

THE IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN RELIGION ON AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

Aleke Matthew

Department of Philosophy, Kogi State University Ayigba

Email: toogood4god@gmail.com,



Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of Christian religion on African philosophy. The method adopted for this paper is analytic. The paper argued that every culture has its own peculiar way of reflecting fundamental questions bothering on human person, their experiences of physical and metaphysical realities. Therefore, our different cultures is what accounts for the diverse philosophic frame around the globe. African culture is a religious suffused one and African philosophy started as an attempt towards the justification of African traditional religious beliefs and morals. Christianity on the other hand is more than a system of religious belief. It has generated a culture that have been handed down from generation to generation. The European colonial Christian missionaries' refusal to acknowledge the genuineness of African traditional religion and forced them to adopt Christian religion broke the very backbone of African cognition towards African traditional religion which is the structure that informed African philosophic reflections. This state of affairs turned African philosophy into a platform that is leveraging on Christian religious cultural thinking block chain of understanding, interpretations and projection of outlook to life. Thus, African philosophy must be open to history; a history that is interpreted in the light of African culture with a frame of mind that is free from foreign mental or spiritual construct and interpretations that is free from the lenses of a borrowed and effete foreign ontological categories, or a total package that comes from outside Africa. It is by so doing that African philosophy becomes meaningful to people because it makes their lives and culture come alive and arises from the interactions of their daily existence with the reality on ground.

Keywords: Africa, Philosophy, African Philosophy, Religion, Christian Religion, African Traditional Religion.



Introduction

Religion is participating and involving. When one, therefore speaks of one's religion, one ordinarily refers to those beliefs which one is expected to hold. Thus, religion is a "fundamental pattern embracing the individual and society, man and the world through which a person (though only partially conscious of this) sees and experiences, thinks and feels, acts, suffers everything" (Hans, 1985: xvi). It is "the expression of forces by which human groups maintain their solidarity and ensure their continuity, recognition that all things are manifestations of a power which transcend our knowledge" (Marcado, 1998:3). Clifford Geertz defined it as a "system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting

moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz, 1967:63). Henry Bergson viewed it as "that element which, beings endowed with reason, is called upon to make good any deficiency of attachment to life" (1977: 97).

Christianity is more than a system of religious belief. It has "generated a culture that have been handed down from generation to generation" (Muonwe, 2014:71). Culture is what differentiates a community from the others. It is a vital and important determining factor of how the community reacts, responds and grows. The 'habitual thought' of Africa is constrained by her

religio-cultural frame of mind in many subtle way that is different from that of the Christian culture. African society within history saw herself forced by circumstances to adopt Christianity with her culture and attitude to reality. Haven been alienated from her cultural milieu which is the foundation of her philosophy through imposition of Christianity, this paper therefore investigates the impact of Christian religion on African philosophy.

The Religious Background of African Philosophy

Philosophy has its preoccupation “the business of looking very closely and carefully at the foundation of human knowledge and experience” (Ozigi and Canham, 1979:3). Its nature has necessitated its multi-dimensional interpretations - “the study of the basic principles of knowledge and human conduct, insistent, creative, systematic talk, probing to the roots of things” (Agudosi, 2009:136). In order words, philosophy is “the basic reflection, taken to establish, support and substantiate claims on what thing are in their being and why they are the way they are” (Aleke and Gonjoh 2021: 147).

Africa is “a religious suffused society with natural powers which have been shrouded in centuries of religious rituals” (Obi, 2017:6) that “informs African reality” (Parrinder, 1962:26). Throughout the history of Africans reflective thought, the relationship between philosophy and religion has always been marked by continuous dialogue and reciprocal interaction. Historically speaking, “African philosophy began as a reflective interaction on African religious and moral beliefs, and this characteristic has been an on-going concern of philosophy” (Agudosi, 2009:96). Apart from the fact that African philosophy was derivable from the religious content, values and practices of Africa. African Philosophy was, from its inception “a synthesis and distillation continuation and discontinuation from African religion” (2009:97). As such, African philosophy can be said to have both shaped and was shaped by religion. As Williams Olorufemi Aso would argue:

What various peoples believe in their culture to be

God or gods opens human mind to fundamental questions about the characteristics of their concept of God or gods, the origin of their God or gods and relationship to the people, the basis of their liturgical practices: worship, festivals, functionaries in the sanctuary, items of sacrifice and seasons of celebration with necessary justification for their community. Again, the place of God in the causes and consequences of the evil in the world and the people's understanding about this existential reality of life equally serves as a good source of philosophy (2018:39).

