

Looking at the african traditional religion



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To discuss the question that Christianity should not influence African Religion, but that African Religion can also enrich Christianity, it is important to state what the two religions are and the misunderstanding that has locked up the two Religions. It is equally very essential to mention the concepts, which were at one time concrete to African Traditional Religion before the coming of Christianity in Africa.

Therefore, in this paper, my major concern is to discuss issues that indeed African religion has contributed to the enrichment of Christianity

In this paper, it is also important to discuss what Christianity and African Traditional Religions are all about.

Therefore, Christianity is a religion believed to have been founded by Christ. Christ is believed to be the supernatural Son of God and mediator between people and God. He is considered to be the ancestor in Christianity belief. He is believed to have died and rose from the dead, interceding for human beings. Christianity is a religion that acknowledges the existence of the Supreme Being, God the almighty the creator of the unseen and seen things. This supernatural Being is called by different names such as the provider, just as he has been given different names and attributes in African Traditional Religion.

Christianity is the religion that has practices and beliefs that are believed to be the teachings are well as the works Jesus Christ. It is believed to have been brought to African by the Europeans. It is a foreign religion in Africa from the western world. When the missionaries were spreading the Christian beliefs and practices, they used also their culture to dominate other people

including Africans; who at the time already believed in African Traditional religion.

As for African religion, many people say that it is not easy to define. It has made scholars fail to understand and explain it fully. As a result they have ended up defining African Religion using terminologies, which are misleading. They have described African Traditional Religion as magic, animism, primitive religion, ancestor worship and many more wrong descriptions.

Nevertheless, African Traditional Religion is believed to be the oldest religion. It is believed that the beliefs and practices of the African tradition religion are indigenous that have been in existence from time immemorial for indigenous black African people. In other words, African Traditional Religion is part of the mental cultural heritage of indigenous Africans and are able source of identity and consciousness, morality and spirituality, in all spheres. It is passed on through traditional education done by elders of the community.

Wilson's idea of educating that:

“ Education involves initiating people into various forms of thought and activity in such away that they are helped to become better informed, more understanding and more reasonable.” (Wilson 1971: 1)

However, Wilson's view is that traditional religious education by elders through oral or handing down of culture in Africa attempts to be as its set

emphasis on keeping the tradition. The African Traditional Religious view on religion is not an influence from Christianity, but rather enrichment to it.

However, African Traditional Religion is very essential in that it is universal, unifies and disunites and diverse in nature. Religion is human experience found in all societies in various forms. Holm (1975: 7). States that “ a religion is vital, universal and that every human being has a form of religion”. Her argument is based on the assumption that every person has farther concern in life. Therefore, a religion is not only about Christianity. Hence, it is important for African Traditional Religion to enrich Christianity. Despite that African Traditional Religion unifies, Africa being a multi racial, multi ethnic, multi religious and multi culture and belief, it enriches other religions like Christianity.

Nevertheless, African Traditional Religion can play a role effectively as it assists to remove bigotry and fanaticism among Christians; it helps Christians to realize that human beings are equal and that they should respect others their ways of life and beliefs. Such realization comes about by African Tradition Religion objective teachings. In this way it can play the significant role of holding society together in the spirit of Ubuntu- which of a spirit of oneness, the spirit of love one another as yourself in the Christian concept.

Actually the Religion is said to have no founder and has no sacred books such as the Bible for the Christians. The beliefs and practices of African Traditional Religion are said to have been handed down from generation to

generation by both verbally and as well as by the practical performances as narrated earlier on.

African Traditional Religion is based on communitarian kind of lifestyle. That is, living as tribes or clan and as extended families, hence there are so religious because of these many tribes or clans in Africa, but Africans themselves remain in union as they have common God to whom they worship. Despite having many religions, It is generally agreed that there is one African Religion because they have common and important beliefs such as the Supreme Being as already stated above. The Religion puts man on the center as a central concern, the universe, life, death and life after death.

The religion does not separate believers from unbelievers. There is no demarcation between them. Everyone is welcome in the society because Africans are born into the religion. They born and live in it wherever there's an African, religion is there too whether in field, at school, at funeral etc.

The religion has influence on all affairs of life starting from before birth of a human being through life itself and even after death. It is centered on life and how to protect it against misfortunes such as sickness, infertility, death and many more adversaries that can happen in human life.

African Religion embraces Spiritual, political and social aspects of human beings. Its practices and beliefs are based on the faith of the ancestors. This is what makes African Religion a traditional belief. The beliefs and the concepts of beliefs are found in the idea of God, the creators of all things; the concept that has enriched Christianity. The beliefs are expressed in different ways from culture to culture but the same presence of God

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permeates the lives of Africans. God is believed to be a higher Being Personal with Feelings that he/she can be offended or be appeased. God is thought to be mysterious and he is named according to his manifestations, for this reason God can be referred to as Greatness, Holy, the Provider, and Healer, Protector, Deliverer, and many more attributes. All these titles reflect the same to Christianity, therefore no influence to African religion.

