

DYNAMICS AND TRAJECTORIES OF RELIGIOUS POLITICS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A CASE OF GHANA

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explore the complex relationship between religious politics and socio-economic development in Ghana. It focuses on how religion simultaneously functions as a source of socio-economic development in Ghana, yet has a large part to play as a potential driving force for instability. Using a qualitative research approach, the study involved in-depth interviews with fifteen purposively chosen participants: political sociologists, religious anthropologists, urban clergy, and religious practitioners of Christian, Muslim, and traditional faiths in Accra. The findings show that religious politics is ambivalent in Ghanaian society in that religious institutions bring about development through education, healthcare, and social services, however, it may also enable exploitation and perpetuate harmful practices. The study identifies three main theoretical perspectives on religious politics: the anachronistic (pessimist), catalyst (optimist), and ambivalent (dualist) viewpoints. The study recommends fostering greater interfaith dialogue, encouraging religious leaders to strike a balance between spiritual guidance and practical development needs, and better oversight of religious practices as potential solutions. The study contributes to the literature regarding the dualistic nature of religion within development contexts by demonstrating evidence that can be utilized by both policymakers and religious leaders to leverage this capital to maximize development while reducing the negative consequences that may arise.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Religion is undoubtedly a source of comfort and guidance to many individuals and groups in societies (Baldwin, 2021). It provides a basis for moral beliefs and positive behaviours (Smith and Faris, 2005). Also, it provides a sense of community reunion and connection to the mosaic of traditions (Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 2004). Indeed, Baldwin (2021) argues that religion can affect the health of its adherents physically, mentally and spiritually.

Religious politics, therefore, denotes the nexus between religion (i.e., religious institutions, beliefs and practices) and political processes, governance and socioeconomic development. It includes how religious actors love to influence policy-making, mobilise followers for political action and shape public discourse on social issues. Religious politics in Ghana is embodied in the types of engagement in governance by various faith traditions: Christianity, Islam, and Traditional religions as they interact with state institutions, promote development initiatives, and impact public opinion on governance and social policy (Dovlo 2005; Nukunya 2016). Religious politics, therefore, naturally and efficiently cultivates, nurtures and harnesses the human capital necessary for a thriving society (Smith and Faris, 2005). This assertion motivated Baldwin (2021) to argue further that religious politics is an agent of social control and thus maintains and strengthens social order. According to Baldwin (2021), religious politics teaches people moral behaviours and thus helps them learn how to be good members of society. For instance, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments are perhaps the most famous set of rules for moral behaviours (Baldwin, 2021; Smith and Faris, 2005).

Insightfully, Baldwin (2021) was found to be ambivalent about the politics of religious roles when they maintained that religion can both positively and negatively affect socio-economic development. What made Baldwin (2021) doubtful is that their studies revealed that religious beliefs can promote ethical behaviours and foster community development. Contrary to this view, Baldwin (2021) regrettably posits that religious politics involving students often tend to waste more time in school, lower their educational aspirations, and indoctrinate students, thereby causing exclusion, social inequality, resource conflicts, and obstruction of progress. This position of Baldwin (2021) contradicts the benefits associated with religious politics articulated by McCleary and Barro (2006), who argue that religious politics contributes about \$ 1.2 trillion of socio-economic value annually to the U.S. economy. This is equivalent to being the world's 15th-largest national economy. McCleary and Barro (2006) argue further that religious congregations, including churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and chapels of every denomination, add about \$418 billion annually to the American economy, and that religious affiliation is stratified by socioeconomic status, which includes education, income, and occupation.

Interestingly, McCleary and Barro (2006) categorized religious affiliation into two levels. The first level is referred to as Lower-income groups, who are also affiliated with more theologically conservative institutions of worship, whereas the second level is the higher-income groups who are affiliated with more liberal institutions. McCleary and Barro (2006) argued that the last two emphases are incorporated in the first. Positively, it brings people together, provides meaning and moral guidance, and comforts those in need (McCleary and Barro, 2006). Quashigah (2020) adds to this by arguing that the heart of religion is critical to social development because of its universal emphasis on the spiritual dimension, ethics and a way of living determined by the acceptance of all human beings and all life as sacred.

It is so fascinating to note that in religious discourse, pessimist scholars seem to have some sense of the negative influence of the religious role. For instance, McCleary and Barro (2006) contend that arguably, religion is said to be a recipe for misunderstandings and protracted arguments between those with differing beliefs, and some who feel compelled to interfere with others who do not share their beliefs. This motivated McCleary and Barro (2006) to think that economic development often influences religious practices and beliefs by altering people's life circumstances and shaping their

worldviews, as such a greater wealth can reduce religious observance as material security may lessen the perceived need for spiritual reassurance.

In the context of this study, the term socio-economic development refers to the process of social and economic advancement in which a society seeks to improve the economic, political, and social well-being of its people concerning the availability of education, healthcare, infrastructure, and general quality of life (Nukunya, 2016). Also, religious ambivalence refers to the dual and at times contradictory role religion plays in culture, contributing simultaneously to social cohesion and development on the one hand, and an impetus to division, exploitation, or hindering of social progress in certain contexts (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015). While religious institutions refer to organised bodies or establishments devoted to religion (like churches, mosques and shrines) along with the administrative units, which provide spiritual services and often social services (Adogame, 2013).

Given the above, the study accordingly seeks to bridge the knowledge gap in the literature that reflects the dynamics and trajectories of the ambivalent role of religious politics as an agent of transformation to occasion a positive change in the lives of individuals in society and at the same time, a recipe for intractable violence, conflict, turbulent divisions (often refers to as a trouble-causer) within families and among groups in society.

The study seeks to unravel how religious politics simultaneously spur transformative agendas in the lives of individuals for socio-economic development in society and negate social stability through interrelated violence and conflicts. In doing this, the study draws on empirical literature and historical materials to help in interrogating the inseparability of politics and religion and their ambivalent role in Ghanaian society and to determine how religious politics simultaneously spurs and negates the transformative agenda of socio-economic development in Ghanaian society.