From the above stand point, one can rightly say that African philosophy is an enterprise that emerged from African attempt to fundamentally justify African religious rites and practices in events such as: birth, death, burial, exorcism, marriage, child dedication etc. The meaning and justification of some religious beliefs like reincarnation, ancestral world, life after death, criteria for admission into ancestral world, reward for those who are morally just and punishment for the wicked members of the community are sources of African philosophy. Understanding the fundamental justification for the religious beliefs in divination is also another vital source of philosophy in Africa.

From the foregoing, it becomes obvious that African philosophy emerged out of African curiosity to examine African religion, to find out the foundations of African religious views, to know whether Africans have adequate or accepted reason for believing what they belief and practice. For instance, when we remember that in Africa, some people still hold tenaciously to some religious belief and practice such as outcast (*Osu*), human sacrifice, female circumcision, killing of twins, money ritual etc. it becomes meaningful asking questions as to the rationale of such beliefs since they negatively affect our cordial interpersonal relationship. Even if some of these belief seem to be true, it is the characteristic of philosophy not to take the truth of anything for granted-even the most widely held beliefs. Little wonder Halverson correctly observed:

The suspicion with which many people regard philosophy derives in large part from the fact that philosophers almost invariably stand in critical, questioning relation to prevailing modes of thought. It is not strange that people regard with suspicion an enterprise whose main business often seems to be the raising of provocative questions (1967:8-9).

Thus, African philosophy concerns itself with the ultimate questions about the ground or grounds for African worldview. Some of these questions impose themselves inescapably upon human minds. Person cannot but raise these questions. Hence, African philosophy emerged as an attempt to provide answers to African religious beliefs and as such satisfy Africans deeper curiosities and get more acquainted with the most genuine and profound religious knowledge and way of life since African life and religion are inseparable.

Thus, African philosophize when they begin to identify and justify what is actually true to the reality of life in African religious values, beliefs and practices to highlight what is superstitious, exaggerated, fabricated and assumed in religious concerns and practices. Therefore, the process of speculation, questioning, definition, critical evaluation and justification of the basic concept in African religion is expected to enable African philosopher to have enough ground to know what correspond to truth in reality and what are consequences of ignorant and psychological manipulations in African religious practices and way of life. The philosophy in religious concerns and practice of Africans is what provided a reliable sources and background for the works of African philosophers such as: Placid Tempels, John Mbiti, Kwame Gyekye, Theophilus Okere, Henry Odera Oruka etc.

Like every other world philosophies, African philosophy is devoid of unanimous definition. John Mbiti says that it is “the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manners in which African people thinks, act or speak in different situations in life (1969:9-10). Placid Tempels defined it in terms of “what is

unconsciously found and enshrined in the normal life of the Africans” (1959:7). Omoregbe would prefer to see it as “what is preserved through mythologies, wise sayings, proverbs, stories, religion etc” (1985:6). Kwasi Wiredu says it is “a critical reconstruction of African world” (1991:47). Odera Oruka said “it must be a rational speculation or synthesis based on rigorous reasoned investigation on African worldview” (1978:52). Amidst the various definitions, none has been generally accepted as a fixed definition of African philosophy. But one thing that is common among the different definitions is that they are all concerned about “systematic inquiry into the fundamental ideas underlying African thought, experience and conduct” (Gyekye 1996:1).

