Relating the Teachings of the Gospel to Social Justice in Africa: The Case of Botswana

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Abstract

Using Botswana as a case study this paper demonstrates the relationship between theology and the temporal order in post-independence sub-Saharan Africa which continues to stir controversies among Christians and non-Christians alike. It is evident that many Africans and Christians in the post-colonial era are faced with serious socio-economic and political challenges in the form of landlessness, homelessness, subjection to undemocratic systems, violation of human rights, and the 'captivity of the Church'. The latter refers to the operations of the Church as a morally upright institution that is supposed to promote social justice but has been held hostage by its leadership. Generally, these challenges deny many Africans social justice. This paper argues that all these challenges can best be understood, interpreted, and addressed through Contextual Theological approaches.

Introduction

To deal with the issue of social justice we start by defining the basic idea of justice in general, which means impartiality or equal treatment of all citizens before the law. In other words, justice refers to giving people their due, or what they deserve or ought to have. This means that justice is rational rather than impulsive or emotional. Rational thinking is characterised by consistency whereby a leader does not operate whimsically or prejudicially (Waren 1977). Justice is also associated with proper administration of a society's laws to ensure that all persons, irrespective of ethnic origin, gender, race, and religion are treated equally. John Rawls (1972) has observed that social justice is linked to democracy, fairness or equal participation in government by all. Rawls definition of democracy and social justice has also been echoed by Allan Ball (1983) who defines democracy as having to do with individual rights, inviolability of the individual property rights, and limiting the powers of government to protect those rights. Theological and Christian interpretations of social justice can best be understood from Sterba (1980) who draws from the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who taught that justice is righteousness. Aristotle's idea of justice is amplified by Macquarie and Childress (1967) who argue that Christian and theological perspectives on justice entails equal consideration by all, and respect of individual freedom. The Christian view on social justice has three distinct though intertwining strands.

The first strand is traceable to the early Christian preachers and has been particularly developed in the Roman Catholic Church doctrine. This holds that there is natural justice for the benefit of human beings, and since it is believed that God created human beings in His own image, He gives every single person unique and yet equal value and dignity (Niebuhr 1963). The implication here is that all the resources on earth ought to be shared, not on the basis of political power or accidents of geography. This strand also maintains that justice promotes the common good for all human beings.

The second strand of Christian Theological thinking about justice is drawn from the story of religious experience, and it is the common heritage of Christians and Jews. Here the Hebrews (commonly referred to as Israelites in the Holy Bible) first knew God as the one who set them free from slavery and oppression in Egypt. The book of Exodus demonstrates the creativity and the eventual salvation in exile. In other words, the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt is not just understood as a political event but also as deliverance from economic and social oppression. Therefore, to the Israelites the liberation and migration to freedom or the Exodus was not just a spiritual or mystical experience. It was a thoroughly political act that made

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them appreciate that it was God who brings social justice to His people (North 1962).

The third strand of Christian thought is unity which emphasises that one has to contribute something towards the welfare of others. Robert Rweyemamu (1989) reminds us that in both traditional and contemporary African societies, social justice is understood not as an abstract concept, but rather as a divinely established practice with a religious value that relates to order and harmony. It is also seen as a moral value that maintains an acceptable human conduct. Amanze (2002) observes that African Traditional Religions (ATRs) permeate the entire spectrum of African society. Therefore, it is impossible to separate religion from politics, economy, and the law and order. This is the same view previously expressed by John Beatie (1964) who points out that individual self-interest quite often incites behaviour which is incompatible with the common good. As a result, African social institutions provide some institutionalised means of containing individual behaviour to some degree of conformity.

Rweyemamu (1989) notes that social justice in African traditional societies also results from good relationship and absence of any form of conflict. African traditional societies believe that social justice brings to all people the spiritual, material, and social blessings. Therefore, any person who breaches the harmonious co-existence of their community goes against social justice, and is made to make up for it through reparation or restitution by a chief or leader. African religious beliefs and moral values play an important role in issues relating to social justice because they produce the virtues, norms and values that help foster friendship, compassion, love, honesty and justice in the society (Mbiti 1975).

Peter Sarpong underlines the inseparable relationship between social justice and peace among the Ashanti's religious beliefs in Ghana. He states that 'Justice produces peace; there can be no peace without justice. People must relate to one another on equal terms' Sarpong (1989). Theophilus Okere (1989:9-10) writing on the Igbo people of Nigeria says that 'Peace is not something that happens, it happens when social justice happens'.

