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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.Supp32.5>

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2021

Supp 32:52-69

Date received:

20 January 2021

Date accepted:

21 June 2021

Date published:

10 December 2021

The role of religion and spirituality in transforming society

ABSTRACT

The role religions play in social transformation is ambiguous. Many wars have been fought, with religion as instigator and motivator. Even so, religions have, over centuries, constantly called out against violence and oppression and motivated the search for peace. Some religious leaders famously fought against apartheid, while others expressed support and legitimated apartheid. The question beckons as to why religion should be burdened with the task of transforming society. Is religion best equipped for this task? Is there no other social institution capable of performing this task? This study presents three potential motivations why religion should participate in social transformation, namely religion is best equipped to bring about social transformation; religion is least equipped to bring about social transformation, and spirituality as an alternative to religion as transformation catalyst. This study wants to understand what transformation is and what role religion can play in contributing to social transformation. To achieve this, a clear understanding of the difference between religion and spirituality is necessary. This study uses the method of critical analysis of available literature on the topic.



Published by the UFS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The phrase “religious transformation” can be interpreted in two ways: religion as being the agent, or religion as being the object of the process of transformation. In some cases, religion can indeed be both the subject and the object. The ensuing discussion focuses on religion as the agent in the transformation

process, although religion can simultaneously be perceived as the one being transformed through its participation in transforming society.

Religion can take on different roles in the debate on religion as agent of social development and transformation. Religion can act as the champion alerting and participating in the struggle against social injustices and restoring justice. Religion can also create and perpetuate structures and conditions conducive to injustices. This article investigates an alternative perspective on religion. This perspective does not emphasise the institutional participation of religion in social matters, but rather the effect of the spirituality of members of society on the process of social development and transformation.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Is religion the redeemer and saviour of society or the villain that contributes to the detriment of society? In history, religion has proved itself to be comfortable as either a redeemer or a perpetrator. The evaluation of the interaction of religion with civil society depends on the view of the evaluator. In the 1930s, in many European countries, non-Jewish members of society reacted indifferently to the exclusion of Jews from social privileges (see Goldberg 2017). But such exclusion is surely regarded as negative from the perspective of both a Jew and members of society with a social conscience. This article investigates and emphasises the role of those members of society with, what at this stage I vaguely want to refer to as a social conscience that can be considered an expression of spirituality.

According to Kalu (2010:37), religion can be used as instrument for political and economic conflict. Despite this abuse of religion, it can also play a role in transformation (Agbiji & Swart 2015:5). As an example of this ambiguous role religion can play in society, Agbiji and Swart (2015:1) argue that religion in Africa, although contributing to the perpetuation of poverty, can still play a role in social transformation. The way in which religion functions in social transformation is conditional. As Agbiji and Swart (2015:8) indicate, to pray for improved conditions during a time of poverty does not take away the responsibility to speak out against state-supported corruption causing poverty. The questions beckon as to who assigned this task of being social guardian to religion, and is religion best equipped to take on this function in society? Some societies would prefer that religion takes on this responsibility, while, in other societies, religion will be shunned from social activities. Not only does religion disqualify itself from participation in social transformation; social structures can also marginalise religion. Faith-based organisations are, at times, excluded as

an actor and contributor to social development in civil society (McDuie-Ra & Rees 2010:21).

Whatever reasons there may be for assigning the task of social transformation to religion or denying it this role, it is important to understand what religion is.

The way in which one views religion contributes to the argument as to why religion is perceived as best equipped to contribute towards social transformation. Agbiji and Swart (2015:2) argue that, based on an African understanding of religion, religion is viewed as the root of all life. This holistic understanding of religion causes the perception that religion permeates every aspect of social life. This is, however, only an African view of religion. A modern or Western understanding of religion places religion as simply a segment among all other segments of existence. Religion is then only one more aspect of human existence and not the main root of all life. This paragraph only dealt with the perceived function of religion, but a substantive definition is also required.

