

## **African Traditional Religion and Christian Religion: Any Compatibility?**

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### **Abstract**

The study sought to find out if there is any compatibility between African traditional religion and Christian religion. The researchers adopted the expository method. Contemporarily, an average Nigerian fanatic Christian has neglected and considered the African traditional religion as a barbaric religion that has nothing to do with the Christian religion. African traditional religion has been downgraded by some Christians as an archaic religion that is woefully harmful to the human person. However, the researchers are of the opinion that the two religions are compatible. The researchers' conclusion will enable the readers to understand that there is in the cultures of the African people a certain perception and the recognition of a conceived divine power that the people name the Supreme God and address as a Father. The process of contextualization must acknowledge that cultures differ in their conception of God and life, requiring other forms of expressions and understanding. Recommendations were made at the end of the work, among which are the following: the elite should educate people in various churches to understand, appreciate and accept the positive contribution of African traditional religion. Unbiased teachers/lecturers should teach some relevant courses on African Traditional Religion both in schools and outside schools. And at the same time, they should be able to practice what they teach.

**Keywords:** African Traditional Religion, Christian religion.

### **Introduction**

African Traditional Religion can be seen as the most important influence in the life of most Africans; although, its essential principles are often ignored and unknown to the Christians who make themselves constantly liable to misunderstand the African worldview and beliefs. This is because in the past, most of African traditional religion was not recorded in writing and much of it was passed by word of mouth, through observation, through practice, from generation to generation and would require at times directly speaking to the holders of such, those who over the years have accumulated knowledge and wisdom about African Traditional Religion. In line with this, Mbiti (1990)

describes "this oral transmission as not written on paper, but in the people's hearts, minds, rituals and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings (3). Everybody is a religious carrier. Many may look down on African traditional religion for its lack of recorded content, but that does not mean religious illiteracy. However, African traditional religion is observed in every aspect of life of an African. It cannot be studied in isolation. Its study has to go hand-in-hand with the study of the people who practice the religion. It is against this background that this article attempts to demonstrate the possibility of any compatibility between African Traditional Religion and Christian religion.

### **The Concept of African Traditional Religion**

The concept of African traditional religion can be regarded as the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans, and which is being practiced today in various forms and various shades and intensities by a very large number of Africans, including individuals who claim to be Muslims or Christians. For easy comprehension, there is need to explain sub concept of African traditional religion. The term 'traditional' means indigenous, that which is aboriginal or foundational, handed down from generation to generation, upheld and practiced by Africans today. This is a heritage from the past, but treated not as a thing of the past but as that which connects the past with the present and the present with eternity. However, it is not a "fossil" religion, a thing of the past or a dead religion. It is a religion that is practiced by living men and women. Through modern changes, the traditional religion cannot remain intact but it is by no means extinct. The declared adherents of the indigenous religion are very conservative, resisting the influence of modernism heralded by the colonial era, including the introduction of Islam, Christianity, Western education and improved medical facilities. They cherish their tradition; they worship with sincerity because their worship is quite meaningful to them; they hold tenaciously to their covenant that binds them together. We speak of religion in the singular. This is deliberate. We are not unconscious of the fact that Africa is a large continent with multitudes of nations who have complex cultures, innumerable languages and myriads of dialects. That is why John Mbiti opines that African Traditional Religion is pluralistic in nature.

But in spite of all these differences, there are many basic similarities in the religious systems everywhere, which is the concept of God (called by different names); there is also the concept of divinities and/or spirits as well as beliefs in the ancestral cult. Every locality may and do have its own local deities, its own festivals, its own name or names for the Supreme Being, but in essence the pattern is the same. There is that noticeable "Africanness" in the whole pattern.

### **The Concept of Christianity**

Christianity is an Abrahamic religion originating from the community of the followers of Jesus Christ. It is a religion that focuses on the life and teachings and death of Jesus of Nazareth. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, it has become the largest of the world's religions. Geographically, it is the most widely diffused of all faiths. It has a constituency of more than two billion believers. Its largest groups are the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and the Protestant.

