

THE DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND RELIGION IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION.

by Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu*

INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this paper is to attempt an analysis and assessment of the dialectical relationship between culture and religion and the impact of this relationship on the struggle for liberation.

THE MEANING OF CULTURE

The concept of culture and the concept of human beings are indissolubly and intimately woven together. In the historical process of human development, culture is both the product of human labour and the living expression of what humanity has achieved. It is therefore not only the result and concretization of the development of humanity itself but also the index and hallmark of the socio-economic, political and technological progress of human society. Thus as a philosophical concept, culture is correctly viewed and interpreted as a specific type and dimension of human activity, that is, as the complex expression of human development. It is the active, and in most cases, materialized and concretized embodiment and realization of human creativity, the self-realization of human beings inherent capacities. Culture therefore expresses the degree and level to which human beings are in control of their relationship with the natural world.

But because culture is a product of human creation it is therefore profoundly human in character. Thus culture as the object of human creativity, is inseparably bound up with its creator, the human being the subject. For this reason culture is the repository of the noblest human values. In philosophical literature, the concept culture usually possesses three basic meanings but all three meanings are intimately connected with human creativity. Each one of them is merely a dimension of the whole, but registers a particular characteristic or feature of culture, that is, the specific way in which and degree to which it is the essential embodiment of human beings.

Used in its broadest and widest sense, culture is the totality of the results of human labour, that is, the results of material and spiritual activity of human beings. As the totality of material and spiritual wealth created by human labour, culture is the development of human productive forces, the development of the richness of human nature as an end in itself.¹ Used in a narrower and more specific sense culture refers to what is generally called spiritual culture. This includes philosophy, science ideology, art literature, religion educa-

tion etc. Summed up together all these components of spiritual culture are normally expressed in and through concepts of spirit and spirituality which reflect human intellectual and emotional dimension and capacity, both conscious and unconscious. It could therefore be said that Philosophy, Science, art, literature et cetera are all products of human intellectual and emotion powers that is, spiritual powers, the creation of human mind and heart. They reveal the highest level of human creativity. The third dimension of culture is what is generally called artistic culture which is in reality the figurative objectification of artistic creativity. Thus the figurative objectified artistic culture takes the form both of material products and direct human activity.

Culture, understood in any of the three meanings described above both material and spiritual, having being created by human beings and given objective form by human creativity has however relative autonomy and acquires its own independent life governed by definite laws of social development. It is therefore not a mere epiphenomenon of which the economy is the reality . No crude reductionism. But despite this relative autonomy, culture remains rooted in the material aspect of social life which have a profound influence upon its content. The mode of production of material life therefore constitutes the basis of culture and its development. Thus fundamental changes in the mode of production are accompanied by changes in the content and completion. Culture therefore is dynamic, and not static.

Viewed from this perspective and such an interpretation of culture means that the creation of any cultural product is always bound up with the material world and the spiritual capacity of the human being.

But while human beings, the creators of culture, are mortal, culture and its products are generally speaking immortal.

Culture and its products accumulate over the course of historical development of humanity. Thus the cultural wealth of society is the result of human activity; human labour, in history, for human development in all its various dimensions, takes place in the process of labour.

But more importantly also human development takes place in the process of mastering the existing, accumulated cultural wealth demonstrating the dialectical and symbiotic relationship between culture and its creator—the human being. This cultural exchange between the subject and object is natural and inevitable. Cultural development is a process of its past, present and future not in isolation but as a totality. But each historical period or era produces its

own version of culture. Cultural development and change takes two forms:

Cultural development and continuity and cultural development and discontinuity. Cultural continuity in development relates to the stage of slow, imperceptible cultural accumulation which does not affect the quality of culture but merely introduces insignificant quantitative changes in culture.

Discontinuity in cultural development is a stage of radical and fundamental qualitative change in culture and cultural norms, a historical moment or period during which the old culture and cultural norms disintegrate and give way to new culture. Thus the reluctance of those who refuse to accept cultural change may be due to their fear of any future which might radically alter the existing state of affairs. To those immersed in the status quo as to be part of it in mind, in values, in expectations, and in habits, any cultural change spells chaos and disaster. That is why they cling to the present. Yet the essence of culture is to be found in dynamic and progressive change. The timid defenders of the present construe and see cultural change and the advent of a new culture in terms of the forms of order of the present world. Hence cultural change is seen as mere cultural confusion and cultural deviance, a story of social degeneration. But cultural development and change is not metaphysical but empirical and concrete. It is determined by both objective and subjective conditions which exist in the society but which are formed historically and are therefore not ready-made.