The central argument of this study, therefore, centres on three schools of thought, namely, the Anachronistic (Pessimist), the Catalyst (Optimist) and the Ambivalent (Dualist) world views of religious politics. Thus, the role of religious politics in ensuring socio-economic development in sub-Saharan Africa, using Ghana as a country of study. The study becomes imperative given the dynamics and trajectories of religious politics in the country.

This study employed a qualitative research method, precisely, participants' observation and in-depth interviews with a purposive sampling technique to select participants who could provide information relative to the role of religious politics and how it simultaneously spurs socio-economic development and at the same time negates social stability in Ghana.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Religious Politics and Development in African Contexts

Although religious politics has the propensity to bring about positive transformation or change in individuals, to trigger socio-economic development in Ghanaian society. Nonetheless, this can only happen when the different creedal persuasions, especially all religious bodies, bring their faith to bear on their actions in everyday life. The power of religion to occasion positive transformation changes in the different sectors of society may depend on how religious bodies surmount the challenges of everyday life and build synergies based on their faith to manage the private and public spheres of life. Religious politics significantly influences various aspects of development, including education and health. Religious institutions have particularly acted in Ghana, for example, to provide educational opportunities and health services when the state has fallen short. According to Nukunya (2016), religious organisations have established many schools and health facilities, especially in rural areas where government presence is minimal. They offer people basic services, as well as a sense of community and morals, helping to shape society. These sectors have a large involvement of religious groups, which highlights their importance and shows that faith-based organisations can work with governmental and non-governmental organisations to achieve their goals positively.

In addition to education and healthcare, religious networks have significantly impacted economic empowerment and entrepreneurship within African societies. According to Adogame (2013), religious affiliations frequently provide ways to obtain resources and social network ties that can improve economic productivity. Church congregations can serve as platforms for business networking, with congregants helping one another with business partnerships and financial assistance. It can also foster entrepreneurial efforts, especially among marginalised communities that may otherwise lack access to traditional forms of credit. Religious politics, therefore, can lead to development by creating a sense of community and purpose in economics.

However, the relationship between religion, politics and development is not without its challenges and contradictions. Atiemo (2017) argues that certain spiritual religious practices can lead to exploitation and extreme behaviour or acts that would undermine the philosophical nature of development. Others might exploit their position and authority for manipulative purposes, funneling resources meant for community development into their own pockets. Moreover, the intentional use of divisions along religious lines can deepen animosities and undermine developmental cooperation. Exploring the intricacies of religious politics on the African continent reveals that these dynamics can be both supportive and obstructive to the progress of multiple sectors.

Overall, the role of religious politics in the development of Africa is far from straightforward. Religious centres have undeniably played a solid role in education, healing of the sick and empowerment of the economically disadvantaged, but factors like abuse of faith and religious extremism are still pressing issues. In that vein, for sustainable development in African societies, a holistic approach that embraces both the light and dark sides of religious influence is indispensable. Many scholarly studies attest to the fact that several schools of thought underpin the role of religious politics in ensuring socio-economic development and the inseparability of religion and politics (Baldwin, 2021; Smith and Faris, 2005; McCleary and Barro, 2006). The gap in the literature points to the fact that religious politics simultaneously spurs the transformative or change agency role of religion and negates the social interactions and religious stability in many societies in sub-Saharan Africa (Baldwin, 2021; Smith and Faris, 2005; McCleary and Barro, 2006). On the one hand, pessimists or anti-religious scholars see religion as anachronistic because it not only constrains the human rights of people but also aggravates social interactions and religious instability and undermines the progress of society. Also, optimists or pro-religious scholars hold the view that the role of religion is to catalyse the transformation of the lives of individuals and groups in society.

Insightfully, evidence shows that religious politics can affect labour supply choices in ways that have negative implications for economic performance and, nevertheless, increase subjective well-being among followers (McCleary and Barro, 2006). Therefore, McCleary and Barro (2006) posit that religious politics affects economic outcomes mainly by fostering religious beliefs that influence individual traits such as honesty, work ethic, thrift, and openness to strangers. A major way that religion influences economic distributions, according to Elom (2016), is through its effect on inequality beliefs and its associated politics.

It is imperative to note that globally, the mainstream contention is that religious politics simultaneously spurs socio-economic development and negates social interactions and religious stability in sub-Saharan Africa, and this contention has been verified by Baldwin (2021), Smith and Faris (2005) and Emile (2017). Also, it has been exemplified by some anti-religious scholars who think that religion is an anachronism and that it constrains the human rights of people as well as aggravates the social interactions and religious instability and therefore undermines the economic progress of society (Baldwin 2021; Smith and Faris, 2005; McCleary and Barro 2006). It is important to note that pro-religious scholars such as Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2004) view religious politics as a catalyst for the transformation of life and the socio-economic development of individuals. Their position indeed counteracts the position of McCleary and Barro (2006).

2.2 Religious Pluralism and Social Cohesion

The work of Elom Dovlo (2019) has been instrumental in understanding Ghana's religious pluralism as the foundation for its relative stability. Dovlo's work explores the coexistence of multiple religious traditions in Ghana and how they are working to establish mechanisms for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. His research highlights how traditional African religions, Christianity, and Islam have negotiated co-existence over time to reach mutual tolerance that feeds into cohesion in Ghanaian society. This pluralistic foundation, Dovlo argues, has helped Ghana escape many of the religious tensions that have consumed much of sub-Saharan Africa (Dovlo, 2019). This is complemented by the sociological analyses of Nukunya (2016), which, through showcasing how religious institutions have adapted to and shaped social change in Ghana, elucidate the interactions at play. Nukunya's work is useful, especially for understanding the adaptation of traditional religious institutions through colonial and post-colonial periods while exercising relevant social functions.

