

ARISE BLACK CHILD

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN THE REVOLUTION

05 JULY 2020

By Mabasa Difference

Outline

History of the African Church and its role in society

A secular state and how the church relates to it

The current disposition of the church

Drawing a future hope

Introduction

The church is a key pillar of society and influences a majority of the people in many different societies, although being a more spiritual body, the church plays a major role in shaping the culture and behavior of the people within its sphere of influence.

Whether we talk about a revolution as a drastic and far-reaching change in ways of thinking and behaving or as the overthrowing of a government, it is important to look at the role that is and should be played by the church as a major influencer in the way that people think and live.

This paper will explore in the African and South African context, the role played by the church in the emancipation of the black child psychologically, economically and politically.

History of the African Church and its role in society and a biblical reference

The role played by the church in the African liberation struggle is quite evident. In fact, it was a bit difficult to separate struggle heroes and members of the clergy as those who led the struggle came from the church. Emperor Haile Sellasie was from The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church which has a membership of about 36 million, Julius Nyerere and Thomas Sankara were Roman Catholics, with Thomas Sankara known to have been a regular who was loved by the priests, his parents also desired for him to become a priest. We can argue that some of the values of these leaders are values that are common to the people in their respective religious groups.

Of course, pointing out individuals who played part in the liberation is not enough evidence to show the role played by the African church in society. We need to also look into the role the church played beyond producing individuals who went on to become struggle heroes on their own. When looking at the role played by the church as an institution, one would not forget the role played by churches in Ghana's education sector, where the Christian church and other religious groups were responsible for the establishment of many educational infrastructures and programs. It was not rare across Africa to find churches playing a role in the development of communities, if they were not sending out leaders to govern, they were helping in building schools and even clinics.

If we want to date back these practices by the church, biblical literature provides ancient political history of which the link between political and religious leadership can be clearly understood.

Whether you are Christian or not, we can all acknowledge that the bible provides us with a great deal of political history, from the times of the judges to the kings and later the governors. Rev. Calisto Odede has argued that when you read the bible as literature, the bible becomes a highly political book, we see a lot of political activities and even tensions, we see governments overthrown and we see religious leaders involved in liberation struggles. What one can draw from it is that religious leaders are the ones that governed in the early days with King David being amongst the first to institutionalize governance, Nehemiah being an example of a leader rooting out corruption and showing compassion for the people.

One conclusion we can draw from these references is that the church as an institution did not distance itself from issues affecting the people, as opposed to being just a spiritual body catering only for spiritual needs.

A secular state and how the church relates to it

It is quite obvious that the same cannot be said about the church today, with time the world has become more and more secular. A secular state means that by law, the governing body of a country rejects any religious considerations. The concept of Secularization divides the world into two, a world that is devoted to the spiritual world and another that is devoted to the temporal world.

A secular government has its body of work lying within temporal dimensions, not only is it not concerned about the spiritual and to a certain extent the moral wellbeing of its society but it is also not bound by law to make any considerations based on issues of faith. People may still have the right to religion but a secular government in its own does not adopt the religious mechanisms that are employed but churches to ensure moral purity.

The transition has surely led to a state of disconnect between the state and the church, if we look at how the church relates to the state today, we see that the level of collaboration is no longer where it used to be. Instead of working together to bring about change in society, the church has removed itself from being actively involved in shaping the politics of the country. The church has become another bystander who is just watching things as they unfold in the political battle sphere.

One cannot blame only secularization for the way government-church relations are but also the current model of the church in itself. The church today looks more like a victim of government decisions, I will give a couple of examples within the South African context.

Around the year 2018, the Portfolio Committee on Women in the Presidency suggested that legislation is needed to regulate those churches operating outside the law.

The committee was briefed by the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission) on the commercialization of religion and the abuse and exploitation of people's belief systems. This was after a series of bizarre activities happening in the church, from fraud, money laundering and even allegations of rape.

The response of the South African church left much to be desired, as it took a stance against the regulation of the church, one would wonder why the church would defend itself for such actions and felt threatened by the suggestion to regulate churches. The point the church argued was that a secular government cannot regulate issues of faith, fair enough, but the question would remain, why has the church not recommended a different solution to this crisis of lawlessness that exists within the church?

The second example is an issue that arose during the Corona virus pandemic, after government put in place measures to curb the spread of the virus, all gathering including religious gatherings would be prohibited and for obvious reasons, if people continued to gather for religious activities churches would then become a hotspot of the virus. The government then made room for services it considered essential to continue under certain restrictions.