### **The Nexus Between African Traditional Religion and Christianity**

We are examining the link between African traditional religion and Christian religion. It is noticed that African traditional religion and Christian religion are two sides of the same coin, even though out of ignorance, but some people tag it to be archaic and without any relevance to Christians. That is why Gbari and Anselm (2019) opined that man has demonstrated a natural inclination towards faith and religion since the beginning of the world. All religions consist of trying to appease and get favours from the superior Being. However, it is on this note that the researchers vehemently discuss the relationship that African traditional religion and Christian religion share as follows:

### **The Belief in Creation**

Both religions believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, who is transcendent and immanent in the lives of the adherents of the two religions. Regardless of the different names used by different tribes and denominations to address this particular power, all believe in this higher power that is in charge. African Traditional Religion maintains that even if called by different names and even if far off, the Supreme Being can be contacted through intermediaries or divinities. It is from this understanding that the study demonstrates that the common belief that the Supreme Being is accessible, in African traditional religion, through intermediaries and in Christianity through an intimate relationship with God, that the concept of preservation through stewardship is in accordance to Gen. 1:28; "Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish and the sea, the birds in the sky, and all animals that scurry along the ground."

There are a range of myths and theories on how man came into being from the African understanding of creation. Whatever the myth, the end-product was man. This leads to the conclusion that man is a product of something, man did not simply appear on his own. It is the same belief found in the Christian creation narrative that God, the Creator, created man out of nothing. The contact point in this instance is that man is the product of something, acknowledged by both ideologies and the essence of the creation man. If this common belief on the creation of man is articulated well by both sides, it will result in agreement that man was created by one Creator. Neither ideologies can be scientifically proven, but are based on organic experience.

### **Creation of the Earth and Man**

The creation account of earth and man in African perspectives, believed God to be the creator. Although, in exploring and ascertaining various views of scholars on the creation of earth and man, these views may be different but all of them are geared towards the same direction which is the belief in the existence and creation of earth and man. That is why the researchers see the creation of the earth and man as having a link to the African Traditional Religion and Christian religion. Therefore, in examining the African Traditional Religion and the Christian religion, there is need to explore other scholars' myth on the issues of creation of the earth and man. African traditional religion and Christian religion have the same belief that the creation was made by the Supreme Being - God. It is noticed and believed that all creation is from the Supreme Being alone who is called by different name by different tribes in relation to their perspective and worldview. In line with this, Mbiti (1971), has described God as follows; "God is seen as a "potter" who created man from clay (162).

However, to ascertain some of the myths on the creation of earth and man, Bambuti clan tells in another story that God made the body of the first man by kneading and then covered him with a skin and poured blood into his lifeless body. Man then breathed his first breath and God whispered softly in his ear; "You will beget children who will live in the forest." The man was called Baatsi. According to Awolalu (1981), a similar story is that of the Fon tribe that maintains that "once God had set the universe in order and had created the animal and plant life, He formed the first human beings from clay and water. Others, like the Shilluk, maintain that man was made out of different colours of clay and that is the reason for different skin pigmentation. He then gave man legs, with which to walk and run; then hands, with which to plant grain; eyes, with which to see that grain; and a mouth, with which to eat. Thereafter God gave man a tongue, with which to sing and talk; and finally, ears, so that he may enjoy the sound of music, of dance and of the talk of great men. God then sent man out, a complete man. This idea of man created through clay and water is common in Africa."

Frazer, (1975:22-23) indicates that the above creation myth of clay and water corresponds to the creation analogy of the Shilluk (Ocolo), of the Sudan Region, as follows; "The creator Juok moulded all people of earth. While he was engaged in the work of creation, he wandered about the world. In the land of the whites, he found a pure white earth or sand, and out of it he shaped white people. Then he came to the land of Egypt and out of the mud of the Nile he made red or brown people. Lastly, he came to the land of Col, and finding their black earth he created black people out of it. The way in which he modelled

human beings was this. He took a lump of earth and said to himself, "I will make humans, but they must be able to walk and run and go out into the fields, so I will give each of them two long legs, like the flamingo." Having done so, he thought again, "They must be able to cultivate millet, so I will give each of them two arms, one to hold the hoe, and the other to tear up the weeds." So, he gave humans two arms. Then he thought again, "They must be able to see the millet, so I will give them two eyes." He did so accordingly. Next, he thought to himself, "They must be able to eat their millet, so I will give each a mouth." And a mouth he gave accordingly. After that he thought within himself, "They must be able to dance and speak and sing and shout, and for these purposes they must have tongues." And tongues he gave accordingly. Lastly the deity said to himself, "They must be able to hear the noise of the dance and the speech of the great ones, and for that they need two ears." So, two ears each he gave, and sent them out into the world as perfect humans."

