

INVESTIGATING THE FOUNDATIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND MORALITY: A NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE.

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Abstract

The issue of moral decadence in both our private and public life in Nigeria is no longer news. Everyone knows it and perhaps everyone decries it. Typical of the African, instead of an informed intelligent discussion on the causes of such moral decadence and informed practical solutions to it, Nigerians, led by their religious leaders, Christians and non-Christians alike, take recourse to praying and conjuring religion to come to our aid as if religion has a magic wand for guaranteeing morality not to talk of restoring one that is lost. This article goes to examine the underlying presumption in this prevailing attitude, that of a foundational relationship between morality and religion and the consequent expectation that religion should or ought to guarantee morality and to curb such moral decadence when and where it manifests itself. The verdict of this investigation is that both the assumption namely that morality is necessarily founded on religion, and the expectation namely that religion should therefore guarantee morality are grossly unfounded and misguided.

Keywords: Investigating, Foundational, Religion and Morality.

INTRODUCTION

In an article titled “Ndigbo in spiritual Disarray” and published in The Leader of July 26 2009, the Catholic Bishop of Orlu diocese Most Rev. Dr. Augustine Ukwuoma, lamented over what he called the moral crisis in Nigeria. The article quotes him as saying “Nigeria is in a moral crisis; South East is in spiritual disarray”. Regretting “that all sorts of evil, corruption, immorality are on the increase in Igboland” he wondered “how an area believed to be the Christian heartland in Nigeria, is enmershed with such wickedness” (cf. The Leader Vol. 1 No. 26 Sunday July 26, 2009, p.1)

And in a similar vein but with a broader outreach Osita T. Asogwa, a Catholic priest of the diocese of Nsukka, writes

In Nigeria today, there are so many Christian groups and churches that it would be most difficult to count them. There is also so much crime, indiscipline, injustice, exploitations and counting, that one begins to wonder if we operate a different brand of Christianity that allows such. Nigeria is unarguably a country of very religious

people, recognized as one of the most religious in the world. In a survey conducted by the Gallup International Association, Nigeria was rated the second nation in the world with the highest percentages of self described religious persons. Yet, in the assessment of Transparency Internationals' 2002 Corruption Perception Index (CPI), which is a measure of domestic, public sector corruption, the same country of outstandingly religious character was ranked one of the most corrupt in the world, second only to Bangladesh. What a contradiction! (Osita T. Asogwa, 2013 p.16)

From the northern part of Nigeria Msgr. Cletus T. Gotan writes in a paper entitled “Authentic Christian Faith Formation in the present Religious-cultural Crisis in Nigeria” which he presented at the Workshop for Formators' Association of Nigeria, FAN, Nov. 4-8, 2013

One of the complexities of our times is that in an environment where everything is clothed in religious narrative, spiritual languages and much religious posturing, little fruits of deep religious living and acting is seen in the society (p.7).

And he goes on to ask

But why is it that our religious claims and external show of piety and love of God have not translated into a strong ethical and spiritual force for the renewal of our Nigerian society? (p.8).

Permit me here to make one final citation, this time from a Muslim brother. Writing under the title “Nigeria: Religion without faith... Is it worth the Trouble?” Dr. Aliyu Tilde says

Foreigners are often surprised to discover how religion is deep rooted in the psyche of the overwhelming majority of Nigerians. When the Egyptian-American doctoral student of Harvard, Sara al-Tantawi, visited me early this year to ask some questions regarding the impact of sharia implementation on woman, she did not fail to show her amazement at our religiosity (p.1).

Further in the article he says,

I know there are thousands, if not millions, of Nigerians that are frustrated with our inability to use our entrenched religious favour to solve our problems, which are essentially none other than our inability to transform ourselves from the level of individuals to that of a community where we [sic] the action of one person has

consequences-good or bad-on the life of all others. (p.3)

Running through the above cited authors and indeed many Nigerians, as Tilde noted, is a disappointment and lamentation of a disconnect between religion and morality, a disconnect that is predicated on an assumed original connectedness. The aim of this paper, as the title suggests, is to investigate this assumed connectedness.