In Botswana social justice is understood from a pre-colonial traditional system or institution known as the *kgotla* (open public forum). The *kgotla* was and continues to be a central feature of consultative Tswana culture or governance whereby in theory men were expected to attend and express their views on governance or administration of their community without fear of reprimand. The *kgotla* also functioned as a court for adjudication of civil disputes and criminal cases (Mgadla and Campbell 1989). In the post-colonial order the *kgotla* has become a place where all citizens regardless of their age and gender can openly debate community or national issues. In the following passage Frank Gunderson vividly defines and presents the functions of the *kgotla* based on his memorable visit to Botswana in the late 1960s:

> Democracy should begin somewhere. For some nations, it begins by overthrowing a ruler, going to war, passing a law, en-rooted in a religion or tradition. For Botswana, it is the later. My group and I visited the *Kgotla (kh-ot-la)* of Old Naledi (meaning old star), the oldest village/township of Gaborone. Every village in Botswana has a *Kgotla. Kgotla* is a traditional political structure in villages that is being practiced for hundreds of years. It is led by a *Kgosi* (Chief). The *Kgosi* is in charge of all matters related to the village. In a *Kgotla*, public meetings are conducted, community counsels with the elders, issues are resolved, and legislation is passed. Enforcement of government programs begin from the *Kgotla*. In addition, it also acts as a court. However, it does not run on a 9 to 5 schedule like most courts do; Botswana has other courts for that. If an issue arises in a community, the *Kgotla* runs as long as the issue is resolved. All members of the community are invited and allowed to share individual opinions. There are no lawyers in the system. You are your own lawyer and are expected to defend yourself. It is a sophisticated system in that no one interrupts when someone is sharing their thoughts. One can only start after the other is done (Gunderson 1970-1:14).

The first president of Botswana, Sir Seretse Khama (1966-1980), who was a strong custodian of Setswana culture, embraced dialogue in the *kgotla* as the best way to promoting social justice. For him, open dialogue in the *kgotla* was the basis of commitment to human dignity and self-determination where people could freely say out their views (Carter and Morgan 1980). His preference for dialogue was also evident when Botswana faced continued cross-border military incursions and raids by the white minority regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) in the 1970s. In 1968, while addressing his Botswana Democratic Party members, he declared that 'We disapprove, in fact condemn, the use of force as means of settling international disputes. Instead, we believe that all differences and quarrels between nations can, and in fact should, be brought to conference tables for peaceful negotiation and solution' (Carter and Morgan 1980). Whereas this position by Sir Seretse Khama could be interpreted by some people as a sign of weakness, it could also be understood as some form of diplomacy that the best way to fight a strong enemy is not to fight it at all. It should be understood that until 1977 Botswana, which was an extremely poor country at the time, did not have an army to parry South African and Rhodesian aggression.

Regarding rights of minority groups as an important element of social justice, Seretse Khama said that 'our guiding principle… is that every national group has a right to self-determination: that the essence of democracy is that minorities and ethnic groups comprising a nation should not be subjected to any form of discrimination (Carter and Morgan 1980). Botswana's reference for negotiation and dialogue as opposed to open violence in promoting social justice is well known to be firmly entrenched Seretse Khama's leadership style. According to Weimer, this made Botswana's democracy an exceptional success story in Africa because frank and open dialogue has always prevailed, even in dealing with issues that are contentious (Weimer 1988).

However, while Botswana has also registered impressive strides in terms of economic development with revenue from diamond mining serious challenges (Magang 2015) or perils of social justice abound as it will be discussed below.

Perils of Social Justice in Botswana

Whereas in most parts of Africa people fought against the exploitative colonial rule with the hope of ushering in a new dispensation of social justice and prosperity for all this proved elusive. For example, Martin Meredith (2005) argues that the fortunes of Africa have declined dramatically in the fifty years since the dawn of the independence era as new regimes became repressive, corrupt and generally denied the citizens democratic rights and social justice. Civil wars and military coups for change of government became common, and the African leaders themselves have been described as *Architects of Poverty* (Mbeki 2009). This has been the story in most African countries for much of the half-a-century since their Independence. Botswana became a notable exception as it continued upholding democratic principles and practices, the rule of law, regular and largely free elections, and even registered impressive economic development. Furthermore, in most African countries resources such as oil and diamonds have fuelled civil wars and unrest, a phenomenon that came to be referred to as 'resource curse' (Collier *et al* 2008). This is a tragedy Botswana has avoided largely because of the country's functioning democracy.

However, there are numerous challenges or perils Botswana faces which undermine social justice and could reverse the gain made in the past 50 years. There are many of these but below we limit the discussion to the deficiency in the Botswana democracy, serious disparities in land allocation and power relations, and the captivity of the church.