It is the objective conditions, the material conditions which influence cultural change rather human will and caprices.

So far human history has produced four major phases or epochs of human society each with its own culture, norms and customs, philosophy, ideology et cetera. These are the communal society, slave-owning society, feudal society, and capitalist society. The fifth epoch in the history of human society, the socialist society is still largely under experimentation.

This notion of culture differs fundamentally from the Parsonian notion of culture and social development which views culture and social development in static forms. And the main weakness of Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism, as an explanation of society and its culture, is that it lacks the sense of history or indeed any interest at all in cultural history. It remains stuck in the immediate and the reification of the status quo conceptualized outside the realm of the historical process.

This notion of looking at culture and cultural development also differs from the metaphysical notion of social development and cultural change. For metaphysics interprets social development and cultural change as simple repetition of what already exists and does not recognize the emergence of the new culture.

But cultural development is historical and the cultural history of human society is expressed in the human being's mastery of nature by the discoveries of science and advance of technology from the stone implements to molecular biology, agricultural chemistry and the micro chips et cetera. It is this recognition of the obsolescence that overtakes every culture which defines culture as dynamic.

THE MEANING OF RELIGION

It is generally accepted that the basic feature of religion is the belief in the supernatural. In other words it is a form of explanation concerning the origins of human beings, their relationship with the natural environment, the nature of human beingness et cetera. Viewed from this perspective religion can be seen as a reflection of the human being's ignorance of the true and concrete of natural and social phenomena, resulting in the assumption that the universe and all that exists on it is the product of terrestrial and supernatural forces beyond human comprehension and whose existence is therefore only possible through revelation.

It is this belief in the supernatural which led to the ascription of supernatural properties to nature's forces and made them into gods and spirits, devils and angels, et cetera, and the belief that if these imaginary beings were not appeased, they could inflict harm and suffering on them, while if placated and worshipped they would protect people. This is how religious worship seem to have arisen; a combination of prayers sacrifices and other rites.

This brought into existence priests, sorcerers, pastors, et cetera and also various religious organizations etc.

Such a view of religion means and implies that religion is part of the history of human society. In other words it is an integral component of the cultural history of society for, viewed broadly culture embodies religion.

The birth and development of religion is determined by the nature and character of the social system and its cultural norms ethics customs and usage. The system of social production and its relations dictates the birth, formation and content and form of religion. No stage in the development of religion is the result of arbitrary

invention but is the products of its age. But the mode of production as a whole and production relations in particular not only determine the origins, form and content of religion but also the limits of its possible variants within specific historical conditions.

Thus all the basic forms content and variant of religion known to history are organically linked to the social system and structures they reflect as their own social roots. Hence in cases where the social system and structures reflected by religion are the social roots of the religion itself, the links between religion and these structures are stable.

But as with all forms of superstructures of society religion enjoys relative autonomy from both the social structures and culture. And this relative autonomy increases as religion acquires a longer and longer history. This relative autonomy permits religion to exercise vigorous and qualitative considerable retroactive influence upon the socio-economic system and its structure which, ironically, assisted the birth and formation of religion and are in fact reflected in it. But in the process of this retroactive influence, religion is in its turn reflected in other socio-economic system and its structures. And in the process of the retroactive influence religion undergoes fundamental qualitative changes and also increases its range and sphere of influence to a considerable degree. But the degree of religious influence varies in different periods of historical and social development, depending primarily on the place religion occupies in the social system. These variations may also be caused by various concrete or material conditions existing in various societies existing in the same historical periods. But more importantly also is the fact that the dialectical relationship, that is, the symbiotic interaction between religion and culture and the entire socio-economic system gives rise to distinct components which appear as autonomous units within the framework of religious consciousness.

The rise and development of religion therefore occur as a result of close and intensive interaction between religion and the socio-economic system.

Seen from this perspective, religion then become a complex system of norms, customs ethics et cetera, produced by the socio-economic system in order to explain social reality, especially those aspects of the universe human mind fails to comprehend. It is therefore not something that is produced externally and imposed on society from without. To understand religion in all its ramifications and the role it plays in society, a dissection, analysis, and understanding of the socio-economic system, its mode of production and the accompanying relations of production is essential if not crucial.

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF CULTURE AND RELIGION IN THE SOCIETY

The role or function of culture and religion in the society is determined by the socio-economic system and material or concrete conditions obtained within the society. For the material conditions do not only determine the origin, content and form of culture and religion within a given society, but also the role that these two super structural elements of society play within the society.