From this preamble it should be clear that this investigation is undertaken not purely for theoretical or academic interest. There is, as you can already perceive, some practical social interest. Our interest is motivated by the Nigerian situation. We shall therefore be asking whether the foundational view represented by the cited sources is justifiable. You can now see why the title of this paper has the additional qualification “A Nigerian Angle”! Within the Nigerian situation or context, we hope finally to discuss why religion or religious morality cannot solve our problems.

MORALITY AND THE NEED FOR A FOUNDATION

For the purposes of this paper, we shall take morality as having to do with human actions or conducts in so far as these are human actions or conducts i.e. actions or conducts that merit approval or disapproval by the human community. It is in this sense that Prof. Radoslav A. Tsanoff(1947) writes

We say broadly that the science of ethics or morals is concerned with character and with conduct that is approved or disapproved.

Such approval or disapproval, as the case may be, is expressed by judging the action or conduct as “good” or “bad”, “right” or “wrong”. Dr. Christopher Ikechukwu Asogwa(2012) of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka puts it in this way:

It has been observed that human actions possess quality in virtue of which they receive appendage terms such as 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'bad' as accolades or judgments. That quality is morality.

The issue or problem of foundation for morality comes in when one goes further to question the basis for the approval or disapproval of an action. Let me illustrate. A boy takes something that does not belong to him. In the language of morality you tell him, he should not do that, i.e. take what does not belong to him. This is stealing, you may add! And if he goes on to ask you “but why should I not steal or take what does not belong to me?” you are bound to give him reasons. You could tell him that decent boys do not

steal. You could tell him society does not approve that. You could tell him God commands us not to take our neighbours' belongings etc. Ludwig Wittgenstein is said to have noted that the language of morality is “ought”. (cf H.O. Mounce “Morality and Religion” in B. Davies Op(ed), 1998, p. 255). You ought to do this or you ought not to do this. Just as you would tell someone sick “you ought to take your medication” and hing this on his express desire to recover from his sickness and the necessary causal relatedness between the medication and his recovery, so also the ought of morality needs a foundation, a basis for its justifiability or universal applicability. There seems to be a consensus among philosophers that morality needs a foundation. Where there is certain divisiveness of opinion is on that which serves as this foundation. We shall here briefly examine some of these opinions. They could be subsumed under two or three broad divisions, namely those who maintain that morality's foundation is religion and those who hold the contrary position, and thirdly those who hold that each is independent of the other. For the purposes of this paper, we shall not be concerned here with the views of those who hold that each is independent of the other.

MORALITY NEEDS & HAS RELIGION AS ITS FOUNDATION

Though we made some reference to Islam in our preamble in order to widen our base to include other religions and not just Christianity, we shall in this subsection be concentrating on Judaeo-Christian religion. What is said here could apply, *ceteris paribus*, to all other religions.

The locus classicus for those who hold and argue that religion is the foundation of morality is the Ten Commandments of the Hebrew and Christian sacred books. In the Ten Commandments or rather in the structure of the Ten Commandments one sees what it means for morality to be based or founded on religion. In his article “Morality and religion” H.O. Mounce (1998) brings this out clearly. Therein he writes:

.... In earlier cultures, there was no sharp distinction between the moral and the religious. The Ten Commandments of the ancient Hebrews will serve as an example. The first four concern our duties to God; the remaining six, our duties to our neighbor. Nowadays, it may be said that the last six are moral, the first four religious. But to the ancient Hebrew there was no such distinction. Throughout, *the commands instruct us* in our duties to God. Thus the last six do not instruct us in how to serve our neighbor as distinct from serving God. Rather they instruct us in how God wishes us to serve him in our dealing with our neighbor.

Whether in the realm of the religious or that of morality the structure is the same: God

commands or gives instruction. This instruction tells us what to do and what not to do. Ours is obedience to this instruction. The goodness or badness of our actions issues forth therefore, from either compliance or noncompliance with such divine instructions. Stealing a neighbour's goat or sleeping with his wife or worst still killing his daughter is judged bad or wrong because the divine command disapproves of these. Apostles of religious morality (i.e. religion-based morality) maintain that all human actions, judged as moral, have their origin in a divine command and could not have come to be without this divine intervention/command.