The church gave another response that was received with mixed feelings by society, it argued that church is essential, for me, the church had so soon forgotten what a secular state is, when it stood against the regulation of the church it understood that governments rejects any religious considerations and therefore cannot regulate issues of faith, how then did the church not understand that a secular government would never deem a service essential due to its spiritual impact? As argued earlier, all government considerations are made within temporal boundaries, meaning if a service was to be deemed essential by government, it would be by merits of its direct impact on livelihoods and basic human needs within the temporal world.

This has exposed to us an interesting fact, if the church was still doing as much work in society as it used to do, it would have been considered essential for some reason. What happened to the church giving daily food distributions? What happened to the church playing a role in the provision of basic needs such as food, shelter and educational facilities? What happened to the church being involved in farming? This needs us to carefully look at the current disposition that hinders it from playing a meaningful role in society and eventually causing it to play no role at all in the revolution and the struggle for total freedom.

The current disposition of the church

The church today as we see it differs a lot from what it used to be, we have moved from a time where it was difficult to distinguish between political and religious leaders because of how closely they work together and above that, they were in actual fact the same people.

The church today has lost its role in society, apart from the services it offers to the believers who congregate every week, it does not directly impact the lives of people living in surrounding communities. It is also worth noting that the church does not provide any mechanism for the emancipation of the black child. Needles to mention that many churches operate oblivious to economic and political issues, it was Joshua Maponga who said "You want to worship in a free society, but you do not want to be involved in the mechanisms that will deliver that freedom".

For the churches and church leaders that are still involved in politics, it seems to me that there is a lack of political ideas that will drive the revolution. Let me give a recent example, we know that there is a huge debate around the distribution of wealth and land in South Africa, it is evident that the current policy instruments have not worked, a motion was moved in parliament in 2018 to amend section 25 of the constitution to allow for more radical mechanisms, an ad hoc committee was then formulated to look into ways in which this can be achieved and due to the Corona virus the work could not continue.

Another motion was moved on the 30th of June 2020 to reinstate the committee so that it can continue with its work. Surprisingly, at least for me, the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) voted against the motion of which for me symbolizes voting against the revolution. It was of course no surprise that parties like the DA and FF Plus would vote against the motion, but for the ACDP, it is quite concerning.

We should maybe also look into how the model of the current church works against any revolution, with a religious system that appears to be highly colonized, it is almost impossible to picture the church participating in delivering economic freedom and the emancipation of the black child. It is not a surprise because church practices have become anti-Black and anti-African, the church continues to demonize Africanism and clings to white superiority. Take a look at how the church is run, listen to the music that is played, the way that people and communicate, it is easy to notice that these are far from being Afro-centric.

It is also worth noting that the church has somewhat declared politics to be impure and therefore unconsciously discouraging its members to actively participate in politics. Beyond is a leadership crisis within the church, we are talking about a church that has lost its moral values, from church leaders who are looting from the poor to those patriarchal men who rape and abuse women within the church. The reputation of the church has been affected heavily and members of society no longer see the church as a place they can run to but a place they should at all cost run away from.

Both political and religious leaders are overfed and unconcerned, unconcerned about the injustices that continue to exist. Corruption is everywhere, the church has degenerated morally and ideologically. The church has also portrayed a god who does not care about the lives of his people but only cares about their spirituality. That is why all energy is focused on enriching few individuals who then become little gods to be worshipped by everyone.

Drawing a future hope

Although we can very easily point out a lot of what has gone wrong, we cannot bring any solutions by standing and watching, we need to be able to come up with solutions to the problems that we have.

The church plays a very critical role in shaping people's lives and the way that people live with each other, it influences a larger number of people in the society. If we carefully study the behavior of the people of a particular society, we will notice that there are similar patterns in the way of life of people from the same religion. This is a powerful tool that can be used to drive a revolution. This should however not be seen as a way of hijacking the primary purpose of the church but a way of getting the church to fully reclaim its place in society.

Even for people who do not belong to any religion, there is a sense in which everyone agrees to the role played by the church in shaping the moral compact of society. The aim is to use this vehicle to achieve equality and freedom. While the world is crying about highly immoral leadership, we can look to pillars of society that promote moral purity and ethics. We need leaders with values that are driven by compassion and love for the people.

Those that are leading in the church should not shy away from politics, the church needs to produce a mass of ethical and morally pure leaders who will put an end to corruption, greed and lawlessness. We need to move away from the current model of the church that is not in contact with the realities of its people and model a society that seeks to help everyone live equally.

The world needs leaders who are all about their people and if the church can be intentional about building such leaders who will lead in love and all fairness, we will have leaders who are uncompromising and unapologetic about the revolution and that is the direction we need to go.