

AN EVALUATION OF THE CO-EXISTENCE OF ADHERENTS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY IN EKPOMA

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Abstract: *Nigeria remains the most populous black nation whose aim is to join the technologically developed nations of the world. To be able to achieve this, a peaceful co-existence among the various human contributors in the eco-system is paramount. Unfortunately, the Nigeria State is bedevilled by tremendous religious upheavals, threatening to tear the nation apart. Religion undoubtedly features incessantly as a core and divisive instrument in the Nigerian polity. This trend perhaps is occasioned by gross misunderstanding and intolerance disposition among adherents. Apart from being an important factor in the developmental process of a nation, peaceful co-existence features as an indubitable panacea to the threat of total disintegration of any given nation. The urgency to emphasize the unifying importance of religion and to save the Nigerian nation from total disintegration and consequent annihilation forms the main thrust of this paper. The research adopts historical and analytical research methods in the work towards the attainment of useful*

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antidote for a holistic and peaceful coexistence in multi-religious society like Nigeria.

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Introduction

Over the years, scholars have devoted enormous time to the issue of religious crisis in Nigeria. Several books and articles have been authored by scholars on this issue. However, as we source for materials that will assist us in contributing positively to this seemingly over laboured topic, it dawned on us that although a lot has been written with regard to the question of co-existence between adherents of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, when it comes to that of the co-existence between adherent of African traditional religion and Christianity, there is a considerable dearth of literature. Obviously, there seems to be an assumption on the parts of scholar, that religious hostilities in Nigeria exclusively concern the two foreign religions. This is exactly the point made by Ottuho and Oniwhawo (2020) when they asserted that the most persistent problem confronting religious life in Nigeria today is that of religious exclusiveness an

absolute claim to religious truth by a religion. Exclusiveness is a by-product of religion. This is a basic assumption among scholars. However, several unreported hostilities are emanating from the sphere of co-existence between adherents of traditional religion and Christianity.

The import of this paper, will be properly appreciated from its focus on the much abandoned sphere of the co-existence between adherence African traditional religion and Christianity. As a guide against national chaos, under development and possible total annihilation, the imperativeness of a task of this nature cannot be over emphasized.

Understanding African Traditional Religion

For reasons of time and space, generalizations on African Traditional Religion have become spurious. For the purpose of clarity, the said spurious posture of ATR is occasioned by the absence of a known and accepted systematic approach. It varies from culture to culture. Hence, its theological explanation cannot be said to be generally approved one. For instance, it is a fact that the indigenous religion of Africa has been affected by its co-existence with other religions.

Although, there exist some threads of continuity, the elements of discontinuity cannot, however, be ignored. In spite of this, the factor of discontinuity seems to be minimal since the traditional religion of the people of Africa continues to survive in modern societies. One can only achieve a correct understanding of African Traditional Religion when the religion is appreciated against the background of a social system, which no longer exists in its pure form. This point occupies a very important aspect of this paper.

Again, to speak or write about Africa as if it is homogenously religious will be misleading. According to Isiramen,(2005) “The different traditions and systems have been modified in a variety of ways reflecting traditions and systems have been modified in a variety of ways reflecting the impact made by historic figures and historic contacts between ethnic groups. The result is a bewildering variety by religions. In spite of this pluralism, certain vital regularities in the religion are discernible. Thus, the possibility in accentuating these vital regularities gives one the impetus to refer to them generally as African Traditional Religion. It is in this sense that I am able to

refer to the indigenous religion of the people of Nigeria, as African traditional religion”.

African traditional Religion and Christianity: The Earliest Relationship

A historical reflection on the earliest relationship between the adherents of traditional religion and Christianity is important because knowing the past, provides avenue for a proper examination of the present and making of positive recommendation for the future. As expected, the Christian missionaries set themselves against the core of the traditional religion. They expressed considerable disdain for every aspect of the religion and the people. Pius Abioje quotes Emile Ludwig thus: “How can the untutored African conceive God?... How can this be? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing”. As noted by Hastings, (1998) most of the early accounts of Western on the indigenous religion of Africa were based on bias, prejudice and ignorance.