2.3 Pentecostalism, Charismatic Christianity and Development

Asamoah-Gyadu's (2005) in-depth research on Pentecostalism in Ghana casts valuable light on how these more recent formations of Christianity have shaped development discourse and practice. Asamoah-Gyadu chronicles how Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have become dominant in religious life and economic thought, championing what some scholars describe as a "prosperity gospel" that fuses spiritual rescue with financial gain (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013). His analysis shows how these movements have developed alternative paradigms of development, focused on personal entrepreneurship, individual transformation, and faith-based economics. It also seriously affects how Ghanaians think about progress and relate to established development schemes. Asamoah-Gyadu's research also highlights how these churches have, in more recent decades, become significant providers of social services, filling gaps not covered by the state and traditional development actors.

2.4 Religion, Human Rights, and Democratic Governance

Atiemo's (2013) work on religion and human rights gives us a sophisticated insight into the way that religious values are at play in the context of Ghanaian rights discourse. Atiemo shows how religious institutions can be resistant to specific human rights frameworks that they understand as 'Western,' but they also draw on their traditions to articulate indigenous conceptions of human dignity and justice (Atiemo, 2013). These dynamics have been especially important in Ghana's democratic development, where religious institutions have acted as constituent interest groups (particularly civil society actors) that have agitated for political change (Atiemo, 2017). Atiemo's research highlights how religious leaders have been at the heart of election monitoring, civic education and conflict resolution amid political turnovers. This intersection of religion and governance is further explored by Kwesi Yankah's study on communication and religion, which examines how religious language and symbolism permeate political discourse in Ghana, creating both opportunities and challenges for democratic deliberation (Yankah, 2004).

2.5 Philosophy of African Religion and African Development Ethics

Gyekye (1996) is acknowledged for his immense contribution to understanding how indigenous African religious themes can inform alternative paradigms of development. Gyekye expresses an African communitarian ethic based on traditional religious worldviews that stress social harmony, collective welfare, and intergenerational responsibility (Gyekye, 1996). His 1997 work highlights that any model for developing Ghana should grapple with these conceptual underpinnings instead of painting ideas tailored for the West on the walls (Gyekye, 1997). This perspective is reinforced by scholars such as John Mbiti, whose outstanding work on African religions and philosophy explains how African notions of time, community, and the sacred, in contrast to Western notions, inform

conventional development theories. Mbiti's well-known adage, 'I am because we are,' summarises a relational ontology that strongly contests individualistic approaches to development (Mbiti, 1990).

2.6 Gender, Religion, and Inclusive Development

This study draws important historical precedent from the pioneering work of Amoah (1997) and Oduyoye's (2001) understanding of the intersection of gender, religion and development in Ghana. Oduyoye constructs a framework for African women's theology, enabling the critique of both traditional and imported religions that contain patriarchal elements while reclaiming the liberating resources found in these traditions. Her research shows how women have historically used religious platforms to gain economic power and advance social advocacy. Amoah's research complements existing literature on the role of women in Christian women's organisations by highlighting their religious leadership and economic activities, particularly in indigenous religious traditions. Collectively, their scholarship uncovers both the challenges and potentials that religious institutions pose for gender-inclusive development in Ghana.

2.7 Transnational Religious Networks and Global Connections

Adogame's (2013) work on African religions in global contexts highlights how Ghanaian religious movements transcend borders and intersect with transnational networks that enable the movement of resources, ideas, and people. His work demonstrates that Ghanaian churches have made inroads to become global forces, particularly in Europe and North America, creating reverse missionary movements and diasporic communities with continuing connections to Ghana. These connections have significant economic implications through remittances, religious tourism and international partnerships. Adogame's work illustrates how the intersections of spiritual and economic globalisation create new channels for Ghana's integration into global systems while also enabling forms of cultural resistance to certain aspects of Western-dominated globalisation.

2.8 Human Capital Development and Religious Education

The historical and contemporary roles of religious institutions in education and human capital development in Ghana have been documented by several scholars, among whom are Nukunya (2016) and Asamoah-Gyadu (2013). The relationship between religion and education has been fundamental to Ghana's development from the colonial period, when Missionary schools were the only providers of Western education, up to the present time, when a large number of educational institutions at all levels are run by religious organisations (Nukunya, 2016). These faith-based institutions of learning have been crucial for social mobility, professional formation, and leadership development. However, scholars also point to tensions surrounding the content of the curriculum, including issues related to sexual education, evolutionary theory and religious diversity, highlighting ongoing negotiations between religious values and educational goals.

2.9 Indigenous Religious Values and Sustainable Development

Recent scholarship, drawing on the foundational works of Mbiti (1990) and Gyekye (1997), has begun to explore how indigenous Ghanaian religious values might contribute to sustainable development goals. Traditional religious perspectives on land as sacred, natural resources as communal heritage, and human-environment interactions as influenced by spiritual principles offer potential resources for addressing environmental challenges. These indigenous approaches, when engaged in dialogue with contemporary sustainable science, suggest possibilities for culturally appropriate environmental ethics that might be more effective than imported conservation models. This emerging area of research suggests that religious traditions have the potential to contribute to ecological sustainability alongside social and economic development.

2.10 Theoretical Perspectives on Religious Politics

There are three main theoretical perspectives on religious politics, which include the Anachronistic (Pessimist) Perspective, the Catalyst (Optimist) Perspective, and the Ambivalent (Dualist) Perspective. The Anachronistic (Pessimist) Perspective, exemplified by scholars such as Mbiti (2015) and Atiemo (2017). They posit that religious phenomena in Africa, bound with exclusionary forms, could limit human rights, spur social insecurity and hinder the human development process of the African continent through exploitation, superstition and resistance to progress. The Catalyst (Optimist) Perspective explained that religion is beneficial for change as it offers moral systems, social capital and institutional resources which drive socio-economic progress (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015 and Adogame, 2013). The Ambivalent (Dualist) Perspective, supported by African scholars such as Nukunya (2016) and Gyekye (1997), see religion as a duality that can promote or impede socio-economic development, based on context, social leadership and the applications of religious principles.

