

Where ‘heaven and earth’ meet: Religion and Social Responsibility

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Abstract

In this discussion the question to be addressed, will not be as much as to present direction in the format of religious participation in social responsibilities. Such a question assumes that religion does indeed have a social responsibility. This discussion here rather wants to question the question: does religion indeed have a social responsibility? There are two possible positions on this: (i) it is obvious that religion has a social responsibility and should act upon it; and (ii) it is not so obvious that religion has a social responsibility and should refrain from social participation in social issues. Both positions are supported by good arguments. The former position is supported by the assumption that human nature is filled with virtue and humans have the moral capacity to influence society in a positive way. The religious idealists are convinced that an utopian society can be created on earth; almost make heaven touch earth. The second position is underlined by the argument that human virtue and moral capacity is over-estimated. Reinhold Niebuhr (1936) elaborated on this matter. Society is however much rather governed by self-interest and ignorance even under the veil of religion. There are dangers (i.e. reductionism, selectivism, antagonism and utopianism) involved when religion participates in social activities. The discussion here wants to present a third possible way by suggesting a tempered approach when religion participates in social activities. Rather individuals ought to be educated to act morally and responsibly in society.

Keywords: social responsibility, religion, utopia, Reinhold Niebuhr, individual, alienation

1. Introduction

Why are we talking about the social responsibility of religion? Does religion have that kind of responsibility, and what does that responsibility look like? What is it that religion does to and for society? Is it only religion that can do it for and to society or are there other institutions capable of doing similar tasks better?

In a current South African context of social and political turmoil, religious bodies participate in politics and social issues. A pattern of violent destructive protests by communities and students has recently emerged. These protests are presented as the expression of human and democratic rights to remind government of the expectation for them to provide services. Religious communities participate in these protests. Compare in this regard the South African Council of Churches (SACC) report entitled 'Unburdened Panel', revealing the extent of state capture (S. Stone, *The Citizen* 2017-05-08), revealing corruption and bad governance, calling in effect for a vote of no confidence in government.

Publishing a written report is a passive effort to convey knowledge and inform citizens of how their rights are ignored. Should religious bodies do more than just keep society informed about injustices? What should be the impact of religious movements on community mobilisation?

The question as to the social responsibility of religion implies a discontinuity as well as a continuity between the two spheres of society and religion. A more nuanced differentiation would be to distinguish between religion and politics. Such separation (discontinuity) of politics and religion is the result of modernity (Goosen 2009:1). Politics is no longer grounded in a divine sanction, as used to be the case during a medieval (predominantly Christian) European social structure, a social structure which also influenced the form of colonial government in South Africa. No clear separation between religion and politics governed medieval society. The will of the king was the will of the divine; the will of the divine was the will of the king. This principle was continued in a colonial government system where the government determine the law of the country. Think in this regard on laws supporting and maintaining the apartheid system. The Law is divinely sanctioned. Those opposing the Law is opposing divine determination. This scenario however changed in a postmodern, post-colonial context. This process of alienation is not only prevalent between leadership structures and society at large, but this

alienation also plays out between individual members of society.

We are now reflecting on a post-medieval (temporal perspective), African (geographical perspective), multi-religious (religious perspective) democracy (political perspective). It is no longer a religious-intolerant theocracy, monarchy or social-oppressive bureaucracy.

Politics is through separation from religion, now considered to be grounded in autonomous human power. Religion is set up as an autonomous sphere besides politics. The will of the people governs the people. Religion is a private matter and an autonomous institution which does not need to be consulted for political decisions. Only during recent postmodern thinking the urge to merge spheres resulted in synergic relations of spheres. Especially in an African context the connectedness of all spheres and institutions are eminent. Compare in this regard Mbiti (1969:1) when he describes Africans as being ‘notoriously religious’. It would then be impossible to separate religion from other spheres of existence, implying that religion will play a role in society and politics. Based on this understanding of reality religion does have a social responsibility. The interconnectedness of things are better understood when Krüger’s (1995:101) concept of conditionality is applied.

This article wants to delineate the two possible ways in which religion can stand in relation to social responsibilities. On the one hand religion is seen as autonomous but not superior to social matters. Both spheres co-exist peacefully. On the other hand it is obvious that religion and society need to interact and reciprocally influence. Before however describing and evaluating both positions, it is necessary to understand the concepts of religion and social responsibility.