MORALITY NEEDS & DOES NOT HAVE RELIGION AS ITS FOUNDATION

A typical representative of this school of thought is Peter Schwartz. In his article "Moral Values without Religion," (2005) he asks: "Does morality depend upon religion?" And he goes on to say:

Most people believe it does, which is a major reason behind the appeal of the religious right. People believe that without faith in a supernatural authority, we can have no moral values-no moral absolutes, no black-and-white distinctions, no firm demarcation between good and evil-in life or in politics. This is the assumption underlying Justice Antonin Scalia's recent assertion that 'government derives its authority from God' since only religious faith can supposedly provide moral constraints on human action (p.1).

He then queries

And what draws people to this bizarre premise –the premise that there is no rational basis from refraining from murder, rape or anarchism? (ibid).

As opposed to a faith-based morality Peter Schwartz advocates/proposes what he calls a morality of reason. Such a morality, he says,

begins with the individual's life as the primary value and identifies the further values that are demonstrably required to sustain that life. It observes that man's nature demands that we live not by random urges or by animal instincts, but by the faculty that distinguishes us from animals and on which our existence fundamentally depends: rationality (p.2).

Peter Schwartz of course does not just advocate or propose a morality of reason. He points to the facticity of its existence.

There is indeed morality without religion, a morality, not of dogmatic commands, but of rational values and of unbreached respect for the life of the individual (p.3).

What lends credence to the position of apologists of morality of reason or morality without religion is the presence of morally upright fellows/persons of atheistic persuasion in our midst. In this regard A. Zaman (2007) observes in his work "Does Religion Define Morality" that there are theists who commit immoral acts and there are conscientious non theists who behave morally.

The conclusion he draws from this is self evident.

And since there are 'non-theists' who also behave morally so the immediate conclusion is that religious belief is not a necessary prerequisite for being moral

John Henderson (2007) on this note writes in his book *God.com: A Deity for the New Millennium*

don't point to the wonderful things that good people do for their fellow man and call that religion. That is morality. There are many good, moral people. Most of the individuals whom I know as moral and worthwhile citizens would be that way even if they never went to church and never had a religion.

On this same note but arguing from the perspective of the foundational relationship of religion and law, Harold J. Berman (1974) writes

Also, anthropologists are able to show by empirical observation that no society tolerates indiscriminate lying, stealing, or violence within the in-group, and indeed, the last six of the Ten Commandments, which require respect for parents and prohibit killing, adultery, stealing, perjury, and fraud, have some counterpart in every known culture. In fact natural-law theories consider a religious explanation of law to be superstitious and dangerous. Such theorists are able to demonstrate by reason and observation alone that basic legal values and principles correspond to human nature and to the requirements of social order.

What has crystallized from our investigation so far is that morality which the various views discussed above agree to be a necessary component of being human, requires by its very nature a foundation. This foundation could be religion; it could be rationality; it could also be custom or what some authors call social consciousness.

THE NIGERIAN ANGLE

We shall now look into what I have called the *Nigerian Angle* in this investigation. Though there are certainly atheists and agnostics in Nigeria, there is no doubt in my mind that the discussion on the foundation of morality is no serious issue for the majority of Nigerians, Christians, Muslims or traditional religionists. Most Nigerians would certainly subscribe to the view that morality is founded on religion. What I call the Nigerian angle here is not just the near consensus on this matter of the faith foundation of morality but the equally near consensus that morality is solely based or founded on religion. This explains for me the constant pointing of fingers to religion in most of the discussions castigating the moral decadence in our society. This explains for me why some critics, like Dr. Aliyu Tilde, in the face of this contradiction, as my good friend Osita T. Asogwa puts it, are tempted to jettison religion. The next and final leg of our investigation therefore is to examine this view that it is a contradiction for moral decadence to prevail in a supposedly deeply religious society like Nigeria. I shall conclude by saying a word on why religion should not be blamed for our moral decadence. Put in other words, I shall say a word on why religion cannot solve our problem of moral decadence.