Despite concerns that the concept of religion is a modern, Western, and colonial construct (Chidester 2017:75), it is still necessary to provide a definition of what constitutes religion. From a social perspective, Durkheim (2001[1912]:46) defines religion as follows:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community.

According to Durkheim, the purpose of religion is to unite society. Although religion is supposed to unite society, it can also divide society, as religion can also function as a cultural identity marker (Woodhead 2011:112, 119) and a way of constructing identity (Selinger 2004:533), demarcating groups in society along religious lines. Considering this ambiguous and binary understanding of the function of religion, the question then arises as to whether religion can be trusted with such a noble task of transforming society?

Karl Marx is remembered for his unbridled critique of religion as being an opiate to the people. Religion reinforces a social structure maintaining the suppression of the labourers, in order to keep an unjust social structure intact. Marx also expressed the very nature of religion as being the cry of protest against suffering (Raines 2002: 5). Religion has a moral function in society to speak out for the sake of the oppressed, the deprived and the despised (Raines 2002:5) and to be the voice of protest of the poor and

the exploited (Raines 2002:6). In this way, religion has a place and function to both act and speak against socially induced suffering in the forms of exploitation and degradation (Raines 2002:8).

From a Christian perspective, the reason why religion ought to engage with social justice is that God is interested in the poor and the marginalised and expects his followers to assist all those in need (Matt. 25:40).

Once we recognize the identification of Jesus with the poor, we cannot any longer consider our own relation to the poor as a social ethics question; it is a gospel question (Bosch 1991:437).

According to Bosch (1991:437), there is “the indissoluble connection between theology and social ethics”. Durkheim indicated that religion is not a private, but a social matter.

The problem of my own bread is a material issue, but the problem of my neighbour’s bread is a spiritual problem (Bosch 1991:437).

It becomes clear that it is irresponsible to assign religion with the task of social transformation in generic terms. Some contextualisation is required. Every context needs a specific arrangement and application of *humanitas*. Religion functions differently in every context. It cannot be denied that religion has, over the centuries, played a huge role in bringing about social change and transforming societies (Herbert 2001:1). The role of religion in social transformation has changed over time and has been diversified. This diversification consists of either expansion or retreat from social life (Herbert 2001:8). The diversification reflects a context-sensitive approach.

An important factor in this debate is the problem of utilitarianism. Turner (2011:41) explains the “utilitarian problem” as follows. Religion can be perceived as a utility to be used to accomplish something. The value of religion is then measured only in as much as it contributes to accomplishing something, or stated more bluntly, in as far as religion can do something for society. With this understanding of religion, it becomes the means to an end. The provision of assistance by religion to bring about social transformation addresses the social need for change. Religion is, however, more than a utility. It is a cultural expression of the human awareness of the transcendental and determines social behaviour in terms of rituals and ethics (Sundermeier 1999:17). Religion is more than a utility at the disposal of society.

This investigation will not follow a qualitative approach, nor investigate any case studies. A critical analysis of literature available will contribute

to a description and explanation of the role religion can play in social transformation.

This research evaluates the different positions religion can take regarding social transformation. Three positions will be discussed. First, religion is best equipped to facilitate social transformation. Secondly, religion is least equipped to facilitate social transformation. Thirdly, as an alternative to the two previous polarities, spirituality is required to bring about social transformation. In this section the advantages of focusing on spirituality instead of religion will be discussed. Before starting with the three positions religion can take, it is necessary to clarify what constitutes transformation.