2. What is Religion?

It remains an extremely difficult task to define religion (Smith 1991:17). To this, Braun (2000:4) and Schilderman (2014:176) concede. For Smith, the inadequate existing multitude of definitions for ‘religion’ is an indication that the term should be discarded as it has become unusable. It is not the purpose of this discussion to attempt addressing the problem of defining religion. This has been dealt with elsewhere (cf. Beyers 2010:2). Cox (2010:3–7) suggests that studying the groups of definitions has more value than studying the definitions themselves.

Smith's (1991) explanation of how religion ought to be viewed provides valuable insights. Understanding religion is never an unbiased endeavour. The culture of the researcher always plays a role. Culture contributes to the spectacles through which religion is viewed (1991:18). For too long, Smith argues (1991:52), has Western understanding determined the way in which religion is perceived, and that which can be deemed religious. Western thought has produced names for the world religions. The way of studying religions is the result of the Western scholarly processes.

A Western understanding of what constitutes religion caused scholars to divide the world into religious (i.e. everything resembling Western and European traditions and culture) as opposed to no-religion (i.e. everything non-Western) parts. Alongside this process, the Enlightenment developed the notion that knowledge resides only in facts. Facts can only be studied empirically. A study of the transcendental is therefore redundant since the transcendental proved to be inaccessible to empirical scrutiny. In contrast, human reaction and responses to the transcendental can be studied empirically. This idea already excluded many expressions of religions as it presumed all religions focus on transcendence as an objective divine existence. Not all religions follow this structure.

Smith (1991:53 footnote 2) suggests that, instead of referring to religion, it is more appropriate to talk about 'cumulative traditions'. Traditions have contexts and history. The concept of religion tends to call to mind a structured system of beliefs. This includes the understanding of faith. There are more words to refer to these phenomena that Western minds have provided with names over time (Smith 1991:52). Smith suggests names such as 'piety', 'reverence', 'faith', 'devotion', 'God-fearing'. These terms do not necessarily call to mind an organised system, emphasising that it is outdated to think of religions as monolithic blocks consisting of sets of fixed beliefs and practices existing parallel to one another, meeting and engaging with one another. Much rather we should think of religion in terms of fluent beliefs and practices being influenced and influencing others.

After carefully indicating that the concept of religion is in fact a concept originating from a Western (modern) stance of naming and analysing the human environment and behaviour, Smith comes up with a solution as to the problem of transposing the Western concept of religion onto world religions. His (Smith 1991:50) suggestion is to discard the term religion altogether. His argument maintains that the term religion is misleading,

confusing and unnecessary. The term religion hampers the understanding of people's faith and traditions. This hampering is caused by our attempt to conceptualise faith and traditions into what we refer to as religion. As indicated earlier, Smith recommends the terms piety, tradition, faith and religiosity in the place of religion. Wiredu (1998:32) argues that (an) African understanding(s) of religion differs from Western understanding(s) of reality. Laws applied to activities in the physical world in Western understanding does not exclude activities ascribed to spiritual activities in an African understanding.

Smith's suggestion can be employed as a method of studying the belief systems (or religions) of the world. The value of Smith's analysis lies in the making scholars aware that studying a religion is not complete without taking note of the religiosity or cumulative tradition lying at the foundation of the religious expressions.

The way in which Smith presents the object of study as cumulative traditions, piety or religiosity is important in an African context. Since the concept 'religion' has convincingly been proven by Smith to have a Western origin, it by default does not apply to what we want to study in an African context. When considering discovering the social responsibility of religion, it is indeed important to start off by asking about our understanding of religion. This article has a bias towards a Western understanding of the concept of religion, although different ways of understanding religion is mentioned and acknowledged here. This bias towards Christianity is evident already in the title to this article. Although the concept of 'heaven' rather has more meaning within the Abrahamic faiths, the intention is to illustrate how the actions qualifying as social responsibility is connected to and in relation to that which is considered sacred or 'holy', to use the fairly neutral concept of Rudolf Otto (1932).

3. What is Social Responsibility?

As how to define the concept social responsibility, several dimensions may assist us. McWilliams and Siegel (2001) define social responsibility as 'actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interest of the firm and that which is required by law'. Corporate social responsibilities (CSR) is defined by the European Commission (2001) as 'a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in

their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis'. Although these two definitions derive from a business point of view, it clarifies the general understanding of social responsibility.