It is believed that God can be communicated to through the ancestors - those who have died, just like what happens to Christianity through Jesus. This is one of the issues which Christianity have misunderstood African Religion so that they have always wanted to influence African Religion. While at the same time they are the same valuable elements, which are used in Christianity.

African Religion and Christianity are in constant misunderstanding though they are compatible. When Christianity was brought to Africa, Europeans thought that Africans did not have knowledge about God. They thought African Religion was all about worshipping of ancestors and that it was a primitive religion just as stated earlier on. I conquer with Richard Gehman when he said that we should not think that the missionaries were preaching the gospel to Africans whose heads were empty or may be to think that Africans are not aware of the existence of God. For example, in African religion the spirit of oneness has been a practical issue that existed long before. This deals with the African concept of the community. In Africa, nouns like cousin, niece, nephew, uncle, and aunt does not exist. In Africa, one may have many fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters. Brothers to their father are also their fathers, and sisters to their mother are their mothers

too. That is how the African community is set up. Extended families are appreciated. This is what Christianity of the western world should do. Westerners who brought Christianity should embrace the extended families too, and embrace everyone as members of the same family. Oneness has no limit to nuclear family like Westerners who brought Christianity; it extends beyond the ancestral tree to clan and so forth. The Christian religion instead preaches of love your neighbour, which is enrichment from African religion of oneness. Moreover, there is uniformity in African religion. All what they believe in are the same everywhere, unlike Christianity which different in Africa and in the western world.

The missionaries dominated African with their western culture to try to influence African culture. They coupled African Religion and culture with Christianity; hence the failure to harmonize the two and what has come out is misunderstanding. Like in the Ngoni tradition ceremony (N'cwala) of the people of Zambia, the culture of giving thanks to God for the harvest of the new crops is a long outstanding issue back dated to the time of our ancestors. This has been enrichment to Christianity, being given a name of Harvest Sunday. Africans in their religion knew that there was a supreme being who deserves appreciation. Hence traditional ceremonies like the Ngonis. The crops are presented before the Paramount Chief for thanksgiving now. And a Chief can be equalled to a Priest in the Christian circles, whom also performs similar duties of that of a chief; though through different mediators, ancestors for the African religion and Jesus Christ for the Christians.

Misunderstanding intensify because the westerners came with their own ways of living and thinking together with Christianity as stated earlier on and tried to rob African religion.

Despite the misunderstanding that has been exhibited between African Religion and Christianity it is important to mention that the two religions are compatible Though Christians think that African religion is a religion of ancestral worshipping, the African religionist have indicated that it is not about worshipping the ancestors, but rather to honour the ancestors just as Jesus is honoured

What Christianity has failed to understand is the reason why African Religion venerates and not worships the ancestors. Actually African Religionists have said that “ we do not worship ancestors, we remember them and thank them”. Veneration is honouring the ancestors and their spirits. This is one of the values, which are similar to Christian denominations like the Roman Catholic, and the Anglican churches do the veneration when commemorating the saints. These are believed to play a similar role as intermediaries and are believed to be closer to God who is the Supreme and Supernatural Spiritual Being.

In African religion, life is perceived to be sacred. There is almost a feeling a divine imperative that life must be lived, is to be enjoyed and to be honoured. No wonder both Religions believe that people continue to exist even after death and there is need to remember them as Mbiti said that as much as Christianity and African Religion are aware of the existence of God, they would also remain in contact with him through intermediaries. It is

believed that the spirit of the living dead of those who have died in fourth to fifth generations ago became ancestors who mediate between God and those who are still living. Mbiti also explains that the natural relationship and the sacred status are included in this ancestral. In African tradition religion there is a very high sense of the sacred. There is a reverence of sacred places and persons, and it enfolds the whole of life. The relationship ties continue to exist. Hence they are venerated in remembrance of them as though they were still alive.

Now Christianity holds the some similar belief that death is not the end of the relationships between the living and the dead. That is why there is the remembrance for the departed ones. This is what the west failed to understand why African Religion honours the dead.

For example, the ideas of Religions about faith in the Supreme Being, ideas about morality and worship are concrete to both Christianity and African Religion. Unfortunately such concrete issues and many others have been neglected in Christianity whilst African Religion has been up holding them. African religion is actually being urged to enrich Christianity by urging it to reinstate the lost values.

As seen in 1 Corinthians 14: 36, Paul gives a picture of what an African would ask the Christians that the values of life can not only come from the whites but from Africans too. African Religion has something to offer the west as Peter. K. Sarpong states that;

“ African Traditional religion challenges Christianity to re-appraise it self with regard to the main concepts which once were its pillars, but now are disappearing or becoming irrelevant”

Sarpong may mean that Christianity has lost very important elements needed for the better relation between human beings and God as well as among people themselves. Like what is happening today, homosexuality is tolerated among Christians who was at a certain time criticised but in African religion it has remained an abomination- a taboo up to today.

Lastly, as a person born in Africa and attached to an African tradition, can proudly say that there is nothing that African tradition religion can enrich from Christianity. Christianity instead, enrich from African religion. And I have observed that there is some wrong perceptions about African religion practices that are actually in some form performed in Christianity, and just failed the other religion.