African Traditional Religion versus Christian Religion

Christianity which is revealed religion differs from African traditional religion that evolved naturally within traditional society. Unlike the revealed Christian Religion, African Traditional Religion “originates with the people themselves as an expression of many thousands of years of existence and seeking answers to the mysteries of life” (Lugeria, 2009: 16). Contrary to the “two-world hypothesis inherited from Platonism by Christianity” (Suzuki, 1964:181; Obi, 2017:24), one world hypothesis of African Traditional Religion derive its validity from African “interpretation of duality within which opposites are reconciled” (Booth, 1977: 5-6). In Africa, the invisible and visible world coalesce. There is “no distinction between the material world and those of the spirit world” (Arazu, 2005:9). “Other world” in African context is “a misnomer because it is articulated in materialistic and physical terms” (Mbiti, 1969: 153; Leonard, 1968: 84). Duality of visible and invisible, physical and metaphysical world informs these opposites as aspect of one and the same world. The terrestrial world comprises “human and non-human forces interacting and influencing one another” (Tempel, 1959:36; Parrinder, 1969: 26) and provides the “foundation for African philosophy and religion” (Zahan, 1979:8). Hence, African interprets “sacred as unity rather than separation” (Campbell, 1988:34). To be is “to be

whole” (Obi 2017). A thing is “not one by itself” (Hasting, 1976:67). Everything is “united in existence” (Zahan, 1979:127). To be is “to become something” (Tempels, 1959:53).

The “human person is at the centre of African Traditional Religion” (Zahan 179: 6) as opposed to the Christianity idea of “finality outside the human person” (Obi 238). The primacy of the human person in African Traditional Religion is informed by human relation to the rest of the world; his central position as providing a systematic framework of the cosmos which defines it as the “microcosm in which converge the innumerable invisible threads spun by objects and beings between themselves in consonance with the rules of correspondence given by categories and classifications” (Zahan 1979: 6). The centrality of the human person within the cosmic order explains “African communal and individual acts of worship and veneration as pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual or mystical” (Mbiti 1964:4-5). Africans “appropriate becoming by experiencing themselves as universal forces and strengthening their vital forces through communication with other forces operational in the cosmic order” (Jahn 1990:61). From the African interpretation in contrast to Christian perspective, “man was not made for God or the universe” (Zahan 1979: 5). God “exists for man” (Mbiti 1969: 92) while human person “exists for himself and embodies the justification for his existence” (Zahan 1979: 5). The human person as articulator of force is “superior to all else in existence and their irreducible reality; and on that account, divinities enter into his affairs in the same way as do other things” (6).

Unlike the Christian religion linear concept of time which divides time into “three dimension: past, present and future” (Obi, 2017: 135), African traditional religion foundation of time is cyclic, “the future is not substantially different from the past” (Zahan, 1950:90) because “tomorrow is made up of the element of 'yesterday' and 'long ago' and 'what –will- be' blends into 'what already was' (Zahan, 1979: 89). Cyclicity harmonizes referents generally interpreted as “opposed to one

another as “one and the same phenomena” (Zahan, 1979: 134-135) in African traditional worldview. The concept of human person as “a single rational, entity unchangeable and immutable propagated by Aristotle, championed by Boethius and Spinoza and adopted by Christianity” (Obi, 2017:169) contradicts the “African dynamic self-constitution dependent on otherness of human person” (Eze, 2010:190-191). On the social foundation, the fundamental features that informs African conception of good and bad is the nature of relationship between individuals (Mbiti, 1971: 213). Paul Ricouer's interpretation that “evil is not being but doing, not something but subversion of relation” (1974: 273-303) approximates African position. Contrary to Christian religion ethical system that is based on “absolute values of truth and justice” (Obi, 2017:161), African ethics is a “social ethics” (Molema, 1920:116; Busia, 1954: 205). In Africa, force is being and being is force. African aesthetic foundation of “good and bad prevalent in African language” (Kagame, 1956: 385), provide “metaphoric orientation to both concepts” (Jahn, 1990: 174). While “good and bad are fixed and opposed concept that defy reconciliation in Christianity, in African traditional religion both concepts maintain a harmony founded on the dialectics of duality” (Tempels, 1959: 53; Jahn, 1990: 64).