Based on these insights I would suggest a definition for social responsibility as the voluntarily actions of members of society addressing social and environmental concerns in order to serve the social good. Social responsibility is therefore directed to give meaning and to heal and to provide in needs. It also reflects an attitude of a willingness to act upon injustice in society. Social responsibility then refers to the actions and attitudes of individuals and groups to participate in ensuring the survival and self-realisation of those in a particular society. Social responsibility refers to the things people do for and to society which others can or cannot do for themselves. It can even be described as assisting society to reach a level of wholeness or participation in mitigating processes in order to create harmony in society.

As to the relationship between religion and social responsibility research done by Brammer, Williams and Zinkin (2006) provides valuable insight. Their research focussed on the relationship between religious denominations and individual attitudes towards Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Some of the important results of their research is worth mentioning.

The essence of religious involvement in social responsibility is for Brammer et al (2006:229) the moral and ethical prescriptions which are consistent with religious doctrines and that provide guidance for ethical conduct in society. Religious affiliated individuals make more ethical decisions in terms of judgment, action and behaviour which is based on the individual's religious values (Brammer *et al.* 2006:231), such as fairness, truthfulness and trustworthiness. Common religious values can be reduced to the one Golden Rule to treat others like you would want them to treat you (Brammer *et al.* 2006:231). This includes showing love and respect for others as these are expected to be shown reciprocally.

Brammer *et al.* (2006:231) also indicated how religious affiliated people are more prone to participate through business in social responsibility than the non-religious. Religious people seem to have an awareness and willingness to participate and react to the need of others, even if the others are not stakeholders in their business.

The fact of the matter is that not only religious people have an attitude

of willingness to address the need in society. Non-religious people may also exhibit a willingness to participate in social actions. The differentiation can be made between a social responsibility directed at merely human needs, closer defined as humanitarian and altruistic characteristics of such actions. On the other hand a religiously motivated participation in social responsibility may be encountered. The religious motivation can be causal (in terms of expectation of divine reward or salvation for good deeds performed) or legalistic (a divine command to love the other) or religious-ethical (a lifestyle exhibiting acts of love based on religious convictions). Even intra-religiously there might be different opinions and motivation as to participate in social responsibility. Within a particular religion there might exist different interpretations as to the desirability of and ways of participation in social responsibility. Two distinct lines can however be identified: social responsibility due to concern for human needs and social responsibility due to religious motivation.

The question would be why would religion take up responsibilities in society? The very ethical nature of religion is to help others, assist, heal, make a difference, provide meaning and protect the marginalised. These characteristics can be based on universal values and ethics to which religions subscribe (compare Brammer *et al.* 2006:229). From a religious point of view, participating in social issues may be to correct social injustices in order to establish a just and honest society. The correction to social issues introduced by religions may be an attempt to re-create an idealised environment on earth. One might say religions want to restore a paradise environment, bring about an utopia, re-creating 'heaven' on earth. The early Christian theologian Augustine (354-430 CE) divided reality into the idealised City of God as opposed to the City of Man (Earthly existence). Augustine envisioned an environment governed by divine principles where no evil or injustice exist. This idealised city of God however has not yet replaced the evil and unjust earthly City of Man where selfishness abounds. Religious participation in social issues may then be perceived as the attempt to bring about the downfall of the City of Man and replace it with the wonderful City of God, bringing 'heaven' close to earth. As we today still live in the City of Man, so to speak, it is an environment devoid of justice and abundance for all in society. Besides ethics, the way in which religions participate in social responsibilities today may be grounded in an utilitarian understanding of religion. Max Weber might be of some assistance here.

4. Social Responsibility and Religion

For Max Weber a sociological discussion of religion does not focus on religion but rather the effect religion has on human's social interaction and economic action (Weber 1966:xxi). Weber is not interested in the essence of what constitutes religion but much rather in the type of social behaviour religion constitutes (1966:1). Weber is focussed on determining the meaning of religious behaviour as exhibited by subjective experiences, ideas and purposes of the individuals concerned (Kippenberg 2011:72). It is clear for Weber that religious actions are casuistic (1966:1): religious actions are performed in order to achieve a specific end, which Weber believes is predominantly an economic concern.