But although the role of culture and religion in society is determined by the material conditions existing in the society, both culture and religion do not remain passive in relation to the material conditions. They also in turn actively influence, and facilitate the development of material conditions. It follows, therefore, that the role and function played by religion thus this interaction between the socio-economic conditions, the material condition which make the relationship between the structure and in this case material conditions on the one hand and culture and religion on the other, a dialectical relationship. Implied here is the notion that the role played by culture and religion, although ultimately determined by the material conditions existing within the society, also influences the development of the material conditions.

But just as the material conditions play a crucial role in determining the role played by both culture and religion, culture also plays an important role in shaping the completion, content, form and role which religion plays in the society whilst religion in turn also influences the role played by culture in shaping not only the content, and form that religion adopts in the society but also the function it performs. There are two main functions that both culture and religion perform in the society in which they exist. In other words they are determined by the objective conditions prevailing at the time. Thus depending on the nature of prevailing objective conditions and the nature of the mode of production and its attendant production relations, culture and religion can become instrument of and justification for oppression and exploitation or instruments of liberation and freedom.

CULTURE AND RELIGION AS INSTRUMENTS OF AND JUSTIFICATION FOR OPPRESSION AND EXPLOITATION

Throughout the history of human society, with the exception of the era of communalism, culture and religion have been used not only as instrument of oppression, exploitation and domination but also as justifications for these inhuman actions by one human being against another. This is especially so in a class divided society in which the dominant and ruling class uses culture and religion not only to articulate its interests but also to promote and defend these

interests. In other words, culture and religion are an essential component of the mechanisms for control, oppression, exploitation and domination which the ruling classes in all societies and in all epochs use and have used consistently. But the application of culture and religion by the dominant classes with the society, as instruments of oppression and exploitation, is sustained and mediated by a network of institutions which are actively involved in the performance of a process of transmission of cultural and religious norms, customs, ethics and usages which perpetuate and reproduce the culture and religion of oppression and exploitation from one generation to another, and from one historical epoch to another. Institutions involved in this process of the reproduction of culture and religion of oppression and exploitation include, among others, the family, schools, the mass media et cetera.

The dominant classes are able and have been able to harness culture and religion for the promotion of their interests because the class which controls the means of production, the state and all its varied apparatuses is in a position to control not only the production of the dominant ideas within the society but also the cultural norms, ethics et cetera which help in the substance and consolidation of the status quo. For class domination cannot continue and reproduce itself without taking a leading role in the production and dissemination of cultural and religious norms compatible with the socio-economic system from which it derives its very existence.

Thus in a class divided society national culture and religion mean the culture and religion of the dominant or ruling class. But it is in the class interests of the ruling class that class culture and class religion are presented and articulated as national social phenomena.

For this minimizes the change of revolt and opposition from the dominated classes. And because of the national camouflage in which both culture and religion are presented in class-divided society, the result is that any cultural oppositions becomes cultural deviation and any religion becomes heresy. And the fear of being labelled a social or cultural deviant and a religious heretic in most cases compels individuals to conform to the existing cultural norms and religions dogmas and internalize them as the national cultural norms and national religious dogmas.

Intellectuals of the ruling class constitute the dominant intellectual force in the production, articulation and dissemination of the cultural norms and religious dogmas of the ruling class as well as in their consideration within the socioeconomic status. They are the cadres of the ruling class who articulate the cultural and religious sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and view of life of the ruling

class. That they may in general not be conscious of the fact that they are performing the role of producing and disseminating norms, customs and religious dogmas on behalf of the ruling and exploitative class does not contradict the fact that this is the function they perform. After all the production and dissemination of culture, cultural norm, and religious dogmas etc, occur within the production, process and its relations of production and they are therefore formed historically.

Thus in a class society the role of culture and religion is determined by the class nature of the society and the completion this role takes is determined by the content and intensity of the class struggle.

THE SOCIO ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ROLE OF CULTURE AND RELIGION

It is perhaps in the field of politics that both Culture and religion have played and continue to play a central role in the oppression and exploitation of the masses of people, society, with religion occupying the most conspicuous position in this process, In this respect Christianity emerges as one of the world's religions whose role in supporting and justifying the dominant interests of the ruling classes is indeed very conspicuous. And it has done so in response to fundamental changes in the socio-economic and political structure of the society.