THE ISSUE OF CONTRADICTION

Is it really incongruous, as Osita T. Asogwa and Bishop Augustine Ukwuoma would have us believe, to be religious and at the same time morally or ethically wanting? By extension is it incongruous for a given society to be deeply religious and at the same time morally decadent? To answer this question, let us look once more at the Ten Commandments which we have seen above as the basis of both religious and moral practices in the Judaeo-Christian religion. There is certainly nothing logically and practically impossible in one person keeping the first four (three) commandments and not keeping the other six (seven). In his study of “The Relationship between Religion and Ethics in Jewish Thought” Louis Jacobs (1996) observes that even Jewish rabbis did recognize that morality did not need religion to be effective. In some of their writings these rabbis, Jacobs says,

are, in fact, calling attention to the phenomenon that it is quite possible for a man to have a strongly developed religious or *numinous* sense but to be at the same time a thorough scoundrel so far as his ethical conduct is concerned. At all events it is suggested here that one can speak of a man as having a strong moral character without him having any use of religion, and the Rabbis are saying that such an assessment of human character need not be wrong since religion is one thing and ethics another, though, of course,

for the Rabbis, Judaism demands both”.

The priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan perhaps exemplify this. They had certainly strongly developed religious sense with no corresponding developed moral sense.

RELIGIOUS MORALITY CANNOT SOLVE OUR PROBLEM

Let us conclude our investigation by looking at why religious morality cannot solve our moral decadence problem. To my mind why this is so is both simple and obvious. Why our religious morality cannot solve our problem lies in the very nature of both religion and morality itself. Unlike ancient Judaism and primitive Islam the brand of religion we practice in Nigeria, whether Christianity or Islam, has lost what H.J. Berman calls its legal tooth. This loss of its legal tooth contributes, he says, in no small way to the ineffectiveness of a religion to play its role of social engineering. Writing to the American public in 1974 Berman warned

To appeal to religion to rescue law in America today is like asking a drowning man to rescue another

Mutatis mutandis the same can be said of Nigerians. To appeal to religion to rescue morality in Nigeria today is like asking a drowning man to rescue another

When we look at morality itself we see the same loss of legal tooth. Morality is by its very nature normative i.e. it can and indeed does prescribe but has no legal binding power to enforce compliance to its prescriptions. If the moral tells you “do not steal or do not kill” it does not have any legal binding force to compel your compliance. Even when one assumes that morality is founded on religion, this assumption by itself does not guarantee the acceptance of and compliance with the dictates or prescriptions of such a morality. That further step, the acceptance/compliance with the dictates of morality is a free choice of the accepting community and by extension the accepting individual. After Moses had read out the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, it was left to the people of Israel to accept it or not. And even when they had said “All that the Lord has said, we shall do” we know that the subsequent history of Israel is a chronicle of disobedience to these laws. Paul Taylor (1985) makes the case that ultimately our commitment to moral principles is in no way predicated on whatever foundation such moral principles are said to be based on. Such commitment, he argues, “is finally a matter of one's will.”

The second element in the nature of morality that makes it impossible for it to solve our problem is that morality is a baby of several mothers or what Dr. C.I. Asogwa calls morality's “feeder channels” and George Anastaplo (1983) calls “private shapers of

morality” On this note Asogwa writes:

As raw material of moral philosophy, morality has certain feeder channels on which it seems to rest and depend. These otherwise have been referred to as sources of morality. Some of these are customs, religion, society, instinct, conscience, etc. they form the corpus of morality. However, necessary and sufficient sources of morality may never be established since morality encompasses these and more that are heavily drawn upon consciously or unconsciously by the moralist.

From the above it is clear that any nurturing of morality that does approach this task from all or most of these relevant sources is bound to fail.

CONCLUSION

From the above investigations it is clear that though morality may require a foundation, this foundation must not be religion and even where religion is said to provide this foundation, religion does not ipso facto guarantee such morality. The bane of the Nigerian society is that we as a people have collectively left nurturing our morality from its several mothers. As a people we have laid a disproportionate weight almost exclusively on religion to nurture our morality, both private and public. We close our eyes, for example, to the contributions of positive law and civic education to engineer and nurture public morality. The resultant effect is the moral decadence we see in our supposedly religious society. Surely religion is not and should not be blamed for this!

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