consequence for social change in Africa. He also does not give any room for the usual excuses invoked to explain Africa's slow process to development. Arguments that find excuses in culture or the colonial experience do not seem to excite him.¹³¹ Without saying it explicitly, he seems to be pressing home the point that Africa must not be seen to be different from other parts of the world, for example Europe. This is because institutions of accountability such as the courts, the police, and special statutory bodies, such as human rights commissions and the Serious Fraud Office (SFO), are as relevant for Africa as elsewhere. In another work that focused on East Africa, Gifford argues that,

The sheer novelty of the modern world is left unaddressed in this preoccupation with African culture. ...Yet this dichotomy (either African or Western, with a true African always opting for the former) surely obscures the crucial element of novelty. Accountable government for example, is not Western in any real sense. In Britain Henry VIII was almost totally unaccountable, as was Louis XIV in France. Had Britain's King Charles I deigned to plead at his trial in 1649, he would have argued that 'The king can do no wrong,' for the monarch is accountable only to God. To most of his compatriots of the 17th century this truth was self-evident; to the people of Britain today the claim is absurd. The demand for accountable leadership is totally new.¹³²

He makes similar assertions concerning the separation of church and state, which he says is 'hardly 250 years old' in Europe. He declares that 'these things are not part of any Western heritage. Quite the contrary; they are totally new, but novelties seemingly required by the dynamics of modern society.'¹³³

The modern nation-states of Africa do indeed need these 'novelties' to be able to hold their own in the comity of nations in an era of globalisation; and other scholars such as Birgit Meyer, Ellis and Ter Haar do not deny this. In Ghana, the growth of modern ideas and institutions has not led to the abandoning of religious beliefs. Nor has the intense religiosity of Ghanaians led them to shun participation in political and economic life.¹³⁴

In fact, the neo-pentecostal/charismatic churches may not be serving as obvious nurseries for democracy because of the pastor or prophet-centred approach to church government. Nevertheless, the beliefs and ideas found in popular religion to which they contribute have the potential to strengthen the growing democratic culture. For example, the inspiration or the sense of inner power that participation in the religious activities under discussion generates in believers toward their proper functioning in life is an important resource. Generally, what has been referred to as popular religion in this work, which draws aspects of its ideas from the neo-pentecostal/charismatic churches, heighten the individualistic consciousness of the Ghanaian. As will be shown later in chapter nine, themes such as prosperity, deliverance, and the breaking of

¹³¹ In his works, he is so frank and passionate about what he thinks is wrong approach in academia and also in the attempt to help bring change in Africa. See for example, Gifford, *Ghana's New Christianity*, 181-189; and also, Gifford, 'Africa's Inculturation Theology: Observations of an Outsider' in *Hekima Review*. 38. (May 2008) 22 -25.

¹³² Paul Gifford, 'Africa's Inculturation Theology,' 24.

¹³³ Gifford, 'Africa's Inculturation,' 38.

¹³⁴ Ghanaians have been fast learners of the art of modern governance. From the earliest times as an emerging nation, they made several attempts to invent systems that combine modern institutions of governance with their traditional ones. For example, Allott notes that clause 3 of the Bond of 1844 indicate that from that time on there was a conscious effort on the part of the Mfantse Chiefs to mould the 'customs of the country to the general principles of British Law.' See Antony Allott, *Essays in African Law with Special Reference to the Law of Ghana* (London: Butterworth & Co. 1960) 102.

covenants and ancestral curses that are central to popular religion in Ghana are related to the individual more than to the group. A sense of individual autonomy is considered an important prerequisite for the growth of human rights in any society. Moreover, it is in the meetings of church groups such as the Women's group or the youth group that several Ghanaians learn about new public policies, bills and laws. In a context where illiteracy is still high and formal civic associations are non-existent, religious groups play important roles in public education on issues of political and social relevance. In several cases, religious installations such as chapels and mosques serve as meeting places where communities discuss development issues and where other civic activities take place. For example, when the 2008 election dates fell on Sunday, most of the churches decided to worship on the Friday or Saturday before the Election Day to enable their members to participate in the process and also to make their chapels available to be used as polling stations.