The above religious claims could have socioeconomic implications. The anachronistic claim often positions traditional beliefs as outdated or hindering progress, arguments that are commonly put to use to validate particular religious or political agendas. Such claims can be utilised to marginalise indigenous knowledge systems or traditional practices that otherwise could contribute to sustainable development models. The Catalyst claims to assert religion's transformative power and ability to drive positive social change. In Ghana, for instance, religious leaders often make such claims when they mobilise followers for community development projects or call for moral regeneration as the base for national development. These and similar claims emphasise the role of faith communities as complementary reservoirs of social capital, moral ecosystem and institutional support, sources of social capital, and moral counsel and institutional support for development. Ambivalent claims acknowledge the complex, sometimes contradictory, roles of religion in society. These recognise that religious institutions and leaders can both advance virtuous social programmes, even as they perpetuate practices that may either burden followers or create social divisions. The ambivalent perspective best captures the complex reality of the role of religion in development in Ghana, where religious organisations are the major providers of education and healthcare, while sometimes also vectors of prosperity theology that can impose huge fiscal strains on poor followers.

3.0 RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY GHANA

According to the Ghana Statistical Service, the population of the country in the 2021 population and housing census is 32.83 million. Ghana comprises over seventy ethnic groups, with the largest groups being: The Akan- 45.7%, Mole-Dagbon- 18.5%, Ewe- 12.8%, Ga-Dangme-7.1%, Gurma-6.4%, Guan-3.2%, Grusi-2.7%, Mande-2%, Other-1.6 % (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Ghana is a former colony of Britain; hence, English is the official language and is spoken by many. Ghana has rich traditions and cultures that differ from one ethnic group to another. It is on the west coast of Africa, with La Côte d'Ivoire to the west, Burkina Faso to the north and Togo to the east. The country is divided into sixteen political and administrative regions, with Accra as its capital.

The 2021 Population and Housing Census indicated that 71.3% were Christians, 19.9% were Muslims, and 3% were traditional/indigenous religions, while other religions or no religion made up 6%. (Ghana Statistical Service,2021). Other religions include the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai, Sri Sathya Sai Baba Sera, Sat Sang, Eckankar, the Divine Light Mission, Hare Krishna, Rastafarianism, and other international faiths (Haynes, 1997: cited in Allan, 2014). The multi-religious nature of Ghanaian society, therefore, makes it very difficult, if not complicated, for those in charge of Ghana's affairs to ignore this reality (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). No wonder the preamble to Ghana's 1992 Constitution is premised on the religious declaration, "In the Name of the Almighty God..." (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010).

According to Awuah-Nyamekye (2010), historically, religion has been a primary driver of social development. Hence, in the past and now, religious activities have occupied an important place in society by maintaining social cohesion for the development of its members. Additionally, religions have also consistently condemned violence and injustice and have always encouraged the pursuit of peace. Some religious leaders were well-known for fighting apartheid, while others declared support and helped to legitimise it (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). In some societies, religion has also been a source of conflict and tension, leading to loss of life and property (Abbink, 2014). Nonetheless, Abbink (2014) posits that religion may lose all its importance if the believers and worshippers of that religion cease to worship together by the patterns of social and individual behaviour that believers use to organize their daily lives in a spiritual sense (Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, as quoted in Abbink, 2014).

Christianity, one of the three main religions in Ghana, has been very dominant in affairs of the state. The Church has contributed immensely to the socio-economic development of the country, and over 70% of Ghanaians profess to be Christians (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). According to Abbink (2014), in the past, Christianity in Ghana was largely monopolised by the former mission churches such as the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, the Methodist and the Presbyterian Churches. However, this is not the case today; things have changed. The works of the Church cover areas such as education, health, agriculture and social protection. In the area of politics, the Christian Council of Ghana and the National Catholic Secretariat were very instrumental during the military regimes in providing the context and inspiring many God-fearing persons to put themselves forward for elections to various national offices (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010).

Now, the Ghanaian landscape is inundated with an increasing number of Pentecostal/Charismatic churches. This epitomises the importance of religion in the everyday life of the Ghanaian but also points to a certain degree of overreliance on religion as a primary means of dealing with the existential challenges of life (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). In a related development, Dako-Gyeke (2013) opines that the Pentecostal or Charismatic movement has made inroads through its spirited missionary effort, hence the large proportion of the Ghanaian population today associated with the Pentecostal or Charismatic beliefs. Available records show that there are deep-seated behavioural challenges and social and economic inequalities to address (Dako-Gyeke, 2013).

Notwithstanding, generally, some Ghanaians' attitude towards work, sanitation, social services such as electricity and water, occultism and '*Sakawa*,' for example, is having a significant effect on the lives of many young people, which cannot be glossed over (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). The desire for fast wealth and power is the driving force behind juvenile involvement in these practices. Many young individuals are also involved in drug-related activities, prostitution, abortion, armed robbery, and other sorts of deviant behaviours (Emile, 2017). At the same time, one can also see signs of hope in young people who are leveraging their sense of innovation and creativity to improve their lives and that of society (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010).

In Ghana, there is the fact that religious beliefs and practices permeate all aspects of Ghanaian life, hence, all citizens are free to believe and manifest themselves in any faith (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). Indeed, Ghana's Supreme Court affirms Ghana as a secular state and rules that: "...secularism...allowed and encouraged recognition and accommodation of religion and religious identity by the state" (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). The Supreme Court's decision emphasises the role of religion in complementing the efforts of the state. It also recognises the distinctive character of religion in explaining social phenomena. Additionally, the proliferation of religious trends and the variety of Christian churches leave a wide range of choices for believers. Nonetheless, how individuals relate to their maker is influenced by their spiritual and material life (Dako-Gyeke, 2013). Even though religion is a very powerful force for societal transformation, it plays a significant role in creating fair and equitable societies. Hence, the proliferation of Christian churches and membership growth influences the role of the church in bringing about societal transformation in this new democratic dispensation.