3. WHAT IS TRANSFORMATION?

Transformation implies a discontent with the present situation and the will to move away from an undesirable context to a better society (Du Toit 1999:3). This can imply a move away from poverty, un- and underdevelopment, social injustice, poor education, and insufficient medical services. The concept “development” falls within the same field of reference as transformation. Middleton and O’Keefe (2001:6) state that development implies an undeveloped state as starting point, which refers to poverty in most instances. Development aims to establish social justice, reduce poverty, and create strong independent functioning organisations (Middleton & O’Keefe 2001:9). Middleton and O’Keefe (2001:12, 14) emphasise that development should be perceived as helping others to help themselves. Tomalin (2013:n.p.) defines development as “broad processes of social change”. In short, transition and transformation can function as a metaphor of hope (Du Toit 1999:5).

Several dimensions may help define the concepts “transformation” and “social responsibility”. McWilliams and Siegel (2001:117) define social responsibility from an economic perspective as

actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interest of the firm and that which is required by law.

Social transformation thus deals with helping society reach wholeness or a condition of harmony.

When addressing the matter of transformation from a theological perspective, Bosch (1991:126) uses the word “transformation” to describe the process of conversion in the life of Paul. Paul moves forward, leaves the past, but does not forsake or scorn his past. Being transformed by an

event that leads to his conversion to Christianity, Paul becomes a new “transformed” being, fully part of a new religion, but aware of the religion he left behind, as he found something better instead (Phil. 3:5-8). Paul finds himself in a new context and needs to readjust to the new context. Transformation calls for adjusting to a new context. “The transformation process stimulates a radical recontextualization” (Du Toit 1999:3).

Is every society in need of transformation? Perhaps this requires a different question. Is there an ideal or utopian condition – an ideal society¹ – to which all must aspire and, once reached, the need for transformation no longer exists? The problem is that the context of each member of society differs. As Marx pointed out (see Raines 2002:3), society consists of different classes and each class has different aspirations and challenges. Societies worldwide are becoming more diverse in terms of multicultural and multireligious identities. Who in society will then need to transform, and to whose advantage (and demise!) will transformation take place? Once again, the context of all those involved in transformation must be considered.

Transformation and development studies have become two technical terms that identify two separate disciplines of study. One similarity between the two concepts, however, is that they denote a progressive move away from a negative towards an advanced and positive condition. I am aware that the jargon used fits into a modern understanding of progressive evolutionary development, as if the past is negative and the future better. The emphasis is on indicating how changing contexts demand adjustments. The past is not altogether bad. But, in order to address the challenges posed by a globalised environment, societies need to adjust to the needs in a new context.

Transformation is thus to move over from brokenness to wholeness. The question needs to be asked as to whether religion is the best vehicle to assist in this transformation or transition. Is religion part of the solution or is it the problem?

4. THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN TRANSFORMATION

Selinger (2004:524-525) indicates how religion has become a neglected factor and is rarely included in development and transformation discourses. The main reason behind this, according to Selinger, is the effect of the modernisation and secularisation theories. The separation of state and religion led to an understanding that the state is concerned

1 See More's (1516) depiction of the ideal society on the island of Utopia.

with the material sphere and, therefore, with development, while religion is only concerned with the spiritual. Religion has been marginalised as a private matter. Since religion is considered part of culture, it is perceived to impede development (Selinger 2004:525). Religion and culture can slow down development (Tomalin 2013:n.p.).

There are also other views on the role of religion in development. Religion as institution can assist by providing the infrastructure to reach development goals. As a private and personal matter, religion can provide motivation to attain development goals. Religion is relegated to a spiritual domain and combined with development, in order to discuss the influence of spirituality on development (Selinger 2004:525-526). This last element will be discussed in more detail.

Selinger (2004:531) argues that religion should be a factor to be considered in the study of social development. The reason is the emergence of a new paradigm, the postmodern. A resurgence of religion is evident within a new changed context (Selinger 2004:531). A definite turn to include religion in the study of development has taken place (Tomalin 2013:n.p.). This is, according to Tomalin (2013:n.p.), due to the resilience of religion in the face of secularisation. The role of religion in society needs to be taken seriously (Tomalin 2013:n.p.).

