

CHRISTIAN VALUES AND AFRICAN CULTURE: AN EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT: *This paper attempts to examine the influence of Christian values on African culture. As a matter of fact African holds certain things to be of great value, e.g. large family, respect for old people, and believe in the existence of gods, e.t.c. It is these values that gave Africans a distinct cultural personality and enable us to make some contributions to the society. The Christian religion on the other hand means for the African fundamental changes in many of his cultural values. The paper argues that the influence of Christianity has caused certain customs and beliefs to be discarded or modified, at the same time it has caused others to be retained by one level of society while on another level new alternatives are being accepted. We argue further that Christian influence on culture has been selective. It has not been systematically complete or effective, for example in the area of human sacrifice, the slave trade, and the killings of twins have been discarded and old and new ideas have been amalgamated in the sphere of religion. Hence the position with one foot in Christianity and the other in tradition poses a serious dilemma for both Christianity and tradition in Africa.*

KEYWORDS: African Culture, Christian God, Deities, Religion, Values.

INTRODUCTION

Man considers life worth living because he finds certain things intrinsically valuable; hence value in its simple connotation means a thing of worth. A thing has some value if it has some worth. The traditional values of the African includes among others: large family, love for and practice of the extended family system, respect for old people, ancestor worship, traditional religion, African loves nature and seeks harmony with it. The concept of culture includes not only the way we lived yesterday, but how we lived today, not only the heritage of our ancestors, but also that of our contemporaries, above all, it emphasizes the meeting of old and new. The high values of Christianity are well known and appreciated. We shall concentrate on religion and social life to determine the extent of the influence of Christian values on culture.

However, some aspects of African culture have been civilized by wholesome interaction with Christian values, for example it is due to Christianity today that twin babies are no longer destroyed, slave trade, and human sacrifices have dropped drastically in Africa. Christians have equally played some negative cultural roles in their religious zeal e.g. the dwindling moral life in our society today may well be traced to the weakness of Christianity in punishing evil. The Christian faith has destroyed the belief and fear of the wrath of the gods and the ancestors. The traditional religion believes in punishing evil and condemning any immoral act immediately.

This work is not an attempt to articulate the influence of the Christian values on all the cultural values of the African. Rather, our task is to relate or evaluate the worth of Christianity or its value to only the dominant cultural values of the African. Besides, we shall

select certain sections of the culture and highlight the Christian influences. Invariably the study will examine the undulating influence of Christian values on African culture, that is the good and the bad effects of the influence of Christian values especially on the religious and social aspects of culture.

The Nature of Christian Values

Christian values, unlike natural human values have a different source and reference point, namely revelation and Christ. These values are pursued for their own sake as ends in themselves. They are intrinsic values, such as a belief in a transcendent God as the creator and end of man, the fall and redemption of man, the Trinity, Christ as man's ethical ideal, scripture as divinely inspired, and the existence of grace.

However, value is commonly believed to be something that is useful, desirable and has some worth. Among philosophers, values cover a multitude of uses. Frankena for example talks about value in two different senses, in the first sense he tells us that value means something that is thought to be good or desired, the expressions, his values, the value system and American values refers to what a man, a woman and Americans value or think to be good. Secondly, he sees values as things that are good or goods and for some uses, also things that are right, obligatory, beautiful or even true.(Frankena, 1969:230).

The Christian values are normative for Christians as ideals to embrace, as a result the actions and values of Christians are judge in their ethical significance from the perspective of Christ and the teachings of the church. The Christian unlike the non – Christian has dual sources of truth, law, knowledge, and values namely nature and grace, reason and faith, man and God. This is because Christ alone is the way, the truth and life. The point made here need not contradict each other because God is the ultimate source of everything according to the Christian faith. This type of believes has immense consequences upon one's fundamental options, goals and values. The morality, ethics and values of this type of faith is based on the life of Christ. Albert distinguishes between what people valued in their own culture and what they ought to value. To him more than two thousand years of the discussion of the relationship between what is valued and what is worthy to be valued have yielded many permutations and combinations of the themes proposed by the Athenian philosophers: absolutism versus relativism, exalted moral idealism versus interest in the world as it is, rationalism versus irrationalism both what is valued versus what is valuable and what is valued versus what is actually done (Ethel,1970:252). While intrinsic good is concerned with those things that are valuable, desirable, worthwhile, or worth having, and as such good for their own sakes. The instrumental good refers to those things held as worthwhile and hence good in so far as they lead to other good desired for their sake; some philosophers take happiness as an intrinsic good and money as an instrumental good.