The short deficiency of Botswana democracy state

In the context of this paper democracy simply means the mandate given by the people to the national leaders

through free and fair elections to bring about social justice. Unfortunately, in most African countries the national leaders use this mandate for self-enrichment, violation of human rights and to remain in power at all costs despite the social unrest and abject poverty resulting from their misrule. Post-colonial African states –including Botswana– have also entered a worldwide economic structural arrangement known as globalisation in which they continue to economically depend on their former colonial masters (Samatar 1999).

At Independence in 1966 Botswana was ranked the second poorest country in the world after Bangladesh (Magang 2015). Since then great strides were made to uplift the country economically through provision of social amenities in the form of education, healthcare, water, roads, electricity and others. Nevertheless, Botswana has not escaped skewed development with grinding poverty, economic disparities, landlessness and other ills being rampant. Kenneth Good (2008) points out that the Botswana's polity has been characterised by considerable democratic authoritarianism, inequality of wealth and low income, as well as a state where a combination of presidentialism and ruling party preponderance that has stimulated arrogance, complacency and corruption among the country's rulers. Good gives as examples, the state of deepening inequalities, corruption by the ruling elite, marginalisation of minority groups, particularly the Bushmen (San) or Basarwa and denial of students' academic freedom to freely air out their grievances as some of the problems. All these factors are the peril of social justice because they show that democracy in post-independence Botswana has not delivered the goods to all members of the society.

Disparities in land ownership occupation and power relations

Boga Manatsha (2011) argues that land in the Southern Africa region is a highly controversial issue because it is complicated by the rigid neoliberal approach to it. This gives legal power and political influence to big land owners who are mostly white, multinational companies and emerging black elites to the detriment of the poor. Manatsha cites as an example Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa as some of the countries where the land question has remained contentious after Independence. Even in Botswana access to and control over land are contentious issues (Onoma 2010). For instance, the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), which has been in power since 1966, gets significant support from wealthy cattle owners and includes them in their ranks (Cullis and Watson 2005). It is noted that 'there is no doubt that some of the highly placed members of the government and ruling party who promote the TGLP [Tribal Grazing Land Policy] policy benefit directly as wealthy cattle and borehole owners' (Cullis and Watson 2005).

As Elaine Baldwin observes, power relations and inequalities based on either traditional or legal rational has been used to promote land disparities in Botswana and many parts of Southern Africa (Baldwin *et al* 1999). Thus, one way through which inequality has manifested itself in post-independence Africa is in land use, occupation and ethnic power relations. Gulbrandsen (1994) notes that much of the land in Botswana is held under customary law and traditions where legal titles to the land are seldom held, and ownership is presumed to be communal with the *kgosi* being the custodian of the land. Power over land was taken away from the dikgosi and vested in the newly established land boards in 1968. Given the current situation in Botswana it is hard for someone to disagree with Gulbrandsen's (1994) observation that land and socio-economic inequality in Botswana, which were inherent in the pre-colonial order, remain the same even today.

For instance, the Bangwato cattle farmers occupied a large chunk of territory and expanded their influence through the institution of a highly stratified system of social control where the commoners were tied to their *dikgosi* and those from other groups were incorporated as serfs (Good 1993). Therefore, it can be argued that land in pre and post-independence Botswana has always been linked to a system that provided the basis for ethnic or even gender inequality and power relations between powerful and weak ethnic groups. This in itself a peril of social justice because it us denied to some sections of the society.

The ruling classes are also in a position to prevent any effective land reform which could weaken their grip on land. Thus, the poor remain vulnerable to loss of land through eviction, forced or induced removal in order to pave the way for commercial farming and tourist ventures by the rich as has happened in places such as Ghanzi and Kgalagadi Districts. (Wily, 1981) This occurred through several government programmes such as TGLP that aimed at establishing commercial farms for the purpose of beef production. Kenneth Good correctly notes that 'The TGLP operations represent not only a loss of land without compensation for not only the Basarwa, but, other groups of people living the Ghanzi and Kgalagadi district such as Bakgalagadi. The establishment of TGLP ranches has also created shortage of communal grazing land and reduced hunting and gathering options for the above mentioned communities' (Good 1993). The loss of land is clearly a peril of social justice because it has led to poverty for the above mentioned groups of people and even others.