3.1 The Role of Religious Politics in Ghanaian Society

Having examined the various theories of religion and social transformation, attention can now be turned to the role religious politics plays in the transformation of the Ghanaian society. Religious politics plays a very significant role in the democratisation and social transformation of society and its members. Awuah-Nyamekye (2010: p.24) states that “certain occurrences in life can be explained and adjusted to in a straightforward common-sense and matter-of-fact way.” While certain phenomena that fall outside the ‘normal’ ordinary explanation, and about which human beings feel impelled to think and behave from a position of awe, wonder, humility and supplication, are usually categorised as falling into the sphere of the super-empirical or super-normal.” (Dovlo, 2006, p.22). It is, therefore, questionable when even the normal things that happen are explained in terms of the supernatural. It is in this light that religion is discussed as a conservative force. Religion as a conservative force could be attested to in Ghana by the way religious politics has led many Ghanaians to stick to a particular worldview. Ghanaians are astutely religious irrespective of their religious affiliation, level of education or social standing (Dako-Gyeke, 2013).

The inherent African religious tenets, which are deeply ingrained in some Ghanaians, have greatly influenced their worldview to the extent that, more generally, “everything” about the Ghanaian is explained as the supernatural. (Haynes, 1997: cited in Emile and Mark, 2020). The practice of relying too much on religious beliefs in explaining or understanding daunting challenges of life has made the Ghanaian somewhat superstitious. Invariably, this has given some pastors the power to deceive their followers into believing that they can do everything for them (Elom, 2016). In Ghana, many people are quick to assign spiritual meanings to positive or negative happenings in their lives or the community. For instance, phenomena that can be understood medically or technologically are attributed to the work of God, Mallams, deities or other spiritual beings (Dako-Gyeke, 2013). The causes of sicknesses are also, more generally, attributed to witches and evil forces. Because of this belief, some sick people do not seek medical attention when needed but go to prayer camps for ‘spiritual’ healing. Eventually, these people may report to the hospital at a time when their health has already deteriorated (Dako-Gyeke, 2013). Some sick people die in the prayer camps through the negligence or ignorance of pastors who are trying to handle medical issues spiritually.

In Ghana, it is not uncommon for a terrible road accident to be attributed to a god who was angry with someone in the vehicle. In this instance, it is argued that it will require a sacrifice offered to the god in question to forestall a future occurrence at the same place (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). However, what is needed is for the right authorities to investigate the cause of the accident and provide a solution to prevent any future accidents. The inability to properly handle such matters often retards the progress and development of society (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010).

The above examples mean that Ghanaians, especially Christians, rely heavily on both their beliefs in the supernatural and reason in solving everyday challenges of life. Ghanaians are very religious, but religion is not only about emotions and feelings. Religion is also about understanding what one believes in and leveraging the beliefs to improve one’s personal life and that of society. Science is a good source of knowledge and is not opposed to religion, and vice versa, so both disciplines should influence how issues are handled in life.

Furthermore, Dako-Gyeke (2013) observes that the Ghanaian religious landscape is full of good religious leaders, but also charlatans who have the proclivity to convince adherents that religion can provide answers to everything in life. Religion and spirituality can blur the objectivity of people. And in Ghana, extreme religiosity is making it difficult to introduce change, especially in the public sphere. Dako-Gyeke (2013) maintains that the attitude of ascribing every challenge to a supernatural or malevolent force does not promote growth and development; rather, it prevents people from taking personal responsibility for their problems and constructively dealing with them.

Moreover, Therborn (2014) points out that in Ghana, as in other African countries, religious leaders use religion to exploit the innocent poor to enrich themselves. Today, it is common knowledge that

certain persons establish a Church or a shrine because it is one of the most lucrative business ventures in Ghana. It is thus of little surprise when one reads about the extortion of money from people by charlatans from these Churches or shrines. In most cases, the central message of the pastors is that they can make their adherents wealthy or prosperous (Haynes, 1997, as cited in Therborn, 2014).

Given the level of poverty and other social challenges in society, the assurances of some pastors may be welcome news; however, deceptive and awkward they may be (Brown, 2018). In a related development, pastors claim to have the power to double monies for people through intense prayer sessions instead of encouraging them to work hard for a living. Thus, in parts of urban Africa, “we are witnessing not just the construction of new churches and mosques, but also the marked rise of preaching personalities who mobilize their charisma, deploy skills and arts of persuasion to build their authority, assemble new publics, and mobilize their audiences” (Dako-Gyeke, 2013: p.44). Presently, it is observable that leaders of the Churches are growing richer while many of their followers are becoming poorer. These practices lend credence to Marx’s assertion that religion is the opium of the people because it offers them little latitude to think for themselves and challenge what is not acceptable (Karl Marx as quoted in Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010).

As a social institution, religion is important because it helps societal members attain a sense of worth, dignity and growth. But religion can become negative when it is used to suppress, torture and hold people back (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). Religion that does not seek the integral socioeconomic progress of people is bad. Bad religion stems from the distortions and misinterpretations that believers give to the tenets of their faith. Indeed, in Africa, not least Ghana, one may strongly suggest that bad religion has become a major bane of the continent’s slow pace of development (Beyers, 2021). Against this background, some scholars have opined that in Africa, religion is increasingly becoming a disabler rather than an enabler for the social progress of its people (Baldwin 2021; McCleary and Barro 2006). In Ghana, adherents of African traditional religion teach values of peace and harmony and encourage collective acts of goodness for the good of members and society (Baldwin 2021). Yet, there are others among them, such as herbal medical practitioners and diviners, who sometimes exploit those who come to them for monetary gains and other benefits.