The crucial questions then are these: what are the criteria for rejecting or accepting African cultural values on the basis of a new life in Christ? How can Western cultural values be separated from the content of the message itself? Even though such factors as monogamy or western forms of Catholic liturgical celebration imposed by Rome might seem easy for the African to detect, isolate and question as examples of Western cultural imperialism, but this seems a bit difficult because the early missionaries destroyed some elements of the African culture in the name of Christianity, for instance title taking and native names.

Nevertheless, cultural values in Africa varies from one culture to the other, for example what the “Yoruba” tribe in Nigeria considers as values may be regarded by the “igbo” tribe in the same country as disvalue, culture in Africa is usually conceptualized inside the belief, practical and institutional practices of the people. Faith or the gospel message can only be culture – bound, that is to say, received or interpreted by the people in a given culture who are influenced by its values, it is difficult to think of transmitting pure Gospel News, uninfluenced by some culture to people of a different culture. We are now faced with the question of how Christian values are related to human cultures and men’s natural values. How is Christ or the church related to culture defined briefly as the total way of a people? Is Christ above culture, against culture, or the transformer of culture? Even though it is outside the scope of this paper to go into these controversies, but the truth of the matter is that some tension exists with Christ or Christianity in practically every culture, because certain values demanded by Christianity, such as holiness, patience, long suffering, forgiveness of one’s enemies e.t.c. as presented in the New Testament could be seen as the reversal of man’s natural values.

It is important to point out that not all Christian’s value is a reversal of natural value e.g. kindness and generosity are both natural and Christian values. In the Catholic Church we can see an encouraging sensitivity of the supreme authority to the rich cultural tradition and values of the African as an important contribution to the universal church. The African we are referring to here is the black, largely sub – Saharan African and his dominant values and those of his traditional culture prior to contact with Christianity.

Traditional African Values

The traditional values and beliefs of the African that stem from his culture include polygamy, belief in one supreme God as well as many other minor deities, love of children, music, dancing, respect for old age and authority, belief in a future life, marriage and funeral celebrations. It is these values that gave the Africans a distinct cultural personality and enable him to make some contributions to world knowledge, history and civilization.

The Christian religion means for the African fundamental changes in many of his cultural values and options, such that a real conversion is required for him to be a Christian in the authentic meaning of the term, and its ethical implication. Before the Gospel or Christ can be firmly rooted in the African soil, there must be total reversal of many traditional values and practices long cherished by the African for example the killing of the enemy, an eye for an eye, immorality, idol worship, etc. it also include a new ethical reference point, Christ’s own love ethics as his new commandment.

Both Christianity and African traditional religion believes that the Supreme Being is good, loving, merciful, benevolent, honest, wise and all – knowing (omniscience). Because God is just and Holy, He demands justice and holiness of His people. The Christian believes that God can only be worshipped through Jesus Christ – the son of God. When we turn to traditional religion we notice that African approach the supreme Deity through lesser gods or deities e.g “Ogun”, “Ifa”, “Olokun”, “Sango”, etc. in Yorubaland, Nigeria.

In “Igbo” tribe in Nigeria the supreme deity is called “Chineke” or “Chukwu”, in “Efik” it is called “Obasi”, in “Hausa” they refer to Him as “Obangiji” while the Edo and Yoruba people refers to Him as “Osanobua” and “Olodumare” respectively. Another traditional value of the African is a large family. His main purpose for marriage is children and to have as many

children as possible. In Africa, the union of one man with several wives or polygamy still holds greater attraction for him, African counts his blessings by the number of children he has, whether they are educated or not, rich or poor, healthy or sick, well fed or hungry.

Respect for old people is an important value, in traditional African society. These respects include one's parents, grandparents and relatives especially the old people are respected, this is because the African believed that their ancestors are closer to the old people and they should be honour. Parrinder Buttress this point by saying that the ancestors are not just ghosts nor are they simply dead heroes, but are felt to be still present watching over the household, directly concerned in all the affairs of the family and property giving abundant harvests and fertility (Parrinder,1949:125).