According to Selinger (2004:535), it appears that the role religion can play in developing society is reduced to the moral and ethical spheres. For Brammer *et al.* (2006:229), the moral and ethical prescriptions that are consistent with religious doctrines and that provide guidance for ethical conduct in society are the essence of religious involvement in social responsibility. Religious affiliated individuals make ethical decisions in terms of judgement, action, and behaviour based on the individual's religious values (Brammer *et al.* 2006:231). These values include fairness, truthfulness, and trustworthiness. Common religious values can be reduced to the golden rule to treat others like you would want them to treat you (Brammer *et al.* 2006:231). Religion infuses society with moral fibre to act responsibly, driven by a moral conscience.

The discussion in this section clearly indicates that religion can and has taken on different roles in terms of transforming society. Religion can be marginalised and omitted from the discourse on development. Three possible positions can be identified where religion plays an active role in society. Religion can act in a positive way to bring about social change and act as liberator of society; religion can act in a negative way by disrupting society in such a way that religion is the perpetrator, causing disruption and disharmony in society. This research presents a third possible way, by

arguing that individual spirituality instead of institutionalised religion can contribute to bringing about social transformation in a responsible way.

4.1 Religion's positive impact on society

By its very nature, as Durkheim indicated, religion as social phenomenon, is linked to social well-being. Religion can impact positively on society; prevent violence; be viewed as the ethical and moral fibre of society, and mitigate social transformation.

The position where religion is perceived to be best equipped for social transformation rests on the premise that religion is essential to human existence. Religion is presented as the foundation or root of all branches of human existence (Agbiji & Swart 2015:2). Religion is one big whole and permeates all spheres of life (Agbiji & Swart 2015:2). As life cannot be compartmentalised, everything is connected (Agbiji & Swart 2015:2). A division between material and spiritual domains contributes to the marginalisation of religion. Religion is relevant to society: "spiritual truths cannot be separated from social realities" (Muzaffar 2002:104).

Agbiji and Swart (2015:10-12) discuss the role of, and positive contributions religion can make to social development:

- Religion instils values such as honesty, integrity, openness, and tolerance in society (see Ver Beek 2000:31).
- Religion provides moral direction to society.
- Religion creates hope and optimism in society.
- Religion creates awareness of social injustices.
- Religion contributes to social capital, making a difference to social well-being.
- Religion mobilises communities into action and directs resources to address problems.
- Religious communities provide an interface or platform for socio-economic activities.
- Religion is a uniting factor.

Johnston (2001:17) argues that religion does have a positive role in society:

[R]eligion is not merely a divisive force in the affairs of humankind. In some situations, it can unite people across ethnic, racial, and political lines through a common allegiance to their Creator. To the

extent that religious ties can, in fact, provide common ground (and a complementary, if not common, world-view and morality) between opposing nationalities or ethnic groups

Religion can play a role in intervening and preventing violence. Several examples confirm the role religion has played in peacebuilding and preventing war (Abu-Nimer 2001:685; Johnston 2001:17). The willingness of religious leaders to provide guidance and the infrastructure provided by institutional religion give religion access to the masses, enabling the facilitation of a peace process. The role religion plays in instigating violence has been highlighted for some time. The role religion can play in peacebuilding is, however, not often emphasised. Religion can be a powerful tool in conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Abu-Nimer 2001:685). Religion is equipped to have better access to communities and to communicate effectively on ground level (Abu-Nimer 2001:686).

Religion can unite people, as all suffering, agony, disease, and conflict have metaphysical causes (Muzaffar 2002:105). Life is more than materialism associated with economic gains, wealth, and greed. Life has spiritual elements (Muzaffar 2002:106). Human beings share in this universal spiritual need.

Religious institutions and organisations as well as faith-based organisations, in particular; they are making huge contributions to disaster relief, and they support and participate in development activities (Tomalin 2013:n.p.).

