

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE NEGATIVE ATTITUDE OF CHRISTIANITY ON AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS DOCTRINE OF REINCARNATION: A DEFENSE

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Abstract

The advent of Christianity in African in general and Igboland in particular had brought about an unprecedented and steady decline in the fortunes of African Traditional religion. This ugly situation was motivated as a result of the fact that Christian missionaries and many Euro-Christian writers did everything within their power to emphasize the inferiority of African indigenous religion to the Christian faith. They were able to achieve this feat with the conscious and unconscious collaboration of the various indigenous tribes in Africa including the Igbo nation. One of the ways by which this was achieved was the derogatory names employed by the missionaries to define or describe the traditional religion of the people. The Christian missionaries completely ridiculed many of the doctrines in African Traditional Religion declaring them as false, illogical and unreasonable. One of these doctrines is the doctrine of reincarnation. The doctrine of reincarnation is arguably one of the major doctrines in African Traditional Religion. It is a doctrine that highlights the exalted position and the roles of the ancestors in traditional African Society. By reincarnation, we mean the belief that a person who have lived a life worthy of emulation in this world of time and space in the context of African traditional religious perspective is qualified to be canonized as an ancestor, thereby counted worthy to come back into the world through reincarnation. The negative attitude and total rejection of the doctrine of reincarnation by Christian missionaries is quite unfortunate, as facts abound in the Bible that supports the reality of reincarnation. The notion or the reason that the reality of the doctrine of reincarnation cannot be proved scientifically or the emphasis on its perceived illogicality is laughable, and cannot be said to be devoid of bias, because many Christian doctrines if not all cannot be proved scientifically and arguments backing their advocacy are grossly illogical and baseless.

Keywords: Reincarnation, Doctrine, Worldview and Christianity

Introduction

Before the coming of Christianity into Igbo land or Ala-Igbo, the belief and the practice of Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR) was at the heart of the peoples' culture and greatly formed the integral part or the epicenter of their cosmology. Through this, the people were able to appreciate their environmental realities and to satisfy their deep spiritual yearnings and curiosity, as it regards the origin or source of things, the reasons behind the existence of things and the final destiny of man after biological death. In other words, they were able to find answers to the “whats”, “whys” and the “hows” of life and existence. One of the ways by which they were able to find answers to the complex problem of life, death and hereafter is the doctrine of Reincarnation. This is arguably one of the major doctrines of African Traditional Religion in general (ATR) and Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR) in particular. The

doctrine of reincarnation though occupying a strategic position in African Traditional Religion and Igbo Traditional Religion is also greatly affirmed by other religions from the oriental world such as Hinduism and Buddhism. While other revealed religions or Abrahamic religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism, vehemently disagreed and debunked the reality of the doctrine of reincarnation. Whatever be the case, it is very important to look at the meaning of reincarnation.

Reincarnation Explained

By way of an in-depth definition cum explanation, the ATR or ITR doctrine of reincarnation can be etymologically traced to the Latin word “Re-in-carne” which means “gain in the flesh or in another flesh” (Kanu:2015). Also dwelling on the etymological definition of the concept of reincarnation McDonald (1987) explains the idea as to be born again in another body or form. Therefore, from the above etymological stand point expressed above, reincarnation is a claim that a person or individual had existed in this world of matter or will subsequently be in this world in a different body, at a later date of which exactly cannot be determined by anybody except the Almighty God, the Creator of all things both visible and invisible, whom only Himself has absolute claim to the title Omniscience. In the same vein, reincarnation is the passage or the migration of the immortal soul from one body to another majorly within the human species or Homo sapiens (Chukwu: 2006). Furthermore, in the words of Nkiruka (2010), reincarnation is often taken to mean transmigration, rebirth, polygenesis, metempsychosis, second creation unmodified inheritance of ancestral characters. Anameze (1996) sees the phenomenon of reincarnation as the belief in a cyclic process of death and rebirth. By cyclic process of death and rebirth it means that an individual who died has the ability to come back into this world through what is called rebirth. To Ekwunife (1999) reincarnation is the cyclic return of a dead personality into a new born child of their families.

The doctrine of reincarnation in African Traditional Religion in general and the Igbo Traditional Religion in particular could be traced to the concept of death, what happens to a man after death, the supremacy of life over death and a form of consolation to a family who lost a beloved father, mother, brother or sister etc who lived an exemplary life here on earth. In all the traditional African societies especially before the advent of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam, the mysterious phenomenon of death is not conceived to mean the termination or the cassation of life, but the process of ushering in another realm of existences. In explaining the above line of thought Metuh (1999) describes the notion of death in African traditional cosmology when he explains that natural death is therefore not total annihilation, it is conceived as something wholly positive. He expresses fact that death is understood by African as a journey into the spirit world of which they considered as man's real home after a brief sojourn here on earth. Onunwa (2005) is in strong agreement with the views of Metuh, when he declared that death in African traditional worldview is not a complete annihilation of a person's authentic self,' but can be seen as a departure from one state of life to the other or a portal to a wider world beyond.