In Christianity, followers are encouraged to love God and their neighbours (Scott, 2021). At the same time, others think that going to Church and later engaging in social vices is acceptable. Islam preaches faith in one God and peace, but it can also be associated with some levels of negative practices (Baldwin 2021). Given this, one cannot neglect the fact that in many ways, religious politics has also brought some level of development to many local communities where social amenities such as water, schools, and health facilities were difficult to access.

4.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research method, specifically participant observation and in-depth interviews. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants who could provide information relative to the role of religious politics and how it simultaneously spurs socio-economic development and at the same time negates social stability in Ghana. Data was collected from fifteen participants, made up of three political sociologists, three religious anthropologists, two urban pastors, three Christians, three Muslims and two traditional religious activists. All of them were purposefully selected from Accra in the Greater Accra Region.

4.1 Selection of the Key Informants

Political sociologists were to provide social benefits or otherwise of the role of religious politics; ii) religious anthropologists and traditional religious activists were to provide the cultural dimension of the role of religious politics and socio-economic development or otherwise; and finally, urban clergies, Christians and Muslims were to provide information related to religion and socio-economic development or otherwise.

In selecting the participants, the researchers strategically considered the months or periods associated with Easter and Ramadan. These periods usually climax religious activities, providing an opportunity to gain access to participants. Some of the participants were contacted through phone calls, some through personal delivery letters and others through the snowballing technique. The researchers made sure that the research ethics, such as respect for participants' views, anonymity and confidentiality, were observed. Geographically, Accra was considered for the sake of convenience and as a macrocosm of all religious activists in Ghana.

As already indicated, this study adopted a qualitative approach. According to Yin (2014), it shares the primary aim of knowledge acquisition and is also concerned with subjective phenomena that do not require numerical measurement, like explaining different people's grief experiences. Yin (2014) describes it as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon in-depth to understand the underlying patterns and causes. Case studies are used in qualitative studies to answer the "how" or "why" of a phenomenon. It is suitable for studies involving a small number of participants. As pointed out above, the study employed the qualitative approach in gathering and analysing data drawn from empirical literature with historical materials and conducted qualitative discussions of key findings from participants' interviews. It interrogates the politics of the ambivalent role of religion in Ghanaian society and determines how a given religion simultaneously spurs and negates socio-economic development.

5.0 FINDINGS

This study made several significant discoveries on the premise of the study's position that the role of religious politics simultaneously spurs socio-economic development and negates social stability in sub-Saharan African countries, of which Ghana is no exception. The findings not only confirmed the main argument but also introduced new phrases like "ambivalent role" and "dualism role". For instance, the key findings from the responses of most of the participants interviewed pointed to the fact that while some anti-religious scholars see religion as anachronistic and that it constrains the human rights of people as well as aggravates or endangers the social progress of society.

Pro-religious scholars believe that the role of religion catalyses the transformation of life, leading to the social and economic development of individuals and groups in society. On the one hand, religion is a transformation of power to occasion a positive change in the lives of individuals in society and on the other hand, it is seen as fundamental to intractable violence, conflict, and turbulent divisions within families and among groups in society if believers fail to adhere to its principles, faith and/or creed. Given this, we find religious roles to be ambivalent if not dualistic. For instance, while some religious bodies are contributing to social development in the health, education and spiritual growth matters, others are abusing the same opportunities to exploit and perpetrate deviant behaviours. This finding indeed corroborated the view of McCleary and Barro (2006) that the role of religious politics is uncertain, complex and ambiguous- it is a unifier and at the same time a trouble-causer. This study, therefore, posits that religious politics reflects both ambivalent roles and dualistic roles in Ghanaian society.

Further findings obtained from the religious anthropologists and the traditional religious activists interviewed indicated that although religious politics has the propensity to bring about positive transformative change in individuals to trigger social and economic development in Ghanaian society; nonetheless, this can only happen when the different creedal persuasions, especially all religious bodies bring their faith to bear on their actions in the practice of everyday life. Also, the political sociologists submitted that the power of religious politics to occasion positive transformation change in the different sectors of society depends on how religious bodies surmount the challenges of everyday life and build synergies based on their faith to manage the private and public spheres of life. The data shows that globally, the mainstream contention about the role of religious politics is that it

simultaneously spurs socio-economic development and negates social stability in sub-Saharan African countries, of which Ghana's case is no exception. One of the key respondents alluded to the fact that:

While some anti-religious scholars see religion as an anachronism and that it constrains the human rights of people as well as aggravates the social progress of society, the pro-religious scholars are of the view that the role of religion rather catalyses the transformation of life and socio-economic development of individuals and groups.

The above submission supports the study's central argument that 'politically, religion plays an ambivalent role in Ghanaian society'. This assertion was endorsed by the submissions made by the interviewees that religious politics is a transformation of power to occasion a positive change in the lives of individuals in society, and at the same time, it is fundamental to intractable violence, conflict, and turbulent divisions within families and among groups in society. Also, the finding corroborated responses from the interviewees that though religious politics has the propensity to bring about positive transformation and change in individuals to trigger socio-economic development in Ghanaian society. Nonetheless, this can only happen when the different creedal persuasions, especially all religious bodies, bring their faith to bear on their actions in the practice of everyday life. This finding aligns with that of Baldwin (2004), who states that religion is increasingly becoming an enabler for the social progress of its people and at the same time a disabler of individuals' social progress.

5.1 Religious Claims

The study found that common wisdom holds that there is a special class of claims known as "religious claims." These claims are characterised by an inability to be religiously proven or disproven. These claims are that the role of religious politics is anachronistic, catalytic and ambivalent.