According to him,

The study of African religion in the now somewhat remote past suffered partly because of lack of real knowledge and factual information and also because of

pre-conceived, often inadequate notions of early writers...

The result of such an enterprise was an inadequate or false representation which saw nothing good in the religious life and thinking of Africans. Samuel Baker (1979) confirms this in his statement about the people of Africa when he wrote:

Without any exception, they are without a belief in a Supreme Being; neither have they any form of worship or idolatry, nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition. Their mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world

This repugnance of Africans and their religion is again emphasized in the writing of Burton (1979) when he said;

The Negro is still at that crude dawn of faith-fetishism and he as already advanced to idolatry. He has never grasp the ideas of a personal deity, a duty in life, a moral code or a shame of lying. He

rarely believes in a future state of rewards and punishment, which whether true or not are infallible indices of human progress.

Burton went further to describe the African brain as not capable of developing by saying that once an African becomes adult, “his mental development is arrested and thenceforth he grows backwards instead of forwards”. With this words and with a more superior culture and sophistication as represented by better technology, medical care, communication and formal education, the early Christian missionaries were able condemn to nullify what Africans cherished and valued as religion. Nigerians were intimidated and encouraged to make a complete break from the traditional religion.

One begin to wonder why these early Western scholars had to employ such bitterness and malice in putting on black and white such magnified misrepresentation of Africans and their religion. However, in recent times, both African and European scholars have made conscious effort to correct these erroneous impressions but I decided to recall them in

this paper, to draw attention to the point that such impressions still retain underground existence and also that the crisis of today, possibly has direct link with the past. Such historical reflection will at the end constitute a formidable base rewards genuine solution.

Crisis between Adherents of African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Ekpoma

From the fore-going, it is obvious that the African way of life was apparently distorted. The traditional religion which plays a vital role in determining the way of life of the people was grossly affected. The culture of the African is a reflection of African religion. Put succinctly, “African cultures are religious culture”. Africans did not stay akimbo watching the European evangelists eroding their cherished religion. However, the earliest attempts they made to defend and validate their religion were over-powered by the superior culture of the Europeans. The Europeans who brought the Christian religion were also at the helm of government. To be close to the corridor of power, many Nigerians abandoned the indigenous religion for Christianity. Confusion, dissatisfaction and disunity became the order of the

day. This situation was best explained by Achebe (1998) in his celebrated novel *Things Fall Apart* thus:

Turning and turning in a widening gyre.
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.
Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

With these, the stage for continuous rivalry between the two religions was set. However, a seemingly period of peaceful co-existence between adherents of Christianity and traditional religion was experienced for quite a long time. Many African Christians were comfortable in practicing the traditional religion side by side Christianity. They go to church quite all right, but at the slightest threat, they turn to traditional religion for solution. Crisis at this time was not that apparent.

The Nigerian national constitution recognizes that the nation is religiously plural and provides for freedom of worship and freedom to change from one religion to another. Section 10 of the 1999 constitution states: “Every person shall be entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief in worship, practice and observance” it is sad to note that even

with this constitutional provision, tensions emanating from the sphere of religion envelops every nook and crannies of the nation. Each warring party often claims to be upholding the tenets of faith.

The crisis between adherents of traditional religion and Christianity in contemporary Nigerian society, although took its roots from the historical past as explained above, became compounded with the pentecostalization and charismatisation of the Nigerian religion landscape. These came with renewed effort (mostly championed at this time, Nigerians themselves) to wipe out the traditional religious values of the people, explaining them to be satanic, barbaric and demonic. They emphasize that the manifold evil that befall man is traceable to African ancestors and the visit to ancestral Shrines, rituals, taboo and almost everything that the religion can boast of. Nigerians are encouraged to denounce traditional religious objects of protection like charms, talisman and amulets. These are openly destroyed and condemned as demonic.