It is religion that dominates the life of traditional African. Religion sets a definite tone in his relationship with nature and his fellow man. African traditional religion is a natural one, rooted in the ethos and belief system of a people. But when a culture receives Christ as a new reference point in its ethical values and aspiration, it does not and cannot retain all its values because of the inherent problem and presence of sin as an essential part of human condition. The African church has taken the issue of incarnating Christianity into the logical culture seriously, in some places it has made remarkable progress along this line, a good example is the case of Zaire where the Eucharistic celebrations and rites are significantly Africanized.

Christian Influence on Culture

The African find Christianity disturbing in many of his values and ideals and consequently has every reason to raise constantly the problem of what it means to be African and a Christian at the same time. The Genesis of the problem was the ardent quest of the modern African to regard his existential integrity after the experience of his tragic past of slavery, colonialism and violence these evils have worked upon his personality and culture.

Religion, the main carrier of Christian values is defined as the belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them (Hornby, 2003:990). This belief in the existence of such relations is a general human conviction common to all peoples and to all stages of culture. African traditional society belief in the existence of gods, each object has a separate creator. Speaking about African traditional religion Awolalu and Dopamu is of the view that when we speak of traditional religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generations of Africans. It is not as fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it. (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:26). Even though this religion has no written literature, yet it is written for all to see and read. It is a religion that can be found in the people's myths and folklores, in their songs, and dances, in their liturgies and shrines, and their proverbs. The historical founder of this religion is neither known nor worshipped. The Christian God on the other hand is omniscience, omnipotent, supersensible, and Supreme Being, the Christian are monotheistic. To the Christians, God is accessible by reason and human spirit. The African also belief that God's existence is both material and spiritual and this assures him that God exist. Christians take religion to be a personal thing and a salvation to the individual. The African traditional religions are practiced not only for the individual but also for all within the purview of the celebrant shrines of deities. The villagers also honoured the shrines and invited the deities for protection.

Some aspects of the African cultures have been civilized by wholesome interaction with the Christian values and these have had a purificatory effect. In Nigeria for example it is due to Christianity that twin babies are no longer destroyed, and their mother too are also not tabooed and ostracized. There has also been a reduction in the practice of local slavery. When we turn to the social life of the people, on the issue of marriage we noticed that almost all the Christian churches have rejected the issue of polygamy, even though in the African society polygamy is seen as a healthy institution because it insures respect for husband and love for wives. In the African tradition, burial ceremony of the elderly person takes place soon after the death. While the preliminary ceremonies takes place after a year or two.

The belief of the African is that the second burial will enable the spirit of the departed souls join and rest happily with his ancestors. But when the missionaries came they attacked the second burial with the aim of neutralizing the traditional belief in the ancestral spirit. In Yoruba tribe of Nigeria we have some traditional titles like 'Apena', 'Oluwo', 'Iyalode' 'Erelu', Christianity on their arrival condemned these titles as pagan and true Christians are not allowed to take the titles. In the area of morality, Christianity and African culture believed in hereafter whose condition is determined by the quality of one's present life. This is because morality flows naturally from a religious creed. African believed that, the divinities and the ancestors could enhance one's comfort in the hereafter, as a result one's actions and behaviour must not precipitate calamity for oneself, one's family and for society at large. In their choice of instrument for the execution of reward or punishment, Christianity and African culture are totally difference from each other, for instance, the issue of hell fire or punishment in the hereafter is strange and a source of jokes in African tradition, they belief in punishing evil and condemning any immoral act immediately.

However, Christian influence has caused certain customs and beliefs to be discarded or modified; it has destroyed belief in and fear of, the wrath of gods and the ancestors. Such gods are no longer belief to exist or possess any powers; Christianity creates doubts, confusion and vacuum in the minds of the people, leading to doubt and unbelief among people.

The Nature of God

In Christianity, the Supreme gift of the Supreme Being is Himself offered to mankind through the word, or Christ, the reservoir of grace, truth, as well as through the Holy Spirit. Every man that hath this hope in Him purified himself, even as he is pure whosoever committed sin transgressed also the law, for sin is the transgressor of the law (Bible, 2015:1061). The Supreme Being is regarded as Trinitarian Godhead the Father, the son and Holy Spirit.

In African culture, Deity in traditional religion is extant not only in man but also in water, air, earth, trees, animals, sun, moon, and in all things. Sacrifices through them to the Supreme Deity are prescribed and proffered. In Christian values we found Christian teachings about the love of God in the Holy Bible contain Christ teachings. Jesus Christ taught his adherents that the poor classes are not forgotten by God but their rewards is in Heaven they should wait in patience, Christ in His teachings enjoins His followers to be merciful and be pure in their hearts so that they can see God (Bible, 2015:831).