### **The Belief in the Holy Bible**

The Holy Bible is a scripture that was inspired by the Holy Spirit through man to put it into writing or to put it in written form. It is the Christian revelation of God. The Holy Bible is also referred to as the Sacred Scripture or the Word of God. The first lengthy part of the Bible is named the Hebrew Scriptures, or commonly called by the Christians the Old Testament. The Hebrew Scriptures reveal how the people of the old covenant came to know the one true God in the history of man's salvation. The historical contents of the Hebrew Scriptures stretch over many hundreds of years, during which the Hebrew nation, the chosen people of Yahweh, awaited the coming of Messiah and the Saviour promised to them. The second segment of the Bible is known as the Christian Scriptures or commonly called the New Testament. The Christian Scriptures contain the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and the activities of the early Christian communities or Jesus' followers, whose mission was to witness and to proclaim the Good News of salvation to the entire human family.

### **The Belief in the Life after Death/Salvation**

In African Traditional Religion, the belief of human salvation is centered on the human life experience. The African emphasis on life geared towards the continuity of the family life and the continuity of life after death which is always seen in the perspective of salvation. This forms the basic faith of every traditional African person-the continuity of life. For the Africans, faith and life are inseparable. Faith has a communal character in African religious traditions. In African religious setting, faith is essentially experienced in a community – the community character of faith is emphasized and lived by the members. Faith in African religion is experienced in corporate and communal expressions, for instance, in community festivals, sacrifices, worships and in every religious

gathering of the people. In African context, faith is not simply a rational understanding of what you believe, but faith has a corporate and communal character. The African community celebrates its life of faith in numerous feasts, for instance, in name-giving, initiation, reconciliation and in large-community feasts. In African culture, religion is existentially life and not simply an aspect of life. Culture is part and parcel of human beings, and it is difficult to dispense with its demand or part company with its reality. Culture fills our life from the time we got up in the morning until we go to bed at night. Religion is a basic element of culture. In the same vein, the Christian religion believes in the life after death.

### **Spirituality of African Religion**

Spirituality in African Traditional Religion is described as “values by which a person individually or in community relates to the spiritual realm” (Mbiti). It is seen as a sharing / a link between human beings and other realities which include God, spirits of the departed, divinities, spirits associated with natural objects and phenomena, and nature itself. Africans are extremely aware of the “triangle of reality” as a community in which they participate and to which they belong. Their spirituality is governed by the sensitivity to this reality of relationships and communication. The relationship between the mundane and the supra-mundane is maintained through religious activities and practices like sacrifices, festivals and prayers. Of these, prayers are the most intensive expression of African spirituality. They are spiritual messages for the attention of the spirit world. A study of prayers reveals elements of spirituality such as holiness, purity and cleanliness of heart. Prayers portray humility, faith, trust and confidence that humans have in their relationship with the spirit world. Prominent among the themes of prayers in African Traditional Religion are peace, love, tenderness, care and gentleness in the relationships of the human community. Praise, thanksgiving, joy for blessings received are also present in the prayers. From these, we can gather what Africans require of religion. The ultimate concern of the fullness and blessedness of life is the central theme of prayers and that for which people struggle. African Traditional Religion wrestles with the reality of evil, suffering and pain.

For Christian religion, spirituality is in the center of how commitment one is with the divine. This is done by frequent reverence to God in prayer; observing daily devotion and so on.