One strong motivation for Christianity to participate in social transformation flows from the implications of the World Council of Churches' Lausanne Declaration (2013), entitled *Together towards life*. This document clearly emphasises the role of religion and especially Christianity and communities of faith in transforming society. Religions become the ethical fibre in society, by contributing to the common good and thus becoming the driving force behind transformation. Christian mission is no longer perceived to have the goal of converting others, but through dialogue to remind others of a "mutual encounter of commitments" (Article 95). Article 94 of the Declaration states that

[d]ialogue is a way of affirming our common life and goals in terms of the affirmation of life and the integrity of creation.

On the nature of dialogue, the Declaration continues:

Dialogue provides for an honest encounter where each party brings to the table all that they are, in an open, patient and respectful manner.

Article 96 formulates the goal of dialogue as follows:

Dialogue ... is necessary to protect rights of minority groups and religious freedom and to enable all to contribute to the common good. Transformation is a communal endeavour as followers of all faiths and religions have equal rights and responsibilities.

Considering a multi-religious environment, one critically needs to ask: Whose religion will fulfil these duties and actions? The problem is that the religion of the ruling class in society may become the dominant and oppressive mechanism in society. All groups in society will then be forced to comply with the morals, values and suggestions made by the dominant religion. The philosophical (theological) basis of the dominant religion will become prescriptive to all thought and considerations in society, resulting in a religiously endorsed hegemony of society. Religion acts as guardian of society. Calls abound to include religious actors in the transformation process. These actors are perceived to provide alternatives to development and present “counter-hegemonic agency” (McDuie-Ra & Rees 2010:21). Religion, in this sense, protects society from itself. Religion has and will play a positive role in society. But that is only one view among many.

4.2 Religion’s negative impact on society

A second view of the role of religion in society is that religion only brings misery and contributes to the suffering in the world. The solution to social transformation should come from anything but religion. The evil religion can inflict has already been alluded to earlier with reference to Karl Marx’s warning. The negative effect of religion on society has been emphasised for a long time (Abu-Nimer 2001:685). Religion is perceived to instigate violence and war, to perpetuate oppression and marginalisation, to contribute to ecological disasters, and to impose hegemonic moral matrixes on society. Religion can take on an authoritarian form and suppress the individual, in order to maintain mainline belief and practices (Turner 2011:48). The hegemony of religion can suppress and prescribe to society by imposing moral constraints (Turner 2011:48).

If religion is not impacting negatively on society, it can also be absent from society. According to the modernisation and secularisation theories, religion will become obsolete, disappear from society, and become at most a private matter. Many authors (for example, Tomalin 2013:n.p.; Ebaugh 2002:389) have investigated this and concluded that religion is

re-emerging and is here to stay. This implies that there is no end in sight of religion inflicting evil on society.

Religion can perpetrate distress and disharmony and create the conditions that cause society to need transformation. Armstrong (2014:7) argues that monotheistic religions, in particular, tend to lead to violence in societies. According to Armstrong (2014:7), it is even generally accepted that religion is “inherently violent”. According to Huntington (1993:25), nations are formed by religions and the dominance of nations in international conflicts – the “clash of civilizations” as Huntington refers to it – will have religion retained as the force sustaining conflict. According to Huntington (1993:25), religion is the most important marker of differentiation between civilisations. Religion then becomes the propeller of conflict (see Juergensmeyer 2017:5).

The internal struggles between factions within religions contribute to the state of violence. The way in which sacred texts are interpreted motivates intra-religious violence (see Appleby 1999:82). This violence spills over into society, thus creating an unstable environment.

Mdende (1999) presents a variation of the argument that religion causes violence. Religions can contribute to marginalisation in society. This is especially true in multi-religious and -cultural societies. The views of one religion are preferred above those of other religions. It might happen that one religion drives and gives structure to social transformation, neglecting or ignoring the views of other religions. Other religions can be considered inferior and primitive and perceived as being unable to contribute to the transformation process (Mdende 1999:144). Only the views of “recognised religion” are acknowledged (Mdende 1999:144). This can marginalise religions and cultures. Mdende’s argument clearly shows that it might appear as if religion is playing a positive role in society. In fact, by marginalising others, religion is creating disharmony in society.