Christ also taught His disciples to be the salt of the earth and light of the world by doing good works and that once a Christian lacks good works, he is likened to salt that has lost its savour

(Bible, 2015:832), and he who fails to realize the ideal, of the life of the Gospel will be rejected. With the new development of the teachings of Christ, the adherents of the traditional religion felt that their culture and way of life were being seriously threatened. At times the resistance and persecution were as a result of the provocative attitude of the Christians. The new converts were carried away by the enthusiasm of their new faith and carried out activities like the destruction of images, sacred objects and shrines.

The new Christian converts were forbidden to participate in the ancestral cults, even though many may felt strong need to do so. Many of the converts could no longer participate in the ancestral cults and this also means a rejection to traditional and annual festivals celebrated in honour of ancestors as well as of divinities. Those who felt the need to participate in the traditional festivals could not do so, since they were to remain pure and attached to the new faith. Religion has always understood itself to be a way of life, and whenever it is left free fully to express itself; it encompasses the whole of man's life – private and public, individual and communal. According to Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the word God means the being or spirit that is worshipped and is believed to have created the universe (Hornby, 2003:509). God is a supreme being, and His worship is innate in all men and can be found in all cultures. God Almighty, the Supreme Being, is the common denominator underlying Christianity, and African Traditional Religion. It is the foundation upon which these religions built their belief system. As a matter of fact, what the two religions share in common greatly overshadows all their points of divergence.

For us to understand the nature of God we have to combine the knowledge of both the personality and attributes of the Supreme Being. The book of Romans says:

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse. Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful, but because vain in their imagination, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools (Bible, 2015: 974).

Our God is an invisible being, we cannot see him directly, but we know his nature through what he has made which are invisible. In the book of Exodus God appeared invisible to the Israelites while Moses was with them. On another occasion God manifest himself to the Israelites by making himself visible through his infinite power and authority when the Red Sea was divided before the Israelites. Here the Israelites felt the presence of God not spiritually but physically.

We are equally a reflection of God's form of existence in terms of the internal character and external forms of mind and body. God is of male and female in terms of existence. The book of Genesis says:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them, and God bless them, be fruitful, and multiply, and

replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. And God said behold I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a seed yielding seed, to you it shall be for yielding meat (Bible, 2015:2).

In Christian religion, the Supreme Being is characterized by faithfulness, truth and a Trinitarian, Godhead, goodness and mercy and love, perfect knowledge, wisdom, and kindness. Our God is just and holy; hence He demands justice and holiness of His people. The book of Isaiah Declares: holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory (Bible, 2015:611). In African Traditional Religion, God is variously addressed with majestic expressions like 'the king above' or 'the Heavenly king'. One of the important attributes of God that is equally common among the two religions is that God is a righteous judge of individuals and nations, the book of Isaiah says: He shall judge among the Nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Bible, 2015:608).

The adherents of African traditional religion take the Supreme Being to be the final, supreme and perfect witness and arbiter on matters between individuals and communities. Christians, and African traditional religion adherents all agreed that God is good, loving, merciful, benevolent, honest, wise, all – knowing, eternal, ever – awake, and ever – alive. In Christian religion, God can only be worshipped through Jesus Christ the son of God.

CONCLUSION

We have observed that if Christianity can learn from other religions and cultures, it will see elements from other religions that cannot only widen its appeal but also help it to improve its ability to meet the problems of relevance to public life. A few African Christian theologians now hold that the cult of the ancestors can be baptized into the church. A good example was a case reported in the punch newspaper of a man in a town in Ijebu – Ode, Ogun – State, Nigeria who obtained a chieftaincy title of 'Otunba' went through all the shrines, performed all the traditional rites and after that still had a service songs and prayers conducted for him in his place by an Anglican Bishop. Closely related to the chieftaincy title is the issue of the traditional festivals; this is where a degree of understanding is being reached. The traditional festivals are now more cultural than religious, and Christians can participate in their celebrations without negating their faith. To exclude religion from major area of live would amount to a major disabling, and amputation which would reduce drastically its effectiveness and indeed distort its meaning. The type of Christianity needed in African today among other things is one that answers the real fears and needs of the African people, one that integrates their good cultural values with Christians one, one that answers or attempts to answer the questions raised by the people's historical and cultural situation.

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