


10-18-2016

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Recommended Citation

Tonono, Siyabulela (2016) "Religious Response to Sexual Violence: A Black Theology Perspective," *Young African Leaders Journal of Development*: Vol. 1 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/yajlod/vol1/iss1/18>

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RELIGIOUS RESPONSE TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A BLACK THEOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at why it is necessary for churches to take part in the response to sexual and gender-based violence within the African context. As a starting point, it is necessary to discuss the nature of influence that religion has on the society. The discussion focuses on understanding religion as a coping mechanism for stress. Attention is then turned to the context of the Christian faith and available theological frameworks that can be a basis for response to sexual violence. The last part of this paper looks at the ability of the Christian church to mobilise communities and harness a wide geographic footprint to create a sustainable response to sexual violence within communities. The paper concludes with a few recommendations targeted at policy makers and church leadership on developing responses to sexual violence within communities.

RELIGIOUS RESPONSE TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE: A BLACK THEOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

Before we delve deep into the above outline, let us first confine our discussion to a concise meaning of the term sexual violence. The concept of sexual violence is one that is often difficult to pin down to one definition and is often misunderstood (Bradford, 2006). One cause for this difficulty is that several schools of thought define the concept differently. Psychiatry and psychology look at it as a behavioural disorder and define it within that framework. In the field of law, it is viewed from a perspective of social norms and legal principles. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines sexual violence as: “Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work. Coercion can cover a whole spectrum of degrees” (WHO, 2002).

It is regarded as the broad range of violent sexual behaviours that ranges from minor sexual deviant behaviours to sexual homicides (Bradford, 2006). Sexual violence is regarded as a spectrum of non-consensual sexual experiences, the most common one being that of rape (Brown et al., 2006). The key elements of sexual violence include the absence of consent and the varying nature of the actions that can be fitted into this definition. This gives us a clearer understanding of the concept of sexual violence. Now we can look at the influence of religion and its uses as a way to cope with life stress.

Reports state that 796 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa, out of 822 million, claim association to some religious group, be it as an adherent or an active member within that group (Pew Research Center, 2015). Africa is, by no stretch of imagination, a highly religious society. It is interesting to note the influence that religion has within any society. In this paper, the area of focus will be to explore the effects of religion in relation to coping with life stress.

Religion serves as a framework by which life events are understood and interpreted within the African context (Mbiti, 1969). An individual's religious belief systems operate as the lens through which the realities of everyday life are perceived and interpreted (Silberman, 2005). What this suggests is that any explanation of events is supported by a certain worldview. According to this view, religion offers its congregants a coherent belief system that gives meaning to the world.

Silberman argues that, much like any other meaning-making system, religion can influence the formulation of goals for self-regulation, affect emotions and influence behaviour (Silberman, 2005). Religion is at the epicentre of an immense web of beliefs, attitudes and feelings that form a worldview (Cottingham, 2003). There are varieties in worldviews and the African context has its own worldview through which events are understood. The African view interprets reality as a closed system where everything hangs together, with changes affecting all aspects of the entire system (Van Der Merwe, 2008). Within the African worldview the metaphysical, as represented by God and the ancestors, has a direct link to the physical manifestation of life experienced by humanity and the rest of nature.

In the Western worldview, religion is also a means of interpretation of the experiences of life events. Within the western view, this is known as religious coping. Religious coping is understood as being the use of cognitive or behavioural techniques that emanate out of an individual's spirituality when an individual is confronted with life stress (Tix and Frazier, 1998). A characteristic of religious coping is that it provides a significant end and meaning to events that are stressful (Pargament et al., 1999). It is viewed as the quest for purpose, emotional comfort, personal control and intimacy with others using one's spirituality and religious beliefs relating to stressful life events. Pargament et. al. argued that the most common use of religious coping takes place within the most disenfranchised sectors of society.

There is an ever-increasing body of empirical studies that have looked at religious coping and its effects in mitigating life stress. Some studies have looked at the short-term effects of religious coping and others the long-term effects. In a 2005 study that looked at the how religious meaning can influence the coping process in bereaved college students in America, evidence showed that religion can serve as a framework through which the bereaved can reframe their loss, look for more non-threatening interpretations, find coping resources, and identify areas of personal growth (Park, 2005).

Research also suggests that sexual victimisation has negative effects on an individual's trust of others in society (Tamburello et. al., 2014). In this context, trust is used to mean a default expectation of others' goodwill. He further suggests that the regular attendance of religious services weakened the negative effects that sexual victimisation has on trust in individuals (Ibid, 592). There is a body of evidence that proves that religion has the capability of shaping the lens through which individuals view their world. In stressful life events, religion can also be an antidote.

The significance of religion is not only on individuals but also on society (Silberman, 2005). The centrality of religion in modern day society is one that cannot be underplayed. There is no doubt that within the Western worldview, Christianity is one of the most dominant religions. It then becomes important that we understand Christian texts and how their interpretation has implications on our experience of the world. These interpretations of Christian texts are used

to create various theological frameworks. The theological frameworks that result from various interpretations of Christian texts become the theological foundations upon which churches across the world anchor their actions.