5.1.1 Anachronistic Claim

In the global discourse about the role of religion in society, some Western scholars have asserted that religion has become anachronistic and that it inhibits human freedom/rights and frustrates the social progress of society (Jerolimov et al., 2024). This assertion seems to resonate with the thoughts of Karl Marx who argued many years ago saying "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions (Marx as cited in Jerolimov et al., 2024). It is the opium of the people". It is Marx's view that people can be influenced by religion to the extent that they can begin to do unthinkable things, all in the name of religion. For instance, in some parts of Africa, Ghana is no exclusion, there are cases where believers of some churches are asked to eat grass for healing and deliverance purposes, while others are told to drink the bath water from their pastor so they can be anointed for prosperity or protected against evil or malevolent forces (Dovlo, 2006). These examples bring to the fore very worrying truths about Christianity, a religion that ought to refrain from different forms of abuse and to be more prophetic in upholding the teachings of Jesus Christ about showing love towards a neighbour, sharing and doing good to all.

Ghana is a secular country and has all the major religions in existence: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional religions, including deities which play their expected roles in the society. Given this strong presence and the socio-development orientation of these three major religions, Ghana is well-placed to benefit from their services in a myriad of ways. However, religion alone cannot handle the social challenges of society. It will require the contribution of families and communities, and coordinated efforts, interventions and professional guidance from state and nonstate institutions.

5.1.2 Catalyst Claim

Brown (2018) acknowledges that religion is important as morality and law promote social cohesion in an orderly arrangement of social relations. Thus, no matter the form of religion, the effect of its performance or practices may be socially valuable because they have the potential to produce specific positive benefits such as good health and long life, sons to carry on the family name, wealth, success

in occupation, good rainy season, bumper harvest for both crops and livestock, success in battle and transition to eternity. Brown (2018) goes on to advocate that a sufficient number of diverse religions or religious cults must be studied in terms of their relationship with the particular society in which they are found.

This paper has demonstrated that religion is a strong catalyst for change and development, and this outcome feeds into the broader discourse about the role of religion in society. However, it also acknowledges that religion has a dual character in the practice of everyday life as it helps groups and individuals to change and grow through faith and doctrine.

5.1.3 Ambivalent Claim

The study has demonstrated that the role of religious politics is ambivalent, as it is presented as a façade in the process of helping groups and individuals to change and grow through faith and doctrine. Also, it has the potential to be used for negative ends. It is partly the impact of this duality that accounts for the slow pace at which religion may be said to be a force for change and socioeconomic development in Ghanaian society. Additionally, the researchers have shown that despite the negative narratives about the role of religion in Ghana, one cannot ignore the many religious schools and institutions, hospitals, clinics and other social services for people. These services demonstrate that religion is not only about the transformation of individuals or groups but also the institutions and structures that help to improve the quality of life at different levels.

Furthermore, the application of religious values, norms and doctrines in different social contexts of Ghanaian society through sustained good leadership by religious leaders and state actors may further reinforce the potential of religion as a conservative force for change and development. This may lead to good neighbourliness and social cohesion among the different ethnic, religious and social classes/groups in the country and bring them together for the common good.

Media technology has brought about great advancements in the use of the radio, television, and the internet for many good purposes, including the propagation of the Christian message through different media outlets. But, at the same time, some pastors or charlatans are using the television, for example, to deceive or woo innocent believers into believing that pastors can change their lives overnight. These charlatans succeed because many believers of the different Christian persuasions believe that a meaningful life is achievable only through reliance on religious leaders or prayer. It thus comes as little surprise that the Ghanaian religious landscape, especially of the Christian tradition, is inundated with leaders whose major interest is their own interests or benefits rather than the good of the members and society.

5.2 Religious Politics and Social Change

The study found that change has been the import of the messages of the prophets in the Bible and the Qur'an. In Christianity, the message of Jesus Christ is about an individual change of heart, mind and life. This is because God, who is the judge of moral conduct, will look at the way believers in Christ have lived in harmony and cared for one another to determine the state of man's communion with God here and in the hereafter. In Ghana, Christianity and Islam are great religions that have greatly impacted their followers. They complement the efforts of the Government in the provision of education from kindergarten to the tertiary level; they provide medical care from health posts to hospitals; they provide relief services, offer employment to thousands of Ghanaians and provide many other areas of social services to the Ghanaian people.

However, these religions have failed to address the glaring difference between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. There seems to be a breakdown of discipline in many sectors of life, including the workplace and the family. It appears that the religiosity of the Ghanaian is only in the Church, Mosque, or shrine. There seems to be an apparent disconnect between faith and practice. Here, the researchers posit that religion and faith should serve as a guide to professionals, businessmen and women, and

traders, among other persons, in the conduct of their businesses and lives. In making ethical decisions about life issues or work, the tenets of one's religious ethical content should guide the process. The Muslims must be guided by the Qur'an and the Hadith, the Christians by the Bible, tradition and the magisterium, and for the traditionalists, the cherished religious and cultural values, some of which are enshrined in the sayings and taboos, natural law, and conscience (Gussler, 2017). Arguably, this process has the potential to bring great improvement and transformation to the different sectors of society.

Furthermore, the researchers contend that the common key ethical mandate in all the religions in Ghana for their adherents should be unity, peace and love. These values are needed to bring about personal and collective development. For this to be achieved, leaders of different religious persuasions may make it their topmost agenda to give teachings and innovative programmes to enhance the knowledge and commitment of the people. According to Evans-Pritchard (1965), religion plays a major role in the maintenance and support of social order, so it should be given a central place in the social system. Religion can help to address issues such as indiscipline, lack of respect, especially for the aged, illegal wealth, ostentatious living, corruption and deviant behaviour. Religion challenges people to change their attitude, and since Ghanaians are said to be religious, it should not be too difficult for the people to change and use religion as a catalyst for transforming society. The researchers argue that for any process of change to be effective, leaders of the different religious groups in the country must lead the way.