A worldview that encompasses both the physical realm and the invisible spiritual realm has not proved less able to accommodate the 'novelties' required by the 'dynamics of modern society.' What we have called popular religion in Ghana is not antithetical to the workings of modern political and economic institutions. While we are not claiming that 'popular religion' in Ghana is a conscious project to enhance human rights culture, we maintain that there are aspects of it that may serve to reinforce the appreciation of human rights and issues of governance at the grassroots level. For example, packaging national issues of current significance such as the fight against corruption, fairness in the administration of justice, creation of jobs and the strengthening of the police to deal with armed robbery as prayer topics has the potential to increase awareness of the citizenry about them and make them subjects of discussion in the circles of the ordinary people. Furthermore, in the process of developing a modern democratic and economic political culture, the idiom and symbols supplied by popular religion serve as a language for veiled criticism of corrupt and incompetent politicians and public officials.

Apparently, Gifford's disagreement with other scholars mentioned has to do with differences in interpretation of aspects of the African reality. Gifford takes a conservative stance with respect to social transformation, largely ignoring or dismissing the claims that African cultures, including their various forms of religious renewal, hold positive implications for the development of their political and economic life. Ter Haar and the others agree with a certain trend that is growing in development discourse that the inclusion of cultural resources has the potential to ensure sustainable development. Gifford does not accept as valid claims that religious beliefs of the type under discussion and the attitudes they generate can have direct positive impact on political and economic transformation. Ter Haar, however, maintains that there are important implications of what she calls a religious or spiritual approach to development, which Gifford fails to recognise. Ter Haar's position is in line with what is clearly a new thinking in development work. The World Bank, the UNDP and the EU have all come to acknowledge the importance of culture, including religion, in development, especially in regions where previous approaches that were purely secular have not seemed to work.

The approach to development that this new thinking advocates is also aimed at addressing the same concerns as Gifford laments. They include the absence of strong institutions of democratic governance, weak commitment to the rule of law, endemic corruption among office holders, and frequent abuse of and lack of protection of basic freedoms.¹³⁵ What Gifford seems not to

¹³⁵ World Bank, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (Washington DC: 1981) 60 – 61.

appreciate is religion as a resource in the process of social transformation in the context of Ghana, where governments since colonial times, have sought in vain to abolish popular beliefs such as witchcraft and ‘bad medicine.’¹³⁶ In Ghana, businesspersons, politicians, technocrats, and ordinary men and women engage in activities that suggest that they do not only explain events from a religious viewpoint but also, draw inner strength and motivation from religious belief.¹³⁷ Since the meanings assigned to events in life are mostly linked to their basic religious worldview, it should be natural that the symbols with which they express their political and other concerns should mostly draw on religion. An approach that takes into account the religious dimension of life can also be more effective in dealing with the obstacles that religion presents to development and human rights.

5.6 Conclusion

Religion in its manifold manifestations suffuses almost all aspects of the life of Ghanaians, especially at the popular level. It serves as a resource upon which individuals and communities have drawn to address grave challenges at different periods in the life of the country. Its impact on the transformational processes that started in the pre-colonial period has been huge, and its value as ‘spiritual capital’ with investment value in the processes of social change has not diminished in contemporary times. This is because modernity coexists with tradition and the two, largely, blend together in several ways in contemporary society. Being at the base of traditional culture, religion has occupied a central place in the development of ideas and methods for ensuring human dignity in traditional societies. It has also contributed to the transformation of ideas about individual autonomy and the development of popular ideas and language in public discourse. It should be worthwhile to examine its contributions to the development and nurturing of indigenous ideas of human dignity and rights. This, we hope to do as part of the discussions in the next chapter.

¹³⁶ Parker and Allman, *Tongnaab*, 166 -176.

¹³⁷ When the President J. E. A. Mills was criticized by a section of the media for turning the seat of government into a prayer camp, he bold responded that he wished the whole country was a ‘payer camp.’ See *Ghanaian Times*, March 13, 2009.