African Traditional Religion in the face of Christian Religion

From the time Christianity came in contact with Africa traditional religion, there has been sharp conflicts between them. Rather than the Christian missionaries to dialogue with African culture or approach Africa within her traditional religious frame of mind, “they were busy questioning about the maturity, mental and psychological capabilities of Africans to conceive God” (Iwe, 1986:5). Hence African traditional religion before the Christian missionary became a “religion trapped in a pre-logical and unscientific world view incapable of abstract thought” (Obi, 2017:5) with no “idea of the Supreme Being” (Amaegwu, 2010: 101).

A German Missionary Emil Ludwig, who taught

that Africa has no religion, does not know God and that it is the duty of the missionaries to teach Africa how to conceive and worship God asked: "how can untutored African conceive God? . . . How can this be? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing" (Smith, 1961:1).

Ludwig's view was corroborated by Samuel Baker and Daniel Wilson. Baker held that; "without any exception, Africans are without a belief in a Supreme-being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry, nor is darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition" (1969:231), while Wilson is of the view that "Africa has no religion, if they had religion, it could be best described as animism:

". . . there is usually discerned among Africans a belief in unseen powers pervading the universe, this belief into an animistic or spiritualistic theology most result into a kind of worship" (1985:29).

Hence, Christianity saw its emergence on African soil as a battle against African cultural heritage and then forced African to internalize the foreign religion claiming it to be divine ordinance and the only way to civilization. According to Lugira:

The Christian missionaries established schools and hospitals and began to preach the Gospel of Christianity. ...but they had little understanding of the cultures they were entertaining. Their intent was to bring Christianity to continent they believed to have no true religion. They meant to stamp out African traditional religious practices they saw as superstition and ignorance (2006:24). Narrating how the missionary forced Christianity on Africa, Lugira wries:

Sailing along the West and East African coasts, they preached the Christian message to the people they met and took advantage of African hospitality. Eventually they established African Christian communities. However they were to be disappointed. African peoples had welcomed them warmly. But that did not mean that they

were ready to give up their cultures and beliefs. The missionaries failed to appreciate the African religion and culture on which the welcome was based, and misunderstanding arose. In frustration the missionaries developed hostile attitudes towards the people. Finally the natives succumbed to their hostility (2006:24).

Parts of the hostility was the denial of Africa of anything that could be described as genuine culture, and religion being a constituent of culture, Africa were invariably denied of any genuine religion. The missionary "haphazardly collected strange African religion in order to entertain and fascinate their people at home by ridiculing African religion with negative synonyms as: fetishism, ancestorism, primitivism, animism and totemism" (Amaegwu, 2010:40-41). They also interpreted African religious symbols and beliefs in terms of psychological and sociological theories and whatever does not correspond to their theories, they invented something to fill in the gap that exists in their minds. Little wonder "it took about 300 years for scholars to recognize African traditional religion as a true religion. At first they called African beliefs and practices primitive religion suggesting something crude, irrational and unformed" (Lugira, 2006:106).

Reacting to the denigrations and vilifications of African religion, Ezekwugo said that "the European missionaries had eyes therefore only for the exotic and extraordinary; and where they found none they created one, making nonsense of African religion" (1985:8-9). This made the Christian missionaries to see African mind as "a clean slate on which anything could be written" (Kenyatta, 1954: 269). This assumption is based on their conviction that "everything that African did or thought is evil . . . they forcefully uprooted Africa body and soul, from her old customs and beliefs, put her in class by herself, with all her traditions shattered and her institutions trampled upon" (1954:270). Haven been forcefully detached from her religion, "Africa started to follow the white man's culture without questioning whether it was suited for their condition of lives or not" (Kenyatta, 1954:271).