For instance during the era of the slave owning society religion justified slavery. It sought to depict slavery as some form of punishment imposed on some human beings by God. St. Augustine, in his City of God, put this view very eloquently when he observed that. The prime cause, then, of slavery is sin, which brings man under the dominion of his fellow — that which does not happen save by the judgement of God. With whom is no unrighteousness, and knows how to award fit punishment to every variety of offence — and beyond question it is a happier thing to be the slave of a man than of a lust — and therefore the apostle admonishes slaves to be subject to their masters and to serve them heartily and with goodwill so that if they cannot be freed by their masters, they may themselves make their slavery in some sort free —¹⁾

Justified in this manner Christianity gave the slave masters the opportunity to exploit, abuse and dehumanize slave with impunity. For if slavery was a form of punishment visited upon some people within the Society then the slave masters had the blessing of God to consider slavery a normal societal institution. But of course slavery was neither an imposition from God nor a form of punishment but rather a product of society at a certain stage in its development. It was produced by changes in the system of production process and the

social relations of production. But the religious justification for slavery was not confined to Christianity. It permeated all religions from Greco-Roman "paganism" Buddhism, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Mithraism to African religions.

But since the role of religion is determined in the last instance by the mode of production the political role it plays in the society changes with the overthrow of the old mode of production and its production relations.

Thus when the slave mode of production gave way to the feudal mode of production religion not only justified the new feudal politics and its domination of the serfs, but also turned against slavery and condemned it as unreligious and in the case of Christians as unchristian. And when feudalism gave way to capitalism religion also adapted itself to the new mode of production. It adapted its terminology and its dogmas in order to suit the political dogmas of the era of capitalism.

But religion not justified political oppression and domination, it also counselled the oppressed and politically dominated to submit to the will and caprices of those in power. And Jesus Christ seemed to provide authoritative basis for this when he remarked:

Render therefor unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things that are Gods."²⁾

And St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, had written, perhaps the most influential political pronouncement in the New Testament when he commanded:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisted the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves are damnation — For he is a minister of God for their good. But if thou do That which is evil be afraid for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is a minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that does evil but also; for conscience sake. For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour. "³⁾

This commandment of St. Paul became accepted as an authoritative Christian doctrine and the foundation stone for the political doctrine of the divine right of kings, and the doctrine of the

obligation of civic obedience which became an accepted Christian virtue which no Christian was supposed to question and oppose. For civic obedience to secular authority was equated with Christian obedience to God's rule. And this notion of the kings being the anointed princes of God gave political leaders in the then Christendom the licence to rule or misrule with impunity. And during the era of absolute monarchy in Europe the doctrine of the divine origin of Kings became the crucial instrument by means of which the monarchy and the aristocracy warded off rising opposition from the trodden masses of the population. But whilst the doctrine of the divine origin and right of kings was more nakedly touted around up to the late nineteenth century, it is still widely used today to provide an acceptable ideological screen against oppositions and revolution in a more sophisticated manner.

This is especially so in modern theocratic states both Christian and non-Christian. In other instances the notion of the divine origin of political leadership is reflected in the prefixing of certain states or political parties by names such as Christian Islamic et cetera.

In certain instances religion has played and continues to play an undisguised role of being the instrument of political oppression and domination. These have taken the form of, amongst others the state church as in Britain, Italy Spain Norway and Islamic States.

Thus throughout the history of human society religion has always played and continues to play the role of an instrument of political oppression and domination by providing an acceptable ideological justification for political oppression.

While it is in the field of politics that religion has displayed a more conspicuous profile, its role as an instrument of economic exploitation was and is no less significant. Indeed its very support for slavery and feudalism was a clear religion supported the economic exploitation of the subject classes within the society. This is perhaps more clearly demonstrated in Judeo Christian dogmas.

Consider for instance the statement in the Old Testament.
"For the poor shall never cease out of the land"⁴⁾

Or the supposed granting of the power of domination and exploitation over the strangers to Judah;
"And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers."⁵⁾

And during the Reformation Protestantism age substance to the rising capitalist mode of production, for Protestantism, capitalist

economic activity with its attended evils for the labouring class was seen as having been consecrated and as having spiritual value and its insistence that systematic hard work was God ordained. Thus labour irrespective of its nature became, for Protestantism, attributed with religious and ethical virtues. Thus for Protestantism the capitalist accumulation was only condemned if it led to idle luxury but where material profit was amassed through the ascetic pursuit of duty in a calling it was not only tolerated by also highly morally recommended and encouraged. But even today the church both protestant and Catholic as well in other religions continue to condone directly and indirectly the brutal exploitation of the masses both in the developed countries and developed countries.