For Weber (1966:xxvii) it is clear that there is no society which does not possess something that can be called religion. All societies have religion. Human relationships with the supernatural is functional. Weber (1966:xxviii,11) indicates how 'primitive man' seeks the assistance of the supernatural for earthly concerns (i.e. health, long life, assistance in war etc.). According to Weber (1966:11) the ancient Roman religion remained *religio*, which signifies a close bond between human and 'cultic formulae and a concern for the spirits (*numina*)'. The principle in Roman *religio* was that all actions in daily life have some religious significance (Weber 1966:11).

For Weber (1966:126) religion have different functions for different social classes¹. Weber differentiates broadly the society of his time between the intellectuals and the laity (1966:125-126). For Weber (1966:119) the intellectuals have over the history of all major world religions played a decisive role in the development of religion. This is echoed by Berger (1999:10) when he identifies an 'international subculture' consisting of 'Western-type higher education', a 'globalized elite culture', which influences society. Berger (1999:11) suspects that in society religious upsurges are motivated not only by religious motives, but also by a populist protest and resistance against secular elite. It still needs to be investigated whether current political unrest and protests in South Africa are also due to populist protest against the secular elite Berger identifies. Due to the influential role intellectuals have played in the past, Berger (1999:13) suggests that a religious upsurge in the future might

¹ Whether the same structural differentiation exists today in all societies is questionable. The principle however that different levels of society have different expectations of religion still applies.

occur among the ‘disenchanted post-modernist academics’. What we perhaps today see in South Africa is a combined effort by the disenfranchised and disillusioned labour class supported by the intellectual elite protesting against the inability of government to provide in the needs of society.

Both groups, intellectuals as well as laity, have different expectations of religion, according to Weber. For the intellectual strata of society religion assists humans to discover ultimate meaning of human existence, and thus to find unity with oneself, with fellow humans and with the cosmos (Weber 1966:125). The lower intellectual (laity) levels of society seek in religion a moral and ethical compass (Weber 1966:126). Salvation religion probably, according to Weber (1966:101), has its origin among socially privileged groups. For intellectuals religion provides salvation in as far as it provides in the inner need (Weber 1966:124). Such salvation is theoretical and systematic and not the kind of salvation from external conditions of despair which characterises the religion of the lower classes of society (Weber 1966:215). This theoretical and systematic approach to salvation of the intellectuals causes what Weber calls the ‘flight from the world’, characterising the religion of the intellectuals (1966:125).

Weber’s differentiation of classes in society is not as simplistic as to divide society in two opposing categories: intellectuals and laity. The differentiation is much more complex. Especially within the lower middle class, Weber (1966:95) identifies a wide variety and even contrasting experiences of religion. The lower middle classes according to Weber (1966:96) tend towards congregational religion, salvation religion and towards rational, ethical religion. This tendency among the lower middle class is economically motivated. Middle class existence is not closely connected to nature as peasantry is (Weber 1966:97). This religious tendency among the lower middle classes is opposed to the tendency of the peasantry (Weber 1966:96).

Lower middle class existence is based on economic activity. Economic activity requires rational abilities from the middle class in terms of calculations and innovation. It is also clear for Weber (1966:97) that the lower middle class exists in a world with a utilitarian expectation: hard work will result in products to sell, selling requires exchange and compensation. This leads Weber to conclude that the lower middle classes live by a rational world view with an ethical understanding of labour (1966:97). The middle class also has the resources to assist and help lower classes who do not have access to similar resources.

It is clear from Weber's theory that different social classes have different functions for religion. For the economic privileged classes, religion does not need to produce salvation. Religion for the economic privileged has the function of legitimizing their life pattern and social status in society (Weber 1966:107). For Weber it is also clear that there is a connection between social well-being and divine approval. Good fortune experienced by the individual is therefore a sign of divine approval. The opposite being divine disapproval of existence as expressed in human misfortune (Weber 1966:108). This may relate to Brammer's (2006:231) contention that religious participating in social issues may be motivated differently according to religious convictions. Good deeds are divinely rewarded. Participating in society in order to bring about social good, may be divinely rewarded. Good fortune of the privileged are then legitimized religiously.

Religion is not static. Weber indicates that changes in religion are obvious to take place under certain conditions. When the privileged ruling classes loose political control or political influence, religion is determined to take on a salvific form (Weber 1966:121,122). Social responsibility can then be perceived to be one such salvific form religion can take on. Religion is then regarded as the 'saviour' of humankind in need. Religion is the last straw to grasp in this world filled with despair. Religions will enable people to share and assist the less-privileged. Religions will guide social behaviour towards a harmonious existence.