Today, as in the past, there have been initiatives by some religious leaders in the fight against bribery and corruption and matters of sanitation. But the effort was short-lived. The process of change must be sustained not only through the lifestyle of the leaders but also through the work and practice of their followers. There is an absolute need for continuity and persistence in these initiatives. Furthermore, there is a need for the effective exercise of prophetic roles by the different faith persuasions. Religious leaders must speak to issues that call for change and be voices for the voiceless. It must be admitted that this is not an easy task, but religious leaders should strive to lead the way and be courageous in speaking up so things can change for the good of all, and not for a few and to bring rapid development to the area, not only concerning physical infrastructure but also health and educational facilities primarily for the benefit of the poor and the underprivileged. This is a positive demonstration of the impact religious politics should bring to bear on society.

This demonstrates that it is important that religious groups get involved in the affairs of their communities, help the communities identify their needs and find productive ways to address them. For instance, it will be good for religious groups to develop training programmes to offer employable skills and expertise to the youth in the various communities so they can contribute in their own small way for the good of their families and society. Additionally, the various religious faiths may leverage the process of inter-religious dialogue to promote peace and unity among themselves and in society. The example of interreligious cooperation among the different faiths may lead to the promotion of a culture of respect, tolerance and belongingness in the larger Ghanaian society. The result of this process will be peace and development. The use of the media (print and electronic) has proven to be a good source of disseminating educational information and for other purposes.

5.3 Summary of Analysis of Literature and Findings

The study reveals three (3) main theoretical perspectives on religious politics. The Anachronistic (Pessimist) Perspective, represented by scholars like Mbiti and Atiemo, sees religion as potentially constraining human rights, aggravating social instability, and impeding development. In contrast, the Catalyst (Optimist) Perspective, championed by scholars such as Asamoah-Gyadu and Adogame, positions religion as a positive force providing moral frameworks and resources for socio-economic development. Meanwhile, the Ambivalent (Dualist) Perspective, advanced by scholars like Nukunya and Gyekye, offers a view that recognises religion's dual character as both facilitating and hindering

development depending on context. The findings confirm these three perspectives, especially highlighting the ambivalent nature of religious influence.

The findings acknowledge religious institutions' significant contributions to education and healthcare in Ghana. Nukunya (2016) documents how religious organisations have established numerous schools and health facilities, particularly in rural areas. The findings confirm that some religious bodies are contributing to social development in the health, education and spiritual growth matters. This alignment demonstrates consensus on the positive institutional contributions of religious organisations to social development. The role of religious networks in economic empowerment is recognised. Adogame (2013) emphasises how religious affiliations facilitate access to resources and networks that enhance economic activity. Similarly, the findings note religion's role as a transformation of power to occasion a positive change in the lives of individuals in society. This shared recognition highlights the economic dimension of religious influence beyond purely spiritual matters. Also, the research findings introduce specific terminology that appears to be an original contribution to the discourse. The findings not only confirmed the main argument but also introduced new phrases like 'ambivalent role' and 'dualism role.' While the literature mentions an 'Ambivalent (Dualist) Perspective', the findings suggest this terminology emerged from the study itself rather than from prior literature, representing a conceptual refinement of existing frameworks.

In addition, the findings highlight media technology's double-edged influence in religious contexts, which is not directly addressed in the literature review. The findings posit that media technology has brought about great advancement in the use of the radio, television, and the internet for many good purposes, including the propagation of the Christian message. At the same time, some pastors or charlatans are using the television, for example, to deceive or lure innocent believers. This observation about the dual nature of modern communication technologies in religious practice represents a unique contribution to understanding contemporary religious dynamics in Ghana. The study identifies specific conditions necessary for positive religious transformation that are not explicitly covered in the literature review. The findings state that religious politics has the propensity to bring about positive transformation in individuals to trigger socio-economic development in Ghanaian society; nonetheless, this can only happen when the different creedal persuasions, especially all religious bodies, bring their faith to bear on their actions in the practice of everyday life. This conditional framework offers a clearer understanding of when and how religion positively influences development.

The findings emphasise the need for synergistic approaches among religious bodies. Thus, the power of religious politics to occasion positive transformational change in the different sectors of society depends on how religious bodies surmount the challenges of everyday life and build synergies based on their faith to manage the private and public spheres of life. This emphasis on inter-religious cooperation provides practical insights for leveraging religious influence for development.

The findings characterise religious claims as a special class of claims known as 'religious claims.' These claims are characterised by an inability to be religiously proven or disproven. This philosophical framing of religious assertions provides a theoretical foundation for understanding religious discourse that extends beyond the existing literature. Furthermore, the findings provide concrete examples of religious exploitation in some parts of Africa, of which Ghana is no exception. There are cases where believers of some churches are asked to eat grass for healing and deliverance purposes, while others are told to drink the bath water from their pastor. These specific instances move beyond general discussions of exploitation to document particular practices, offering empirical evidence that enriches the understanding of religious malpractice in the Ghanaian context.

These unique findings contribute new perspectives to the understanding of religious politics in Ghana, particularly regarding the conditions needed for positive religious influence, the impact of modern media, and specific mechanisms of religious exploitation. They extend the existing literature

by providing more insights into the complex relationship between religion and development in contemporary Ghanaian society.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Religious politics in Ghana can stimulate nation-building, contributing to education, health care, and job creation. However, they can also empower predation and social fragmentation through dubious practices and tensions between faiths. The effectiveness varies through Christianity, Islam and Traditional religions, where it is effective depending on how principles are understood and applied. Maximising the positive potential and minimising the risks of religion, the study concludes, is a balancing act that can be approached with success. This includes the promotion of interfaith dialogue, the encouragement of religious leaders to take an interest in practical development issues alongside traditional spiritual matters, and the need for greater cooperation between religious and state institutions. The question is whether religion can deliver both the spiritual side and the real, practical developmental need.

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