Moral and Socio-economic values of the Belief in Reincarnation in Igbo Worldview

Despite the antagonism, the ridiculous and the unfortunate remarks made against African Traditional Religion (ATR) in general and Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR) in particular as a result of their continuous belief in reincarnation by other religions such as Christianity Islam and also some scientific minded folks, who had never ceased to point out the illogicality of the concept. The belief in reincarnation cannot be said to be a phenomenon that is anchored on nothing or said to be irrelevant or of no intrinsic value especially to Africans or Igbos living in their traditional societies. In the light of the above insight Onunwa (2005) traces and highlights the values of the belief in reincarnation to the Africans in general and Igbos in particular, that explain beyond every reasonable doubt whatsoever the reason for their continuous believe in reincarnation. It is worthy of note that these values were hinged on the quest by Africans and Igbos to build, maintain, sustain and ensure a highest standard of morality cum socio-economic wellbeing of the people, so as to maintain a cosmic equilibrium to avoid chaos. Still on Onunwa (2005) the moral cum socio-economic values of the phenomenon of reincarnations are as follows:

1. The belief in reincarnation was used in the traditional Igbo society as an indigenous philosophical theory to explain intriguing, perplexing, fundamental, elusive, mysterious issues and experiences of life such as a situation whereby one's child or children behave(s), exhibit certain manner or the occurrence of certain pattern of events whether positive or negative in a giving family etc.
2. The doctrine of reincarnation functions as a form palliative, confidence building and hope to people who lost their loved ones especially their parents. In other words, it provides succor, psychological and emotional satisfaction to children whose parents died, especially when they were still very young. Therefore, it is not out of place to see fathers or mothers that over pamper a particular child with the great assurance that he or she is the reincarnation of a particular ancestor they missed or loved so much.
3. The doctrine of reincarnation also helps to explain clearly the theory of salvation according to African Traditional Religion the in general and Igbo Traditional Religion in particular. By confirming through divination that a particular child who is believed to be a reincarnation of one's beloved ancestor, proved beyond every reasonable doubt whatsoever, that the dead relative was considered to have lived a good life while on earth, thereby qualified to be included in the exalted league of Ndi Ichie (Ancestors) and found extremely to reincarnate.
4. The doctrine of reincarnation is of great impotence to the adherents of Igbo Traditional Religion because it greatly presents the reality of life after death and also explicitly reveals the concept of salvation in Igbo Traditional Religion; .as reincarnation marks the final stage of salvation. Therefore, this stage marks the hallmark of salvation in African Traditional Religion, as a worthy ancestor is given the privileged opportunity to be with his kinsmen once again through reincarnation.

The negative attitude of Christianity on the doctrine of reincarnation in African Traditional Religion

It is a universal truth that virtually all the Christian doctrines, beliefs and their various literal and applied interpretations are anchored on the infallibility of the Christian scripture also called Bible. The Bible is considered the only authority as far as Christian religion is concerned. Therefore, the only voice regarding the authenticity or otherwise of the concept of reincarnation can only be based on the Bible. In other words, any proof outside the Bible, for or against the concept of reincarnation according to Christian perspective is considered baseless, unfounded, heretical, null and void and of no effect whatsoever.

The doctrine of reincarnation as presented by the African Traditional Religion according to Christian perspective on the subject is an outright fallacy and an unpardonable heresy. Christianity as religion established 2000 years ago, unequivocally declared and perpetually maintained that man has only one chance or opportunity to live in this world of matter, time, space and after that comes death, then, followed by judgment. The above claim is anchored on the content of Hebrew 9: 27-28 which says “ And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment, so also Christ was offered once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him. (Holy Bible New Lining Translation: 2013). In many instances the Bible lays great emphasis and claims on” Resurrection of the Dead”. Therefore, many scholars in African Traditional Religions posit that when one gives an unbiased and deep rooted reflection on the above Bible quotation, one can easily see an iota or a trace of the supreme doctrine of reincarnation as taught by African Traditional Religion.

Prophet (1997), in trying to ascertain if there exists a connection between concept of reincarnation and Christian faith observed that in the early church before the 6th century, there was a clear evidence of circulations of teachings though purported to be heretical supporting the idea of reincarnation, which the church as at that time did not approve, hence was not supported. She went further to highlight the contributions of two great church fathers such as Origen and St Clement of Alexandria, These duo repeatedly declared that the concept of reincarnation has no place or connection whatsoever with the Christian faith or teachings of Scripture

However, there is no justification whatsoever for the outright rejection of the doctrine of reincarnation as taught by African Traditional Religion by Christianity, as a result of overwhelming evidences that justify the reality of the belief in reincarnation. Some of these evidences are overtly expressed in the book of Matthew 11: 13-15, 16: 13-14, and John 1: 24. Therefore, it is crystal clear that these passages confirmed the fact that the belief in reincarnation was prevalent among the disciples. These assumptions could be substantiated from the question Jesus asked His disciples concerning His identity. “Who do men say the son of man is?” In responding to this question the disciple said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, some Jeremiah while other one of the prophets”. Also in another situation Jesus

Himself confirms the reality of the doctrine of reincarnation, when He tried to reveal the spiritual identity of John the Baptist “for all the prophets and the law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come; he who has ear, let him hear”. By this statement Jesus was trying to announce the fulfillment of the prophecy contained in the book of Malachi concerning the second coming of Elijah.