Cases were reported of mission schools in Kenya where students were sent home due to recurring mental breakdowns, resulting from their inability to cope with and reconcile their traditional religious worldview with the indoctrination coming from the Christian religion. According to Ochsner Knud, "the psychiatric report following the incidence traced the cause to conversion hysteria resulting from the students' inability to reconcile the two worlds" (1971:98). Ochsner however noted that the situation was even the worse, because they become victims of clash of not just between two but three worlds – "the traditional animistic view of life; the distinct cultural pattern of the village congregation with frequently antagonistic attitude to the traditional religion from Christian communities and the modern 'godless' world, and the secular society with its emphasis on science and technology" (1971:99-100).

The Influence of Christianity on the Development of African Philosophy

There is no culture or people who can claim ownership of philosophy and act of philosophizing. It is in the nature of every culture to "reflect on fundamental questions bothering on human person, their experiences of physical and metaphysical realities" (Aso, 2018: 9). In Africa, "there is no distinction between religion and other aspects of their lives" (Ezechi, 2011:101). African religious beliefs are so closely bound to her culture that religion and culture are one and the same. Religion in Africa, "is therefore not something people do at certain times and certain places, it is parts and parcels of living" (Obi, 2017:60). Among African community, "culture and religion are tightly bound together" (Obi, 2017:38).

Christianity is more than a system of religious belief. It has "generated a culture, a set of ideas and ways of life, practices, and artifacts that have been handed down from generation to generation" (Muonwe 2014: 71). With the denial of Africa of any genuine religion by the European Christian missionaries and forceful adoption of Christian religion, the result became that, African began to internalize the stereotypical

characteristic born prejudices of the Christian religion against African traditional religion that informed African philosophic reflections. On absorbing and attaining the "heights" of the Christian religion and culture, African discovers that they were foreigners to it. They saw themselves sailing in the foreign religion and culture with the identity crisis that go with it due to the wide differences that exists between the absorbed Christian religious worldview and their native African religion worldview. In attempt to rediscover their identity as Africans by interpreting the native African traditional worldview, they fall back to myths and superstitions, because their adopted Christian religion worldview clashes with the African religious worldview. This is schizophrenic. This undermines African maturity to channel their philosophical reflections towards African culture. Thereby making African philosophy to remain perpetual infant, which cannot be fully matured by itself in essential areas of history, expressions and interpretations.

Conclusion

It is trite that a people's philosophy ought to be based on the culture of the people, if it were to be sustainable and if it were not to bear negative influence on the people. Indeed, no philosophy can be rooted in mere material civilization. Religion is part and parcel of culture and at the same time a foundation and presupposition for philosophical reflections. In so far as religion is advanced at the expense of a culture, it is an experiment in eventual hostility to its philosophy. A philosophy must therefore be as it were, a product of culture. A people philosophy must be based on their culture not outside it. Imitation can only lead to superficial progress albeit its sundry limitations. A people's philosophy is therefore a product of reflection determined by accumulated experiences which people have over a period of time, such experiences generally go by the name culture.

Culture is the totality of knowledge and behavior, ideas and objects that constitute the common heritage of a people. It is the way of life of the people, the identity structure and spirit of a race.

Without it they are anonymous persons brought together by technical accidents without purpose or meaning. All that people does must have something to do with who they are. A people experiences everything in the light of their culture which stamps and moulds they experience by generating the conceptions through which they perceives the world, themselves and their fellow men.

The point here is that a people's culture is what give rise to their philosophy and that outside that cultural context, it ceases to be the people's philosophy. Indeed, any philosophy which is derived from sophistication of material conditioned alone cannot be a people's philosophy. It is inimical and lacking in essential foundation of a people's philosophy. Therefore, in failing to develop African philosophy within her cultural frame, Africa is doomed to be perpetual servant, slave in fact, in the global society. For African philosophy to develop progressively it must have its foundation in African culture. Hence, African philosophy must be philosophy that originates from African culture and interpreted within African frame of mind. It is by so doing that African philosophy becomes meaningful to people because it makes their lives and culture come alive and arises from the interaction of their daily existence with the reality on ground.

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