Religion can, however, also contribute passively to an atmosphere of violence. Religion does not need to “do” something to contribute to the destruction of society. By merely maintaining silence in the face of injustice, religion perpetuates the evil of social injustices (Agbiji & Swart 2015:6). Religious leaders can easily be trapped into competing for political power and social status, using religion as a means to this end (Agbiji & Swart 2015:14). The complacency of religious leaders exacerbates the continuation of corruption (Agbiji & Swart 2015:15).

From an anthropological point of view, Niebuhr (1936) argues that human beings are, by nature, evil and cannot be trusted to bring about good. Religion consists of human beings who act on challenges in society

in ways that are motivated by religious convictions. Can religion contribute to peaceful resolutions of conflict? Is religion the best vehicle to drive a process of social transformation?

For Niebuhr, human nature cannot guarantee that it has the best interest of society at heart. For Niebuhr (1936:xi), the individual does have the moral fibre to acknowledge the need of others and to be able to refrain from egoistically seeking their own good. Individuals may even have sympathy for others and a sense of justice (Niebuhr 1936:xi). Collectively, the moral egoism of individuals tends to create an immoral society (Niebuhr 1936:xi), where the needs of individuals are ignored and each individual seeks egoistically his/her own good. Niebuhr's (1936:xii) argument is directed against those in society who argue that religious people will maintain the good moral fibre in society, directing society towards that which is good for all.

The reasons for this difference in moral behaviour between individuals and groups is, on the one hand, the absence of what Niebuhr (1936:xii) calls a "rational social force" – what I would like to refer to as "social conscience" – keeping natural impulses of society in check, and the compounded egoistic impulses of individuals, resulting in a collective egoism, on the other.

Niebuhr's (1936:xix) argument is summarised as "naïve confidence in the moral capacity of collective man" and will not bring about social change. Some religious leaders exhibit this naivety, believing that an oppressive government will act with justice, once they are reminded of their moral obligation towards justice in society. Those who think that religion or reason can solve social problems fail to "recognise the stubborn resistance of group egoism to all moral and inclusive social objectives" (Niebuhr 1936:xx). The bottom line for Niebuhr is that the overestimation of human virtue and moral capacity leads to the failure of seeking solutions within religion and reason to bring about social good.

Despite a negative assessment of the social role religion can play, Niebuhr (1936:xxiv) identifies the social responsibility of religion. For him, religion can contribute to the humanising of individuals and purge society of as much egoism as possible through education. Religion can instil an awareness of humanness in society, thus resulting in a social conscience.

This reflection presents arguments against religion as best suited vehicle to contribute to transformation. The ambivalence of religion of having the potential to bring good and evil to society, leaves one at an impasse, requiring a third possible perspective.

4.3 The spiritual dimension of religion

The spiritual dimension of religion creates a spiritual awareness and causes society to be spiritually attuned. Although Tomalin (2013:n.p.) agrees with Selinger's (2004:585) analysis that religion has been neglected in the debate on social transformation and development, she identifies an emergence of the importance of religion within the debate. The new focus is now, however, not on religion, but on spirituality. Ver Beek (2000:31) confirms that the debate on development tends to ignore the matter of spirituality. Spirituality plays an essential role in terms of decisions made by individuals whether to participate in social development.

Spirituality refers to religion that is not institutionalised and not focused on doctrine (Tomalin 2013:n.p.). Ver Beek (2000:32) defines spirituality as a relationship with the supernatural or spiritual realm. This relationship provides meaning and a basis for reflection, decision, and action (Ver Beek 2000:32). Cox (2017:187-188) also prefers to discuss the contribution religion can make to development from the perspective of a spiritual interpretation of religion. As opposed to the traditional understanding of religion as the obligatory adherence to the beliefs, this focuses on a God (Armstrong 2014:2). It becomes clear that a broader understanding of what constitutes religion is necessary, in order to discuss the contribution religion can make to social development and transformation. This proves the need for a re-contextualisation, as referred to earlier.