### **UBuntu/Botho**

In African Traditional Religion, UBuntu/Botho is the human quality reflecting and at the same time underpinning the dignity of the human personality. It is a cohesive moral value inherent in all human persons. It is an expression of the “Supreme Goodness” in all human persons. It is a modality of being. It is also a philosophy that is underscored by the maxim, “You are because I am, and since

I am, therefore you are." Thus, the being of one person is contingent upon the being of another. In biblical terms, it is espoused as, "thou shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." The German philosopher Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative in consonance with the philosophy of Ubuntu says: Act according to that maxim that you can at the same time will it to become a universal law; whether in your own favor or that of another never treat the other as a means but always as an end.

### **Human Relations**

Human relationships are based on an hierarchical as well as a clan systems. Each social setting will prescribe a particular way of relating to one another in accordance with prevalent customs, norms and values. Respect for the elders, aged, and handicapped underpins indigenous religious practice. However, this aspect of respect should not be upheld in a manner that is contrary to the constitution. The South African constitution provides that no individual shall be discriminated against on the basis of age, sex, creed or color.

### **Supreme being and ancestors**

The ancestors are the "living-dead," our departed parents and elders through whom we communicate with God-Modimo. In some Christian denominations, especially the Roman Catholic Church, believers are taught they can reach God by way of the Virgin Mary. Africans do not worship the dead; they revere them; they accord them due respect. It is a time-tested African tradition to greet, communicate, or offer anything to the chief or king or any person with similar office or standing, through a mediator. To the king you go through the elders or councilors. Therefore, in African Traditional Religion, we often invoke the intercession of the ancestors as we advance our offerings to the Most-High. It is a deliberate and intentional distortion of a people's culture to say Africans worship ancestors, deities, or individuals. Africans do not wish to equate ancestors with Christian saints; the comparison is dangerous and misleading. It smacks of mimicry. African Traditional Religion must be explained and practiced in its cultural context. African Traditional Religion should not seek to be legitimized through a foreign test or yardstick. Anyway, if you look at many religions, similar charges were made in the course of their development. The ancestors are experienced and best qualified to communicate their prayers to God. Our African ancestors daily kneel before the shining face of God, the First Cause, Atum/Qamata/ Mudzimu/Eloihim, to present our petitions for truth, justice, wisdom, righteousness and peace in our human existence, dealings and relations (Koka, 2019). B. J. van der Walt's (1994) observation should amplify these sentiments:

It is a fact that Western Christians (such as missionaries) often had the attitude that people of Africa, who adhere to traditional customs, were

always wrong and the whites always right. Such people did not see the wealth of African culture... The theology of such missionaries is also in error, because they deny God's creational revelation to the African. Before they even had contact with the Bible, God already spoke to the hearts and consciences of the people of Africa. That is why they are usually, as far as interpersonal relationships are concerned, superior to the Western (213).

Of primary importance in this connection is to recognize and accept the close relationship between the living family and kin members and ancestors. Kayongo-Male and Onyango (1984) write:

This perhaps explains the elaborateness of ceremonies connected with every stage of the family life cycle, since ceremonies often enabled the living to maintain ties with non-living family and kin members. The idea of a person's life continuing, even after death, as long as the family remembered him or her, was common. It helps us understand why even when a man died, it was important for him to have children born in his name (as in the custom of levirate); these children would be thought of as his and would keep his memory alive. When misfortunes arose, people often atoned to the dead, assuming that the dead were angered by some behavior of their living relatives. Maintenance of family shrines was believed to discipline peaceful continuance of family life. Ancestors were believed to discipline family members who neglected familial duties or acted disrespectfully to older members (45).

### **Sacred Places**

Some of the identifiable features of the Christian churches are physical structures, crucifixes, and liturgies. Indigenous religion has its own features, like religious mounds. These are hill-like land projections often along the road. It is customary to pause and bow with respect when passing by because it is often believed that such mounds are sacred since the ancestors used them as resting places, or places of "offerings." Such mounds are sacred places where one could kneel and communicate with the ancestors. This is still happening, although in a modified sense. Similarly, you find things like Legwame/Lehwana-an onion-like plant - often in the middle of the homestead. This plant marks a spot where the family often brings prayers or gives thanks to the ancestors. For example, if there were to be a wedding feast in the family, information would be relayed to the ancestors at such a spot, and blessings would be expected from them in turn. So, there is always a reciprocal communication. It is at this point where libation (traditionally beer with snuff)

is poured in order to appease the ancestors. Lamenting the foreign onslaught on African Traditional Religion, Kayongo-Male and Onyango (1984) write:

With little knowledge of the values of the Africans, many of the early missionaries denounced the sacrifice to ancestors, magic, betrothal of children, inheritance of widows, polygamy, many types of songs and dances, initiation ceremonies and bride wealth. Such denunciation over time did undermine traditional customs and beliefs which had projected married life and kingship relationships.