A classic case of religion being used as an instrument of political oppression and domination in South Africa where the Church of all denominations not only provided religious and theological justification for black domination exploitation and dehumanization but also consciously collaborated with all successive white regimes right from the early days of raw colonialism until perhaps fifteen years ago when some denominations began to openly challenge the socio-economic and political status quo.

CULTURE AND RELIGION AS AN INSTRUMENTS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

But whilst the history of religion has largely been the history of religion as an instrument of political oppression economic exploitation and social degradation both culture and religion vehicles for the struggle for liberation freedom and democracy. They have done so both directly and indirectly.

This was especially so during the era of classical Christianity whose basic texts were spiced with passages which provided inspiration to the masses. For instance traces of this is found in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians when he remarked.

There is neither Jew nor Greek there is neither bond nor free, There is neither male nor female for they are all one in Jesus Christ. ⁶⁾

And of course Jesus Christ himself provided some inspiration of the poor, the down trodden, and the subject classes by presenting himself largely as a redeemer of the poor and the oppressed etc.

And typical of this image was his sermon on the Mount which ever it was first delivered, provided some fountain of hope for the dominated till today.

In recent times, instances of religion playing an important role in the struggle for freedom have become common. In most cases however the church establishment has remained largely unresponsive to the needs and cries of the oppressed and exploited. Where it has raised its voice the sounds have largely been muted.

In the same way religion has been played positive role in the struggle for freedom, culture has also been used as instrument of liberation, providing the basis for resistance in a variety of ways.

In Africa this was demonstrated by the rise of negritude in the 1940's and 1960's and black consciousness in South Africa from the early 1970's till today.

The significance of culture in the struggle for liberation in South Africa has been aptly summed up by Steve Biko, when he observed.

Our culture must be defined in concrete terms. We must relate the past to the present and demonstrate evolutions of the modern black man. There is a tendency to think of our culture as a static culture that was arrested in 1652 and has never developed since the return to the bush concept suggests that we have nothing to boast of except lions sex and drink — We must seek (through our culture) to restore to the black man the great importance we used to give to human relations. A culture is essentially the society composite answer to the varied problems of life. ⁷⁾

And Frantz Fanon has this to say about the role of culture in the struggle for national liberation.

The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture. In the sphere of psycho-affective equilibrium it is responsible for an important change in the native. ⁸⁾

The advent of liberation theology and more specifically black theology was in response to this kind of message, namely, that both culture and religion could in the hand of the oppressed, exploited and dehumanized, become potent vehicle of liberation freedom and democracy.

But in the hands of the dominant class religion and culture become vehicles for political domination economic exploitation and social degradation. Hence religion can never remain detached from class interests and class struggles. As Engels put it more hundred years ago:

In the so called religious ward of the 16th century very positive material class interests were at play and those wars were class wars. If the class struggles of that time appear to bear religious earmarks if the interests requirements and demand of various classes hid themselves behind a religion screen it little changes the actual situation and is to be explained by conditions of the time (During) the Middle ages. The clergy retained a monopoly of intellectual education — and education itself had acquired a predominantly theological nature. In the hands of the clergy, politics and jurisprudence, as well as other sciences remained branches of theology and were treated according to the principle prevailing in the latter. The dogmas of the church were at the same time political axioms, and Bible Quotations had the validity of law in every court, This supremacy of theology in the realm of intellectual activities was at the same time a logical consequence of the situation of the church as the most general force coordinating and sanctioning existing feudal domination.

It is obvious that under such conditions all general and over attacks on feudalism, (were) in the first place attacks on the church, all revolutionary, social and political doctrine, necessarily become theological heresies. In order to be attacked, existing social conditions had to be stripped of their aureole of sanctity.⁹).

FOOTNOTES

1. St. Augustine City of God, P187
2. Matthew 22-21 of Mark 12-17 Luke 20,23.
3. Romans 13,17, (f) Peter 2, 13-17.
4. Deutoronomy, XV, II.
5. Isaiah, LXI, 5
6. Galations, 3,28.
7. Biko S. Black consciousness and quest for a true Humanity in B. Moore (ed) Black Theology, C. Hurst and Co. London. 1973, P45.
8. Fanon, F. the wretched of the Earth, P170.
9. Angels, F. The peasant war in Germany, PP50-56.

*Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu is a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Development Management, Gaborone, Botswana.