Weber reminds us of the social functionality of religion. Even participating in social responsibility may be with ulterior motivation: I participate in restoring social justice, but social good due to my participation is only the by-effect. The true goal is attaining selfishly divine reward upon participating in restoring social good.

A further implication of Weber is that religion is viewed as just another means to an end, and at that not a very honest means. According to the German philosopher, Reinhold Niebuhr good individuals filled with love for others, whether religiously motivated or not, could change the world. The moment when individuals unite in a group, the morality however change, no longer able to bring about social good. Social morality is questioned and critiqued by Niebuhr. Can religion really exercise its social responsibility to assist in attaining such a noble goal as social good?

For Niebuhr (1936) human nature cannot guarantee that it has the best interest for society at heart. For Niebuhr (1936:xi) the individual does have the

moral fibre to acknowledge the need of others and be able to refrain from egoistically searching for their own good. Individuals may even have sympathy and consideration for others. They may have a sense of justice (Niebuhr 1936:xi). This however proves difficult for groups or society at large. Collectively the moral egoism of individuals tend to create an immoral society (1936:xi) where the needs of members of society is ignored and each individual search egoistically for its 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. Human collective behaviour results from human natural impulses which cannot be checked by reason or conscience. Collective human power may result in oppression of others. This power-hold cannot be dislodged unless power, and not reason, is used against it (Niebuhr 1926:xii). It is no longer acceptable to argue that gradual development of human intelligence will result in resolving social problems.

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', keeping natural impulses of society in check, and on the other hand the compounded egoistic impulses of individuals resulting in a collective egoism.

For Niebuhr social problems cannot be resolved only through endeavouring to reach 'social intelligence' (1936:xiv), but '... social injustice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone, ... Conflict is inevitable' (Niebuhr 1936:xv). This is confirmed when Niebuhr indicates that conflict caused by the uneven distribution of power in society cannot be resolved rationally as long as power is distributed unequally (Niebuhr 1936:xvii). To appeal to the morality of the oppressing party to end injustice, will result in no solution. As this is Niebuhr's argument: '... naïve confidence in the moral capacity of collective man ...' will not bring about social change (1936:xix). This naivety is to be observed with some religious leaders believing that an oppressive government will act with justice once reminded of their moral obligation towards justice in society. Those thinking 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 searching for solutions within religion and reason to bring about social good.

As to this sceptic understanding of the role of religiously induced morals and ethics and the role of reason, Niebuhr concludes that conflict will inevitable mark differences between social groups. Not ethics but politics should govern inter-group relations (Niebuhr 1936:xiii).

In this regard Niebuhr does identify a social responsibility of religion. For him religion must contribute through education to the humanising of individuals and purge society of as much of egoism as possible (1936:xxiv). This can lead to a situation where the needs of others in society are recognised and the equality of all in society is acknowledged. The social responsibility of religion is for Niebuhr therefore limited to the individual. Due to the low moral capacity of society group morality will not be changed even by religious intervention.

5. Positions Religion can Take on Towards Social Responsibility

If religion then does participate in social responsibilities, how should religion go about this participation? There are two possible existing ways how people perceive the presence of religion in society.

Position 1

The main function of religion is to maintain vertical relations with the divine. This is based on an understanding of religion as human relation with the transcendental (the holy). This relation is culturally and contextually determined. The statement on the function of religion also assumes with bias the location of the transcendental in the realm above as is the presentation within Abrahamic faiths. All religions can however relate to this construct of religion in terms of the human relationship to that which is considered to be of ultimate meaning.

Religion is traditionally perceived to be concerned with higher faculties (i.e. values and spiritual matters). Religion is concerned with the relationship between humans and the spiritual realm, the transcendental or 'The Holy' as Otto (1932) referred to it. Existence on earth is then a replication of the existence of the divine: love and peace and harmony. It can be metaphorically stated that this position focuses on 'as it is in heaven'.

Religion can educate citizens, infusing them with moral values to act as autonomous and responsible individuals in society. As institution religion however cannot act as pressure group. Then religion will exercise power horizontally, misdirecting its actual focus away from that which is considered to be the main focus of religion. In this position religion can only speak out against social injustices and oppression in society. Religion as institution cannot participate in any social struggle, as its focus is on maintaining relationship with the divine². The only social relevance religion has is to provide moral support for society in its struggles. If religion is concerned with earthly existence it is only interested in creating utopia; a society which reflects a heaven-like harmony of peace and abundance for all.