Okoye puts it clearly when he listed “the use of charms, belief in reincarnation, juju-worship, swearing by juju, the Osu cults, title taking, pagan funerals” as

the worship of strange gods and idolatry. Among the Pentecostals and the charismatics the attack of the supposed demonic traditional religion is vehement and rhetoric's of warfare are often employed. These rhetoric's revolve round the use of such war slogans as: "warfare prayers", "spiritual terrorism", "divine revolution", "deliverance by fire", "bullets of fire", "fire by fire", "death of demons". Right in the eyes of Nigerians, a considerable drift of adherents from traditional religion to Christianity became rampant. Children no longer hesitate in stating before their parents the non consequential impact and the demonic influences of the traditional religion. A call to participate in traditional festivals and rituals is now resisted and termed fetish.

The "falcon has actually stop hearing the falconer". Incessant prayers, all-night prayers and crusades have taken over the place of traditional rites, incantations and spiritual dances in the lives of most Nigerians. These seems to be threatening the culture of the people and like the proverbial "goat that has been pushed to the wall", traditionalists began to fight back. Some children who refuse to participate in traditional religious prescriptions are beaten and sometimes

denied school fees. Christians who refused to be lured by their parents into cults are denied their birthright in terms of property possession and otherwise. On account of being Christians or wanting to become priest, some parents go as far as poisoning their children. Christian women are dispossessed of properties and banished for refusal to swear to the corpse of their late husband's on the grounds of Christianity. Some are beaten and maimed. During traditional festivals in some localities, fracas between Christians and traditionalists is rampant. Sometimes, under the guise of masquerades, Christians are beaten up for venturing out of their houses to go to the church.

These hostilities are not one-sided as we have seen from above. In the year 2004, a pastor, an indigene of Ukpenu Ekpoma, Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State, who claimed to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit came from Lagos and burnt the shrine of the people of Ukpenu. This gave rise to serious fracas. His church and family house at Ukpenu were burnt; many of his followers were hospitalized. The pastor arrested the chiefs and youths of the clan and the case was charged to court.

The pastor and his family have since been banished from the clan by the elders. This discrimination on the grounds of religion also has a political undertone. To join the ruling class in Nigeria today, one must take a step into joining a traditional cult. Like one politician told me, he was denied a political position for refusing to join a particular traditional cult. Ironically most traditionalists also claim to be Christians.

Be that as it may, hostilities between adherents of traditional religion and Christianity serve no other purpose than that of anarchy and backwardness. Acrimony, mutual suspicion, hatred and bitterness in the name of religion are inimical to the peaceful co-existence of the Nigerian polity. A way out of this quagmire is imperative.

The Way Forward

Granted that very many concerned scholars had in various ways in mitigating the unfortunate development that have further turned us far apart from each other, it is the position of this paper to align with the likes of Omon, who unmistakably asserted that a concerted effort should be made towards reconciling aggrieved groups. This should be taken more seriously

with all the attention it deserves so that the people can live peacefully and steadily make tangible progress in relationship. Dialogue between African Traditional Religion and Christianity should be organised. The type of dialogue can come in the form of Christian Evangelization using the positive values of the African Traditional Religion. This is the value of inculturation, one is only able to know and understand God through medium available to man, and this medium is culture. Inculturation deals with “contextualization” it makes religion important in a given environment. In this case, it makes Christianity relevant in Nigeria environment and Esan in particular.

Conclusion

The call by Pope John Paul the II on 6th January 1989, for a synod of Bishops special Assembly on Africa to discuss the theme “The Church in Africa and her Evangelizing Mission Towards the year 2000 is a recognition of the signs of the times. The challenge thrown to the African church on how the gospel can be incarnated into Africa culture has not been fully taken up. The resultant effect is the open confrontation between African Traditional Adherents and Christian

Adherents as witnessed at Ukpenu, Ekpoma. Culture is dynamic and the cultural contact between Africa and the West is bound to affect the world-view of the people. This will certainly give birth to what Pope Paul VI called “the building civilization of love”. The beauty and relevance of religion must not be killed through intolerance. To avoid future occurrence inculcation process must quickly be embark upon by relevant Church authority. If the gospel is properly incarnated and understood by the people in relation to their culture misunderstanding will not come up.

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