Title
Religion, Intergroup Relations, and Social Change in South Africa, by the Human Sciences Research Council

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0532r4cf

Journal
Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 17(2)

ISSN
0041-5715

Author
Robb, Judith

Publication Date
1989

DOI
10.5070/F7172016865

Peer reviewed

BOOK REVIEWS

Human Sciences Research Council. *Religion, Intergroup Relations, and Social Change in South Africa*. Greenwood Press: New York, 1988.

Religion, Intergroup Relations, and Social Change in South Africa is a compilation of ten research projects designed by the Work Committee: Religion as initiated by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa. The projects range from "A statistical description of the religious distribution of the population of South Africa" to "The interaction between economic power relations and patterns of conviction in the South African society seen in the light of a Christian ethic." Because the majority of the research projects focus on specific situations, they do not necessarily reflect trends in the country as a whole. To remedy this partial perspective, HSRC conducted a multipurpose survey during August 1983 in which 4,000 persons from different groups participated. Information gathered from this research is cited throughout the book. The Work Committee: Religion, was quick to realize that religion is a vast field and areas of research are unlimited. Admittedly, *Religion, Intergroup Relations, and Social Change in South Africa* does not claim to be exhaustive, but must be seen as an "exploratory venture" highlighting areas in need of further research. It does, however, claim to provide insight into the main issues central to the problem of intergroup relations and religion in South Africa.

Religion is viewed as that which "places life as a whole into some sort of perspective: it gives 'meaning' to life" (p.9). Among the many elements of religion, the committee highlights three: 1) Beliefs about what reality/creation are likely (often manifested in beliefs of an ultimate or transcendent being); 2) behaviors supporting the aforementioned system of reality, and 3) symbols which give concrete expression to the convictions and attitudes inherent in the above two elements. The Committee holds that understanding the power of the religious symbols to motivate a society or group and the ensuing social consequences is essential. This is particularly true in the case of a heterogeneous society such as South Africa. Diversity in religious behaviors and symbols form the basis of social exchange in South Africa and are central to understanding intergroup relations within the country. The Committee further states that in a heterogeneous country like South Africa it is almost "inevitable" that religion will function in a divisive and destructive manner. All of the religious groups in South Africa are often "radically divided in their perception and analysis of the

social situation" (p.14). Essentially, the Committee asserts, religion contains the seeds of division.

While the majority of South Africans are nominally Christian, South Africa is a multi-religious society. The most significant trend in contemporary religious affiliation is the growth of Black indigenous churches. The Committee finds fault with the existence of religion as an ally to the interests of a particular group at the expense of excluding others. In this sense, religion is used in South Africa to promote the interests of the White community, and it functions to legitimate resistance to social changes. Blacks, on the other hand, see religion as a vehicle to sanction opposition to the status quo. The research undertaken for this project illustrates how delicate the beliefs and value structures are for the many religious groups in South Africa. The Committee states that there are "no common symbols functioning as the basis of belief and value information at the national level for South Africa's groups" (p.60). This, they claim, is the result of the dominance of only one group in the formation of symbols at the national level. Because of this reality, the Committee "hopes" that a "super-ordinate value system" may emerge and transcend divisive group interest.

Based on this hope, the Committee asks if the existing religious institutions in South Africa have a basic set of values to offer and what they may be, and furthermore, what role these values have in shaping the perception of individuals and groups and in motivating their conduct. To answer these questions, the Committee looks to the concept of social justice (as addressed by three independent research projects) and examines 1) the theological foundation of human rights, 2) the relationship between economic structures and religious convictions and 3) the problem of violence. Surprisingly, the investigation concerning human rights and religion found that a measure of consensus does exist with respect to basic issues. However, under practical social application these basic principles form two distinct lines of development reflecting two different perspectives within South African society. "Differences centered on the redistribution of wealth, separate residential areas, racial discrimination, homelands for Blacks, separate schools, mixed marriages, social contact and political rights. Agreement (or a larger degree of agreement) was found on matters like equal pay for equal work, non-racial sport, promotion on merit, co-operation with other races and the meaning of church and religion" (p.67).

When asked if violence is permissible in order to achieve political objectives, the majority of White, Coloured and Indian respondents answered negatively, while the majority of Black respondents answered that it is indeed permissible. Religion, in the case of violence, plays an ambiguous role in that it can act as an incentive for and deterrent against the use of violence. One's decision, the committee

posits, is based on one's perspective of the reality in which one finds oneself.

While most South Africans indicate a basic personal religiosity and expect religion to play a certain conciliatory social role, their expectations regarding religion are directly related to their life experiences. As a result, the manner in which South Africans expect religion to perform its ideal functions varies widely among and between groups. With full recognition given to the disparity between ideal and reality, the Committee makes recommendations holding that this disparity should not discourage change but stimulate the pursuit of 1) the right to life, 2) the right to fully express one's humanity and 3) the right to a decent quality of life. The committee holds that public preaching does not give sufficient attention to the problems of intergroup relations and, in fact, seems to avoid them due to their controversial nature. Hence, increased efforts must be made to heighten the awareness of all groups to the positive and negative roles of religion and the increased improvement of group relations. Religious communities are invited to compare the findings of the research to their individual experiences to both check these results and perhaps increase their understanding of the role of religion in the broader South African context. The Committee asks that the political leaders take "cognizance of the ambivalent way in which religion functions in South Africa" and that due attention be given to the Black indigenous churches and their future role (p.111). Finally, the Committee asserts that law and order cannot be maintained in a society on the basis of injustice. "Dehumanizing laws and practices which reduce people to a marginal existence are in conflict with basic religious values and should be removed in the interest of a more just and stable future" (p.112).

Due recognition must be given to the Committee in their research efforts, their forthrightness with respect to the information garnered and their ability to present it in an uncomplicated and dynamic manner. The assignment with which the Committee was charged was extremely complex and sensitive. The individual research projects shed a certain light not only on the reality of religion in South Africa but also on the role the social structure has in developing and maintaining religious ideals and social applications. The Committee does not tiptoe around these realities, but readily displays them, calling on religious and political leaders to examine the situation, determine the role of religion in strengthening group relations and, most importantly, remove the structural mechanisms and volitional factors which combine to widen the gap "in potency between the strong and the weak" (p.77). While religion is highlighted as a potential healer of South Africa's social ills, the Committee points directly to the political powers that be and asserts that without a "new dispensation of social and economic justice which is

not based on race, intergroup relations in South Africa will continue to
deteriorate and become increasingly violent" (p.16).

   *Religion, Intergroup Relations, and Social Change in
South Africa* provides insight into the religious and social climate in
South Africa. One must bear in mind, however, that the sampling is not
representative of the entire South African populace and has entirely
ignored the rural homeland areas. For this reason the research does
show bias. On this same point, however, the Committee does not use
this bias in their "expected" favor, but continuously asserts that until the
social structure changes, the entire social climate of South Africa will
remain unstable. The report is written for those who have an
understanding of the socio-economic reality of apartheid. It will be of
particular interest to those scholars and activists who are attempting to
gain further insight into the socio-cultural aspects of apartheid and how
the socio-economic system works to support and hinder the
development of a "healthy" society.

<div align="right">Judith Robb</div>