This position may be resembled among many different religious orientations and even among those with a preference not to affiliate with any religion. Mysticism and orthodoxy may reflect this position as well.

Position 2

This position views religion as a purely social phenomenon where individuals with similar convictions and needs to express spirituality form a natural group in society. Religion as a naturally formed group is immersed in society and its struggles. Religion then is perceived to have the task to mobilise and support individuals to combat injustice and oppression. Religion can become the leader in social struggles, getting its proverbial hands dirty with social matters. Religion must participate in social struggle as it is concerned with human dignity and wholeness. Religion then becomes completely a social institution similar to many other social institutions which are fully engaged with human needs. Religion can participate in social matters under the guise of being guided by a religiously inspired code of ethics. In this position the focus of religion is on earthly matters (horizontal relations) only. This position can metaphorically be labelled as focussed on ‘as it is on earth’.

This orientation of religion can be witnessed among many faith based organizations focussing on accomplishing some social goal (i.e. health, education, human rights). Their struggle is morally based and grounded within some religious system.

² Again a bias towards Abrahamic faiths is evident here.

6. Dangers of Social Responsibility

These two positions described above may lead each in its own case to some precarious consequences. The participation of religion in any social struggle is limited. Some of these limitations include reductionism, selectivism, antagonism and utopianism.

Reductionism

Religious participation in social issues may lead to reducing the focus of religion to either ethics, social injustices or focussing on the need of humanity. Within these reductionist positions religion loses its *sui generis* character and becomes similar in motivation and expression to other social groups, such as social awareness groups and NGO's. The focus of religion is then limited to humanitarian needs.

Selectivism

Religion participating in social matters is guided by the culturally determined ethics and morals of a particular religious community. If religion elects the universal ethics governing society it again ends up in reducing its focus to common human good. When selecting values and ethics to govern its social participation religion may end up electing a particular set of values. Whose values and ethics will that be? Religion participating in social matters cannot represent the interests of only one particular group in society. Religion cannot represent electively and exclusively. It must represent common human interest.

Antagonism

This danger is linked to the previous danger. When religions end up as representatives of different factions in society. Religions endeavouring to accomplish the common good in society may end up opposing one another as they drive opposing agendas in society. We see this often in social struggles when religious factions support opposing political positions in society.

Utopianism

The social ideal religions try and create may be so idealised that it can never

be accomplishable. The perceived reality can never become empirical reality. Religions then end up chasing abstractions unable to realise them in a social context. Envisioning an environment devoid of injustice and oppression and poverty might be the ideal, but the accomplishment of it may be totally unrealistic. In this sense religions cannot contribute to the alienation of society from reality. That what is sociably achievable must be presented in real terms. Religion can have this social responsibility of maintaining a sober awareness of reality. Simultaneously religion must maintain the balance of the ideal as set up over against reality. This leads to a new position as opposed to the two positions (Position 1 and Position 2) already discussed above.

7. New Position

Religion must bridge alienation. The divide between heaven and earth, the divide between ideal and reality must be overcome. In a newly suggested Position 3, the vertical (Position 1 'As it is in heaven') and horizontal position (Position 2 'As it is on earth') are combined as to create an environment called Position 3 'As on earth as it is in heaven'. The goal is to abide on earth by divine example.

Within Position 3 people with religious convictions participate in social struggle, speaking out against injustices, participate passively in peaceful protests, giving voice to the marginalised, seeking help for those who are in need. This position seeks participation on a broader level. Religious groups in society unite in order to speak out against injustices together. The focus is on ecumenical (interfaith, inter-religious) participation.

Individuals are trained and encouraged to participate in social issues in a responsible way. Religions as institutions do not participate. Religions support individuals to act responsibly (compare Brammer *et al.* 2006:231). Individuals act in such a way as they expect others to treat them (Brammer *et al.* 2006:231). The focus on the individual is due to Niebuhr (1936:xx) identifying that the moral fibre of society is not as strong as the moral convictions of the individual.