Religion is the human reaction to becoming aware of the existence of the transcendental. This awareness is expressed in rituals and ethics (Sundermeier 1999:17). Although the human expression is culturally determined, it is still an expression of a spiritual awareness; an attempt at incarnating the experience of the heart and soul being touched. Religion is then not a separation of the sacred and the profane, but the uniting of the material and the spiritual (Cox 2017:190). Human experiencing and expressing the spiritual exist in this world. The reality of the worldly existence cannot be separated from the spiritual (Muzaffar 2002:114). The result is a spiritual vision of humanity (Muzaffar 2002:114). Muzaffar (2002:103) indicates that the only solution to challenges facing humanity is spiritual (Muzaffar 2002:103). The only effective cures are spiritual (Toynbee & Ikeda 1976:129). Humanity needs a new spiritual foundation.

Religion is no longer presented as the institutionalised form of beliefs and practices, but as the individualised expression of spiritual experience (Cox 2017:194). The origin or heart of religion lies in the "spiritual human impulse [that shows] appreciation for the sacred dimension of life" (Cox 2017:195). This spiritual awareness causes human beings to consider all

life as sacred (Cox 2017:199) and creates the human consciousness to contribute towards improving the life conditions for all.

The spiritual interpretation of religion emphasises that religion can play a role in instilling values such as honesty, integrity, openness, and tolerance in society (Agbiji & Swart 2015:10). Religion can instil values that guide society in developing a just society. Religion can bring hope and optimism (Agbiji & Swart 2015:11).

Religion can bring social, moral, and spiritual resources to the peacebuilding process. The spiritual dimension in religious peacebuilding can create a sense of engagement and a commitment both to peace and to transforming a relationship (Abu-Nimer 2001:686).

One of the advantages of a spiritual approach is that it emphasises ethics, morals and values and does not focus on religion as a cultural identity marker. When religion contributes to identity, it stimulates the formation of opposing identities in society, leading to division and clashes (Huntington 1993:25). With the focus on a spiritual existence, communities find more similarities in terms of mutual concerns and solutions. The focus is no longer on maintaining one's own identity. Institutionalised religion functions from a basis of power, based on the authority of a sacred text. Spirituality is not based on power, but on relations.

Religion will continue to fulfil the ambiguous role in social transformation, oscillating between negative and positive influences. A broader understanding of religion, with the emphasis on its spiritual nature, reveals a different approach to the role spiritualised beings can play in society. Spiritually inclined human beings will have a social conscience, willing to address injustices, by considering values and principles not necessarily reflecting a religious affiliation or religious need for power in society but emanating from a spiritually attuned orientation.

5. CONCLUSION

The mistake can easily be made that the debate on religious transformation is reduced to the single view from a religious perspective. It is, however, important to note that religion functions as an influential factor among and is dependent on many other factors impacting on society. The rise of technology brought about globalisation, thus causing religions to interact with one another. Familiarity does not guarantee peaceful coexistence; it creates an awareness of similarities. In this sense, religion can unite communities and create an awareness of shared values and concerns (Johnston 2001:18).

From the spiritual perspective, religion still retains the responsibility to communicate. Religions have a message to share with the world. Besides reminding the world of a spiritual realm to which humanity can relate, religions have the prophetic responsibility to speak out against injustices in society. Religions can create hope and optimism. In this way, spiritually attuned members of society can contribute to the responsible transformation of society.

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Keywords

Religion

Transformation

Society

Spirituality

Trefwoorde

Godsdiens

Transformasie

Gemeenskap

Spiritualiteit