The captivity of the church

The notion of the 'Captivity of the Church' is based on the phrase 'Babylonian captivity' or 'Babylonian exile' which refers to the period between 598/7BC and 587/6BC when the Jews, also referred to as the Hebrews or Israelites were forced into detention following the conquest of the kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians(Luther 1950) . It was later used by Martin Luther in 1520 when referring to the temporal role of the Roman Catholic Church during the reign of Pope Clement V and Pope John XXII. According to Martin Luther (1520), at the time, the Catholic Church had reorganised and centralised its administration to emulate government practices and procedures of the secular courts. Overall, the lifestyles of the members of public and the leading members of the church resembled that of princes rather than the clergy. There was splendor and corruption done by the leadership of the church (Luther 1950). which even spread to lower ranks of the church. Martin Luther criticised the Catholic Church for becoming too much concerned with issues relating to secular world while abandoning its primary responsibility of spreading the word of God (Luther 1950). Many leaders of the church, particularly the clergy and the governors, were using the church to enrich themselves (Luther 1950).

For these reasons we have borrowed the concept of the 'captivity of the church' because in many parts of the contemporary world, including Botswana, the church seems to have abandoned its primary responsibility of spreading the word of God to enrich those who lead it. The church has also decided to promote what they call 'prosperity gospel' at the expense of its moral duty (Ruele 2009). This has also put the church in a dilemma and makes it unable to respond to the issues relating to social justice as it seems to serve the interests of its leaders. Thus, one can justifiably say that the church is currently in the form of captivity because it has been held at ransom by the leadership. This in itself is a peril of social justice as it prohibits the church from playing an active role in the socio-economic and even political order in post-independence sub-Saharan Africa of which Botswana is the integral part.

Several factors make the church in Botswana captive just as during the time of Martin Luther. It is dormant, irrelevant and unable to effectively deal with issues of community or national concern. Across all denominational spectrum the church in Botswana has failed to separate issues of the secular nature from the prophetic mission, and this is traceable to the pre-independence period (Comblin 1979). Therefore, it could be said that the church in Botswana is captive to the state because it does not vociferously make its position clear on issues relating to injustice and corruption. The other reason is the legitimisation of the church by the liberal democratic state which often calls it to remain apolitical (Ruele 2008). Ruling party politicians have even declared that the church should leave politics to the politicians (Botswana Manual Workers Union 2016). This has made the church unable to use the gospel as an instrument of salvation, liberation and freedom. This impression has been made more legitimate by the peaceful transition from colonial rule to independence in Botswana that the church must remain neutral in matters concerning politics and social

justice because it has never took part in fighting for independence (Ruele 2008). However, the role of the church everywhere is to help create, nurture, and promote democracy and pursue social justice. In our view failure by the church to pursue social justice, as is the case in Botswana, is similar to it being in captivity.

Furthermore, the church in Botswana has remained largely prophetic, focusing on spiritual matters, rather than relating its mission work to the socio-economic and political problems facing the people. Finally, the captivity of the church is unavoidable if the church as an institution becomes idealistic and a privilege of the clergy or pastors. This is so because it represents the ideology of the dominant group and protects the interests of the ruling class, instead of being an institution of liberation of the disadvantaged people (Comblin 1979).

The Contextual Theological Approach

In order to relate the gospel to socio-economic and political matters in the post-independence Botswana, contextual theological approaches become relevant. To use these, one ought to first define contextual theology. Steven Bevan (2002) defines contextual theologies as situational, local and cultural which actually means that they recite events and dreams of the people. They are also determined by the social, political, economic and cultural location of a particular place. Contextual theology is the kind of theology whose knowledge, thinking and practice arises from a context which is also influential. It suggests that the church needs to develop alongside the environment in which people live. Contextual theology also helps to reflect on one's own area of practice. It takes seriously peoples' life forms as the starting point for Christian mission.

Furthermore, it argues that God remains relevant to the people's problems in every situation. The sources and resources for doing contextual theology are culture, language, religion and experience. Bevan's viewpoints of contextual theologies are shared by Pears (2010) who posits that they ask critical questions such as what is God doing in a particular situation at a given time. According to Pears, contextual theologies are deeply connected to the religious and cultural heritage of a people (Pears 2010). That is the reason why contextual theologies can be easily used to ground the gospel for social justice because as Jack Johnson-Hill (1998) notes, they are socially situated in various networks of activity or terrains of practice. Jack Johnson-Hill (1998) also argues that the Bible or gospel could be used through contextual theological methods for social justice. On the other hand Richard Gillett reminds us that 'Only those dispossessed towards a historical reading of the Bible fundamentally call to the salvation of the individual and nations can ignore the message of social redemption from poverty and oppression that is the fountain stone of both the Old and the New Testaments' (Gillett 2005: 210-219).