Religions can instil in individuals the responsibility of sharing. Recognising the need of others and acknowledging the equality of members of society is already an attempt at bridging the alienation between individuals. If there is one way in which religion can contribute to what Niebuhr (1936:xxiv) refers to as the 'humanising of the individual', religion can teach the individual

about the importance of giving. Giving is not only providing in the need of others, but giving is recognising the needs others may have and acknowledging the equality of all members of society.

8. Sharing the Gift

Religion has the social responsibility to instil the value of sharing. In his seminal work, *The Gift* (1990), Marcel Mauss describes the way in which the actions of sharing and giving functioned within primitive societies.

Marcel Mauss' research during the early 20th century was to establish the logical reasons why people in society act in certain ways. There must be a logical reason behind behaviour. The research by Mauss must be read against the background of the social theory of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism according to Caillé (2012:3) is the theory that humans as individuals are only interested in that which holds advantage and benefit for them. The individual tries along rational thoughts to optimise pleasure and luck and minimize discomfort and pain. All human action in society can be reduced to instrumental rationalism. Nobody merely acts, perform actions or just do things. All actions is preceded by a thorough process of rational contemplation. Humans act consciously.

Utilitarianism assumes that humans act in order to accomplish something. Actions are directed at attaining a particular goal. Our actions are not clinically or mechanically. We think before we act. At times we may act unconsciously but then it is actions based on traditional behaviour at reaching a particular goal. Humans are constantly considering what is in it for me? How can I attain maximum benefit with the least effort?

This social theory guided Mauss in his search for the reasons behind human actions. Mauss in following Durkheim, tries to indicate that there might be different reasons than economic reasons why people perform actions. In order to test his hypothesis, Mauss investigates the phenomenon of the gift as it functioned among primal cultures. For Mauss the purpose is to determine whether in a modern context people still give with the same primitive principles in mind. What is the logic behind actions to give and to share?

Mauss focusses his research on the communities living on the Pacific Ocean islands as well as Australia and tribal communities in North America. These communities tend to exhibit the traditions and customs of the most primitive communities and cultures. How these communities exist, Mauss reckons, is an indication of how all primitive communities existed. Their

actions and customs reveal something of the principles guiding early human behaviour, revealing something of original human nature.

In a changing environment, we today live in a world governed by different principles than early human societies. Our question would be then to determine what principles should govern our societies today to enable an existence where all in society share in resources necessary for all. Religions as facilitators to enable the sharing of resources can perhaps learn from early societies what principles should guide our actions.

To give, to share seems like good practice today, almost as logical behaviour. Mauss indicates that what we today accept as logical and spontaneity was governed in earlier times by strict rules, unwritten laws governing actions of individuals in societies.

In primal and ancient agrarian communities to give and to share was a rule, a law. To give functioned along three principles: to give, to receive and to give in return (Mauss 1990:39). The principle to give was considered a reciprocal, causal and respectful action expected from all.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity governed all actions in primitive communities. In modern political and economic systems reciprocity still functions as guiding principle (Caillé 2012:1). Reciprocity refers to the mathematical principle of equilibrium. A balance in relations must be maintained. In social context this implies that when one party gives a gift, the expectation is that the other party will also give a gift of equal value.

A gift may not be turned away. That is a sign of animosity, just as is not giving a gift in return (Mauss 1990:13, 41). Just as insulting is giving a gift of lesser value in return.

The principle of giving a gift does not apply to the giving of alms and charity (Caillé 2012:5). The gifts under questions are mere symbols (Caillé 2012:5). Mauss indicated that the gifts to be given does hold some spiritual dimension. The gift becomes an expression of the spirit of the giver. The spirit of the giver is in fact mixed with the gift itself (Mauss 1990:20). By giving the giver is in fact giving something of him-/herself. The one receiving receives a gift from the heart of the other and needs to answer in similar fashion. Thus the lives of the one giving and the one receiving are inextricable connected (Mauss 1990:20).

The exchange of the gift can even be framed within the structure of honour and shame. By giving the individual establishes his/her own status and position of honour in society (Caillé 2012:5). By not giving the individual loses a position of status and honour and accumulates shame. To give is expected from everyone in society, not only the affluent who has much to give. The abundance of the harvest, or the spoils of the hunt becomes occasions to share with fellow members of society. By not inviting others to share the giver ends up with shame. Caillé (2012:5) indicates that it might happen that the one giving may end in a situation where he/she ends up with insufficient resources. Such conditions qualifies for a bigger amount of honour.