Mosala argues that biblical appropriations and interpretations are always framed by the social and cultural locations and commitments of those who do them (Mosala, 1989). Inherent in that idea is the notion that there are always biblical appropriations and interpretations that are being made. Within the Christian tradition, there are many theological frameworks that exist but the one that will be our focus will be that of Black theology of liberation. Moreso, the focus is on the relevance of black theology of liberation as a theological framework within the Christian tradition that can serve as a foundational basis for action against sexual violence.

It is necessary to look at black theology within its proper context if we are to get a full understanding of what black theology is. The emerging of black theology came around the 1960s in America during the civil rights movement. Writings of James Cone such as "Black theology and black power", published in 1968, are amongst some of the most influential writings that popularised the prophetic voice of figures such as Martin Luther King Jnr and Malcolm X, critics of racism (Mtshiselwa, 2015).

Black theology arose out of the suffering of black people in the United States of America and is anchored on the idea that any exposition of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that omits God's liberation of the poor is not a true exposition (Cone, 2010). In South Africa, the idea took form during the same time that the philosophy of black consciousness was taking root in the country. One cannot talk of black theology without referring to the philosophy of black consciousness (Mtshiselwa, 2015). Within the South African context, black theology emerged from the oppression of the apartheid regime. What is evident is that the theology was born in the face of oppression.

Black theology is a cultural tool born out of the struggle of black people that seeks to break the silence of Christian theology on the oppression of black people (Mosala, 1989). Black, in this context referring to those people that Boaventura de Sousa Santos classifies as nonexistent. "Nonexistent is to exist without any relevant or comprehensible way of being" (Santos, 2007). Black theology is a theology of liberation which reflects upon the socio-economic, ecclesiastical and political realities of the people in the African context (Muzorewa, 1989). It is deemed to be an attempt at presenting the Christian gospel to the black man with all its liberating power (Gqubule, 1974). As a model of theology, black theology is entrenched in the actualities of oppression (Vellem, 2015). What sets apart this framework of theology from other forms of theology is that the interlocutor of black theology is the "nonexistent". It is a counter-cultural form of theology that brings to the fore the lived experiences of the marginalised people in the society and seeks to use its interpretation of the Bible as a tool of liberation for such classes of people.

The rise of black theology out of a context of suffering and oppression makes it, as a theological framework, much more sensitive to the struggles of people across the world irrespective of the type of struggle. The manner in which black theology has found root in different parts of the globe such as Latin America, North America, the Caribbean and Africa illustrates how people with different struggles have found a voice within this theological framework. Sexual violence is highly prevalent in the African contexts and those that are mainly at the receiving end are women and children (Kilonzo et al. 2013). It is within a theological framework such as black theology that voices of marginalised women and children can find edification.

Black theology's presence, therefore, suggests that within the Christian tradition there is a theological framework that can be a foundational basis to build upon a response to sexual violence within the African context. A theological framework upon which a response can be built is not the only reason to encourage churches to respond to sexual violence. Kilonzo et. al. suggest that if responses to sexual violence are to be effective, they need to be community driven (Ibid: 5). The responses need a multi-faceted approach along the prevention-treatment continuum (Magner et. al., 2015).

Churches are the best places to use education to arouse dialogue on sexual violence as a way of creating awareness of the issue within their local context. These religious institutions are nodal points that need to be harnessed to educate and transform social attitudes towards sexual violence. "The use of religious spaces, as a whole, has not been properly examined by policy makers and neglects the sheer influence that religious communities have within the African continent." (Tearfund, 2013). A unique vantage point that churches have is that they are present at the local level and command respect within the communities they serve (LeRoux, 2015). Another key consideration is that the church has an ability to mobilise local communities that cannot be matched. In 1986 the Free Methodist Church in Congo (DRC) embarked on mobilising the communities they operate from to build schools. Within less than four years the church mobilised 29 churches to build 15 schools across the Democratic Republic of Congo (Tearfund, 2010).

The response of the Ecumenical movement in South Africa and its resistance to apartheid illustrates the ability of the church to mobilise communities (Khumalo, 2009). It is evident that government and organisations cannot match the church's presence in communities. Coupled with that presence is the ability to mobilise people and devoted members making it fertile ground in which responses to sexual violence can be planted and rooted.

We have seen that religion has an ability to negate the effects of life's stress to its membership and acts a coping mechanism in the face of stress as a response to sexual violence. Further to that, within the Christian context, it is necessary to have a theological framework upon which responses to sexual violence can be anchored. Black theology of liberation can be such a theological framework. The church has a footprint in every community that enables it to reach grassroots level, yet it operates at varying levels. This footprint coupled with its ability to mobilise communities makes it well placed to respond to sexual violence. One may even stretch the argument to say that the church is located strategically to further the African development agenda. If the church is to be useful in responding to sexual violence, several things need to happen.

1. At policy formulation stage, policymakers need to ensure that faith-based organisations are an integral part of the policy-making. There is a need to ensure that faith-based organisations such as churches are also an integral part of policy implementation regarding sexual violence due to their access to communities.
2. Churches need to show more interest to capacitate their membership on sexual violence and train their leadership on the issues that face the African context and how best to respond to the challenges of the African context.
3. There is need for a multi-stakeholder approach towards responding to sexual violence that also takes into cognizance the value faith-based communities bring into that discussion.

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