From the foregoing, Jesus proved beyond every reasonable doubt whatsoever that John the Baptist was a reincarnate of the great major Elijah the Tishbite. A good scholar of biblical studies will not fail to underscore the overwhelming similarities that existed between the characters and exploits of both Prophet Elijah and John the Baptist. Elijah during his time was so bold, fiery looking and confronted the ills of the society by challenging the authority of King Ahab and his wife's apostasy, which reached its crescendo in the contest at Mount Carmel, where the Supremacy of Yahweh over Baal was physically and spiritually demonstrated and established. Elijah strongly opposed Jezebel, revealing her atrocities and pronouncing punishments, While John the Baptist confronted the religious and leaders of his time example the Pharisees, Herod and his coveted wife Herodias.

The above insights reveal the fact that reincarnation is a phenomenon whose reality is confirmed in the Christian scripture. In other words, there is no justification for the total rejection of this doctrine of reincarnation as preached by African Traditional Religion by the church. The church should understand that the doctrine of reincarnation was one of the doctrines that enabled Africans in general and Igbos in particular to build a good society thereby promoting the wellbeing of man. Since Christianity aims to sanitize the society and bring down or establish the kingdom of God here on earth, the doctrine of reincarnation is also one of the major ways African Traditional Religion tries to sanitize the society and motivates man to live a good life here on earth. The act of denying the reality of reincarnation by Christianity and many Euro-Christian scholars, on the basis of the fact that it cannot be proved scientifically or sounds illogical is as a result of religious and racial prejudices. The reason for this assertion is anchored on the fact that in Christianity, there exist many doctrines that runs contrary to logical reasoning and scientifically cannot be proved. Example of these doctrines are the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the Original Sin, the doctrine of Justification by Faith, the doctrine of heaven and hell, the doctrine of the mission, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus and accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour, as a prerequisite for salvation and the most importantly doctrine of the incarnation of Christ. If all the above doctrines of Christianity cannot be substantiated or proved scientifically or logically, but can only be accepted by faith therefore why is it that the doctrine of reincarnation cannot be accepted by faith the same way early Christian missionaries made our forefathers to accept some illogical Christian doctrines by faith. The unfortunate disregard and dismissal of the reality of the doctrine of reincarnation as a fallacy by the early Christian missionaries was done in error and also in total ignorance of the similarities that exist between Christianity and African Traditional Religion, especially on the issue of Sainthood and Ancestorhood. In other words both the ancestors and the saints occupy the same position in their respective religions. It is very clear that just as Saints are

revered by Christians and their earthly lifestyle emulated, the Ancestors are greatly respected, revered and constantly remembered as also by traditional Africans.

Conclusion

The negative attitude of Christianity to the doctrine of reincarnation in ATR is uncalled for. The doctrine cannot entirely be dismissed as a result of it lacking scientific backing. This is because many doctrines in many religions cannot be substantiated scientifically. Therefore, it sounds so naïve and represents a great show of ignorance for one to demand a clear, intellectual, logical and convincing explanation of a concept that falls within the ambit or realm of culture, faith and dogma, if that is emphasized, the doctrines will be at the mercy of losing its religio- moral flavor and importance. The importance of the doctrine of reincarnation is aimed at building a traditionally clean, just, balanced religious and moral society. Through the continuous believe in reincarnation, man's excesses and unrestricted freedom can be checkmated in a subtle way. Therefore, the doctrine of reincarnation in ATR, in no small measure influences every aspect of life of an individual. The religious principle of whatever you sow, that you shall reap, if not in this life then the life to come which is overtly or covertly expressed in many religions, is the basis for the institution of the doctrine in African Traditional Religion. As a result of the above insight, everyone tries to lead a good life, so as to be qualified to be elevated into the position of an ancestor, thus standing on a strong footing to be considered for reincarnation.

Recommendations

The negative attitude of Christianity towards the doctrine of Christianity is quite unfortunate. Before condemning They should look at the immense benefits of the doctrine as it enables man to lead a good life here on earth for his well being and that of the society, as doctrine of reincarnation promotes public morality, just and honest living. The doctrine should not be discarded by Christians as illogical, as it can be of great benefit to even Christians. The sound morals taught by the doctrine of reincarnation which it aims to impart into the life of the African traditional religious followers is not different from the morals Christianity sets to impart into its adherents. For the Christians, the living of a good life earns one a place in heaven, a place of ultimate bliss and peace, while sin and immorality leads one to hell. On the other hand, the adherents of African Traditional Religion see the doctrine of reincarnation and the quest to become an ancestor as a great motivation to live a good life and maintain sound communal moral. Therefore, the church in the spirit of inculturation as a matter of urgency should ponder and have a closer look at the doctrine of reincarnation in order to discover the power of the doctrine in motivating man to live a sound moral life, thereby purifying the society for the good of all and sundry.

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