### **The Logical Connection Between African Traditional Religion and Christian Practices**

**Incense:** it is gotten from a tree. This tree when blessed by an ordained minister of God is assumed to be chasing evil spirits / witches. In the same vein, African Traditional religion uses the tree after the chief priest might have altered some utterances.

**Olive oil:** In Christian religion, olive oil when blessed by the priest or the reverend is observed to be sacramental. However, the use of the olive oil is mainly to heal the sick, prosperity, marriage and so on. African traditional religion also used olive oil and altering words to the oil based on the particular work it is to be rendered. For example; “the god of ancestors I evoke and call on you to use this oil and bless this person (Emeka) so that he will pass his examination. In this regard, the oil is serving as an oil of success.” From the discussion, it is noticed that what really matters is the utterance that make it to change or to work in different direction.

**Water and healing:** Water which is finite and increasingly scarce commodity is a vital substance in the ritual life of the African initiated churches, including African Traditional Religion. According to Adewale (1986:28), “the use of water for cultic rituals is crucial for the religion and social life of the adherents of the African Traditional Religion and culture. E.g. the Yoruba tribe religion, water, whether running streams or wells plays a positive or negative role in all forms of divine- minor or major worship. Ritual ceremonies and socio-religion rites performed in honour of ancestors on behalf of human beings.” All this are done through a ritual bath. Fatokun (2008:336) aligns with Adewale (1986) that “ritual bath is essential in healing and deliverance rituals of the African Traditional Religion especially those who wear “white garments”. This explains why they worship near the river or the stream. Ritual bath prescription is believed to be a very effective ritual in dealing with any problem of life. Cases like; attack with sicknesses and diseases. Joblessness, barrenness, late marriage, stagnation in business and bad luck are administered through a different form

of ritual bath. The common one is the flowing or running ritual bath which can be found in rivers or streams. If that is not available stagnant ritual bath is used.”

African traditional worshippers emphasize that water has both creative and re-creative virtues. “Through the use of water, as the symbol of life in prayer, God can bring into being new things and “put things right” that have gone wrong in human life. This is why, more than any element of ritual and even more than anointing oil, water is used as the stimulant of faith in prayer rituals” (Fatokun 2008:351).

**Power to control rainfall:** in African Traditional Religion certain herbs and incantations are used to control / make rain to fall. This is observed without violating the natural phenomenon. For instance, during dry season, to command rain to fall is hard. In the same vein, the adherents of the Christian religion pray of some prescribed Psalms to control / cause rainfall.

**Back to sender prayer:** ATR uses some herbs and leaves of a tree to put in their land; so that anybody that tries to put charm in their compound; it will bounce back to the sender. Also the same in the Christian religion which they normally pray (Ps 35, 109)

**Journey mercy prayer (to protect you against accident):** The adherents of African Traditional Religion believe in swallowing certain seeds while embarking on a journey. The same is applicable to Christian religion, some Christians will rub anointing oil, wear some sacramental. These they do to obtain journey mercies.

**The Causes of Conflict Among African Traditional Religion and Christianity**  
From the on-going discussion and examination so far, it is noticed that the lack of syphon in African traditional and Christian religion is as result of thus:

### **Instruments of Salvation in African Religion**

In order to provide salvation and relief from these social sins, African Traditional Religion has designed a variety of protective rituals, magical recipes and charms. These are aimed at immunizing potential victims against witchcraft, evil spirits, bad luck, infertility, thieves, and forestalling failure in life's ventures and at promoting recovery from illness and other misfortunes. So as to forestall impending destruction of individuals and their communities, purifications are used to cleanse those who are defiled. Also, religious rituals and sacrifices have been devised to make peace with the living dead (ancestors), so that they might continue to support and protect their descendants. These

rituals and religious sacrifices, individually and collectively, are believed to have proven themselves effective in saving and preserving the lives of individuals, their families and community. Indeed, the greatest attraction to the African Instituted Churches (AIC, also known as founded churches) lies in their ability to integrate African religious belief and the Christian faith. These are churches that have severed themselves from overseas mission churches and from one another. Appreciative of the fact that salvation is not complete if it fails to address their concrete, daily problems such as healing, driving away troublesome spirits and protecting individuals against evil forces through charms, the AICs openly invite members and others to bring their fears and anxieties about witchcraft, bad luck, illness, unemployment and other misfortunes to the Christian community so that they may be given relief. The mainline churches in Africa are challenged to come to terms with the reality of African cosmology to meet the spiritual and bodily needs of their adherents. It is estimated that, if "historical "churches fail to provide holistic salvation, they will lose members to the AICs and the charismatic churches. Churches must engage in serious dialogue with African Religion in order to better understand African religious life and needs.

### **Myopic Knowledge Towards a Religion**

This implies deem or little knowledge about a religion. It occurs when one is having little or deems knowledge about a religion, thereby condemning it to be archaic and barbaric. However, the causes of having a myopic knowledge about other religions and the subsequent challenges as Anselm (2019) affirms, could be attributed to the following:

#### **a. Bigotry**

Bigotry is the obstinate or unreasonable attachment to a belief, opinion, or faction; in particular, prejudice against a person or people on the basis of their membership of a particular group. In our context, it is as a result of having a biased mind towards other religions. The religious bigot reasons this way "For I was told that African Traditional Religion is barbaric; nothing good comes from there. Therefore, no matter their new improvement; I have locked my mind not to believe anything about them."

#### **b. Fanaticism**

A fanatic is one who is zealously enthusiastic for some cause, especially in religion. Fanaticism is a school of thought whose claim centers on a religion being the blue print over other religions.

#### **c. The Quagmires of Religious Doctrine**

We are in a world of religious confusion, in a world where conflicting and

competing beliefs are rife. In Islam and Judaism, pain, disease, suffering, grief, and death are regarded as affliction sent from God. In Zoroastrianism, they are regarded as a visitation of Satan for the sins of the person afflicted. In Christianity, all sort of ill-fortune can be seen as affliction either from god or from Satan. In African traditional religion, most ill fortunes are regarded in most cases as the work of witches and sometimes as affliction from angry ancestors. But in Hinduism, the Hindu regards diseases, pain, suffering, grief and death as the result of man's evil actions in his previous existence (s). While the doctrine of reincarnation or rebirth to life on earth is a feature of most regions, Christianity does not share the belief in reincarnation. All religions preach life after death. With the exception of the African traditional religion, all religions believe and teach that there are rewards and punishments in future states. They preach the doctrine of the bliss and punishment.

### **Conclusion**

From the discussion and examination so far, it is worthy to note categorically that the African traditional religion and Christian religion are compatible. As the key concept of our research work, our analysis centered on (i) Creation (ii) Holy Bible (iii) Salvation (iv) Water (v) Healing. We speak of faith in the one God in our theological knowledge, to God in prayer and worship and for God through prophetic action. There is in the cultures of the African people a certain perception and the recognition of a conceived divine power that the people name the Supreme God and address as a Father. The process of contextualization must acknowledge that cultures differ in their conception of God and life, requiring other forms of expressions and understanding.

### **Recommendation**

To harmonize the challenges so far on the issue of the compatibility of African Traditional Religion and Christian religion, it is recommended:

- (1) The elite should educate people in various churches so that they will understand, appreciate and accept the positive contribution of African Traditional Religion.
- (2) Unbiased teachers / lecturers should teach some relevant courses in African traditional religion both in schools and outside schools. And at the same time, they should endeavour to practice what they have taught.
- (3) Various churches in Christian religion should make an effort to engage in a rigorous research work that will help to unearth the hidden treasures in our cultural and religious heritage that can make the Christian faith even more meaningful in the African context.

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