What Gillett is saying here is that in order to relate the gospel to the socio-economic and political challenges of post-independence Africa, we must give serious attention to contextual issues such as poverty, landlessness and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. This in a way would help the church to become a liberating institution capable of transforming oppressive situations. In addition Harold writes that 'Contextual theology as a listening discipline of thought, attending to God's revelation in Jesus Christ, needs to be calculated according to our conceptions of what is socially necessary. It is in this situation that the Bible must therefore, be cautiously read contextually. This is true especially when dealing with issues that marginalise the people as is the case in many parts of post-independent Africa' (Harold 997).

In an attempt to relate the gospel to social justice in the post-independence Africa, one is confronted with the question: what lessons can be drawn from the Bible on matters relating to socio-economic and political inequalities? Basing on the views by the authorities cited above, it can be argued that when the Bible is read critically and contextually it can help us deal with matters relating to social justice (Mesters 1988). To understand this it is imperative that reference is made to various biblical texts and how these are used. The Bible is a just document, as evident in both the New Testament and Old Testament which teach

that increasing disparities in wealth is considered an issue of injustice. For example, in the New Testament, Christ warns that those who trust in riches will find it difficult to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Mark 10:23-25; Matt 19:23-24 and Luke 18:24-25). We can also note the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as an example of injustice (Luke 16:19-31). With regard to the Old Testament there is a clear connection between knowing and loving God as a way to ensure social justice. This is outlined in many books such as Deuteronomy. 10:17-20, Proverbs 11:31, 29-7; Isaiah 58:6-8; Ezekiel 16:49-50; 18:5-9; Matthew 22:37,2; Corinthians 81:19; James 1:27,1 and John 3:17. All the above books demonstrate that ultimately God judges societies by how they treat the poor people.

The teachings of prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos as documented in the Bible also show how they defended justice. For example, in the book of Jeremiah God commends King Josiah for defending the poor and needy. The liberation of God's people from slavery in Egypt as explained in the book of Exodus through the leadership of Moses is a clear theological reality and a cornerstone of social justice called *locus theologicus.* Throughout the Bible, love and social justice have to do with slaves being set free from bondage, the care of widows and the fatherless, kindness to strangers, and compassion for the sick and disabled, fair wages to workers, economic security, the inclusion of the marginalised, liberation from oppression, and the end to war (Wells 1997). In using the gospel to promote social justice we ought to draw from these examples which show fundamental aspect of God of justice.

Richard Dayringer (1998) also argues that the Bible as a tool for social justice is both a sword and shield that protects the sufferers and victims. In the contemporary world the Bible has been widely used by Christians to comfort, instruct, or diagnose the problems of the sufferers. Therefore, Christian theological ministers in post-independence Africa can make references to the above verses to see how they were used to advance the course of justice during biblical times. They can apply the truths and doctrines of the Bible in counseling the victims as they personally understand it to their particular situation because the Bible as the 'Word of God' often injects the spirit of hope and perseverance in the victim. In other words, the Bible becomes for many Christians in Africa, a book that provides answers to their difficult existential questions and problems relating to landlessness, inequality and suffering from various ailments. The Bible teaches all those who believe in it to be compassionate and to embrace justice. This is outlined in various books such as Exodus 23:6; Leviticus 19:10; Proverbs 14:21; Psalms 41-1; Amos 5:11-14; Micah 6:8; Romans 12;13-13, 2; Corinthians 8,10-15; Galatians 2:10; Ephesians 4:28 and James 2:14-16 (Dayringer 1998).

Relating the gospel to the socio-economic and polical context of post-independence Botswana through contextual theological methods, is also in line with building an open and, democratic and accountable nation as espoused in Botswana's long term strategy called Vision 2016. Vision 2016 encourages the promotion of democratic ideals, transparency, and tolerance which is in line with the constitutional rights on freedom of religion and worship (Republic of Botswana 1997).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to use the contextual theological approaches in relating the gospel to the socio-economic and political issues in post-independence Botswana. We started by defining the concepts of social justice and gospel to show how and why these concepts are important in addressing the shortcomings of democracy, inequalities in land use and power relations, and the captivity of the church which are some of the threats facing Botswana in the post-independence era.

In an attempt to relate the gospel to the context of post-independence Botswana context, we have also borrowed and used Harold's (1997) view that the gospel of Christ can be used in contemporary times, as it has been used in biblical times to address various situations of human conflict characterized by gross injustice and perpetual poverty. However, that Botswana has registered impressive economic and infrastructural achievements since independence in 1966 is acknowledged. Nevertheless, as the paper

argues and many other observers have also noted there has been serious challenges that the country has unsuccessfully grappled with.

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