Gifts are Symbolic

The gift may in some cases have no utilitarian value. Mauss indicated how in some situations people gave one another a gift of a shell, with no obvious use besides its aesthetic value (Mauss 1990:23). The willingness to exchange gifts is a symbol of the recognition of established social relations (Caillé 2012:5). The assumption underlying the principle is an egalitarian society where everyone possess something. All have something to give. By giving people recognise and confirm the bonds binding them together. By not giving, social bonds are broken.

Causality

Mauss identifies a direct link between giving and receiving (1990:22). The one does not exclude the other but follows logically on the other. There exists a logical sequence: I give and you give (*do ut des*) (Mauss 1990:ix). The causal principle has often been applied within tribal religions. Sacrifices to the gods had an expectation of the gods respond upon receiving a gift by delivering a gift in return (Mauss 1990:ix).

There exists a responsibility in society to give, to receive and to respond with a gift in return (Mauss 1990:43). An invisible force governs this obligation and responsibility (Mauss 1990:43). Relationships are maintained by the constant giving of gifts. The response of a gift can be expected: one who receives a gift must respond with a gift of equal value. By not giving a gift relations break down and the one not giving loses status and accumulates shame in society.

This principle identified by Mauss confirms the anti-utilitarian principle in society. Mauss proves that the social action of giving has no rational, selfishly motivated goal. The only way to explain this responsibility of giving is through the logic of sympathy (Caillé 2012:6). Each individual does experience some benefit and advantage in the relationship where gifts are exchanged. But this comes at a price. I can only receive once I have given. Within this dichotomy selfishness becomes unselfishness (Caillé 2012:6).

Honour and Shame

Within the structure of honour and shame the responsibility to give becomes a means to accumulate honour. To give is therefore not a veiled attempt at acquiring wealth nor power, but it is the urge to receive acknowledgement in society (Caillé 2012:7). Mauss wanted to indicate that the element of the gift causes humans to function anti-utilitarian. Humans do not seek with every action for that which holds value, pleasure and luck, but humans have the deep urge to acquire acknowledgement within society and be known as a giver (Caillé 2012:7). By giving the individual receives honour in society. The opposite of course also applies. By not giving the individual acquires shame. The guiding principle for social behaviour becomes honour. Honour is the commodity which are competed for. Honour is assigned and cannot be claimed. The individual is therefore dependent on society for recognition. The individual needs to keep on giving in order to be regarded as a giver. A society aware of the needs of others, need to be givers of gifts. Religions can remind society of this guiding principle to be givers to and sharers with others. By reminding others of the responsibility of reciprocal giving, taking care of those in need, and reaffirming relations through the gift, society reflects something of a harmony only present through divine ordination. A society willing to give and thereby reaffirming relations are objecting to alienation and seeking reconnection with one another. A society willing to give and share is a place where heaven and earth meet.

9. Conclusion

Religions seem undeniable to have a social responsibility. Even accepting the fact of having a social responsibility there are some conditions to adhere to.

Niebuhr's warning of the deep seeded immoral nature of humankind must be a warning. Group morality cannot be trusted to bring about social good. Niebuhr suggests that religion has a social responsibility only towards the individual; humanising the individual and purging egoism from the individuals as much as possible. This bridges the schism of alienation between individuals in society.

The utilitarian principle guiding human behaviour in society provides another warning in the sense that human actions must always be considered as selfishly directed at the own goal and benefit. The warning of reductionism must also be kept in mind. Social responsibility of religions can easily be reduced to humanitarian and altruistic purposes, helping humankind for the sake of humankind. The focus cannot be on earthly needs only. Neither can the focus remain on recreating 'heaven' on earth, fixating on the utopian paradise-like existence wished for by all humans. A balance is necessary.

This article suggests a balance of responsible social responsibility. Religions cannot shy away from their responsibility to assist society in realising their own existence. But earthly existence is not only material. Religions provide a spiritual dimension by encouraging humans to treat one another with respect, recognising the humanity and value of human life in the other, mending alienation. To give to others, is not an obligation, but a reciprocal responsibility. Religions have to instil in human ethical fibre the principle of sharing with one another. Only through recognising the guiding principle of giving the Gift to others, can society acknowledge their social responsibility towards fellow members of society. To make society aware of this responsibility, is the responsibility of religions.

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