



RELIGIOUS AND HUMANISTIC PRINCIPLES IN AFRICAN ETHICS: PANACEA FOR OVERCOMING INHUMANITY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *Although humanistic ethical principles are usually seen as secular in nature, yet it is important to note that African humanistic ethical principle is unique when compared to other ethical principles. What makes African humanistic ethical principle to be different from other humanistic ethical principles is that it is an ethical principle that is not separated from religion. The researcher was motivated to carry out this research because, unlike other humanistic ethical principles that are unconnected to religion, African humanistic ethical principle is informed by African Traditional Religion. The aim of this research is to show how understanding the peculiarity of African humanistic ethics will help in solving inhumanity which Africans are passing through. The research achieved the aim through the following objectives: By pointing the relationship between religion and ethics in African Traditional Religions, by showing the place of man in West African religious cosmology, by showing peculiarities of West African Religious ethics, and by showing the peculiarities of African humanism. This is an expository research that is based on existing information. The researcher carried out the research by comparing and contrasting, analyzing and synthesizing secular and African humanistic ethical principles. The research will help people in contemporary Africa to work toward promoting the wellbeing of fellow Africans who are suffering from all forms of inhumanity. The scope of the research is on the religious and humanistic principles in West African ethics. The research has shown that religious and humanistic ethical principles are inseparable in African traditional world view.*

KEYWORDS: Ethics, Humanistic, Inhumanity, Religious, Panacea.



INTRODUCTION

Religion and ethics are two major elements that make up African world view; these elements have informed the way Africans understand life in relation to God, human beings and the universe. It is important to point out at this juncture that one of the factors that make the African world view to be unique when compared to other world views is that African world view is both religious and ethical in nature. This is the reason why religion and ethics have become part and parcel of a typical African man or woman. Another important thing worthy of note is that, in Africa, religion and ethics are not two separate entities but two inseparable whole. This means that in African context it is not possible to talk about religion without talking about ethics and vice versa, for the two are interwoven. Consequently, a religious person is highly ethical vis-à-vis.

The need to understand the religious and ethical principles in African ethics cannot be overemphasized. In fact, if we really want to know why Africans have so much concern in maintaining balance between religion and the way people conduct themselves in the community, there is a need for us to know the ethical principles they subscribe to. Although there are many ethical principles that are worth researching, however, the researcher is motivated to carry out research on religious and humanistic principles in African ethics because it is unique when compared to other ethical principles. However, although African ethics is religious and humanistic in nature, yet Africa as a continent is suffering from many forms of inhumanity, which include injustice, corruption, terrorism, kidnapping, banditry, bad governance and the likes. The inhuman treatments which many Africans are passing through contradict the religious and humanistic ethical principles that are deeply rooted in its world view. The researcher hopes to show that understanding the relationship between religious and humanistic African ethical principles will help in solving this problem. The aim of this research is to show how understanding the peculiarity of African humanistic ethics will help in solving some of the ill treatments which Africans are passing through. The research achieved the above aim through the following objectives: By pointing the relationship between religion and ethics in African Traditional Religions, by showing the place of man in West African religious cosmology, by showing the peculiarities of West African Religious ethics, and by showing the peculiarities of African humanism. Africa is a continent that is too vast to be handled adequately in this paper. Therefore, the scope of the research will be West Africa. Besides, the concern of the research is not on religion and ethics in general, but the focus will be on religious and humanistic principles in West African ethics.

Brief History of Humanism

Humanism is a concept that is very complex but enlightening in the history of world culture. Azenebor (2010) as cited in Elejo (2014) offered us four different ways in which humanism is understood. Humanism in its ethical sense relates to the need for according compassion and respect to fellow humans. In the sociological context, it entails viewing social structures as products of human agents. In the field of history, it is associated to different periods in world history such as Renaissance or Enlightenment when human beings become the focus of scholarly attention. Besides, it also denotes placing primacy or values on human essence or nature.

The first noticeable humanist in world history is said to be the 5th Century BC figure, Protagoras, who asserted that “Man is the measure of all things” (Elejo, 2014, p. 299). Another



early humanist was said to be Socrates, the ancient Philosopher, who suggested that “Man, know thyself.” However, some scholars are of the view that humanism began only with Renaissance, who tried to find out the proper status of the human person in the universe. Nevertheless, Madigan (1990) as cited in Eleojo (2014) said that even the Renaissance humanists traced their history backward to the Greek and Roman philosophers (among the Sophists, Skeptics, Stoics and Cynics) who variously made attempts to find out the solution to human existence in man.

Besides these opinions, there are other scholars who trace the origin of humanism even further back in time to the Afro-Asiatic roots of classical civilization in Egypt. Nevertheless, in most cases, it is associated with the 14th/15th century AD. While there is controversy as to the exact time in which this philosophy began, yet what remains incontrovertible in humanism is that “mankind, his nature and problems” are made the central focus (Eleojo 2014, p. 299).

The Relationship Between Religion and Ethics in African Traditional Religion

It is important to say that according to African world view there is an undoubted relationship between morality and religion. Ganusah (2002) saw religion as having a great influence on the moral lives of many (if not all) West Africans (p. 70). One thing that can never be ruled out in West African societies is that religious values and beliefs have a great impact on the way people live ethically (Kunhiyop, 2008). Writing about the Yoruba of Nigeria, Idowu (1962) says, “With the Yorubas, morality is certainly the fruit of religion. They do not make any attempt to separate the two and it is impossible for them to do so without disastrous consequences. What have been named *tabu* took their origin from the fact that people discerned that there were certain things which were morally approved or disapproved by the Deity” (146). Mbiti (1975) rightly argues that, “Part of any religious system is its moral values which regulate and harmonize human life. It is religion which tells us what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil, what is just and what is unjust, what is a virtue and what is a vice.... Religion enriches people’s morals, for the welfare of the individual and society at large” (199).

The point here is this, in an effort to understand the religion of West Africans, one will get to know their ethics as well, for it has been said that, “Morality or ethics is of the very nature of religion” (Magesa, 1998, p. 14). To be more specific, African ethics in its basic nature is religious ethics. This is because ethics is said to be intimately connected to religious belief and in fact its very expression (Magesa 1998). Speaking about this, Geertz (1968) as cited in Magesa (1998) says, “Religion is never merely metaphysics.” Its very nature leads to concrete action” (p. 14). Turaki (2011) also says, “The traditional, moral and ethical foundations are deeply rooted and grounded in the religious and theological beliefs, practices and the behavior of the traditional Africans” (p. 175). African morality therefore is deeply rooted in its religion; it is believed that it comes from God through the ancestors (Mbiti, 1975). Consequently, God is seen as the first initiator of the way people should live their lives. The moral codes come from him for the good of the community. The spirits also play part in the moral behavior of the people. Therefore, God, ancestors and the spirits are the moral agents that connect religion and ethics in the African world view (Mbiti, 1975).

Magesa (1998) points out that morality in Africa is derived from people’s understanding of a holy God who does not only encourage moral commitment, but demands it. In fact, ethics is ultimately anchored in people’s understanding of God who is holy and in their interpretation of what he demands in real life. He further said that, “In all religions, but much more obviously



in African Religion, the most general moral argument seems to be: As God is and does, so human beings must be and do" (Magesa, 1998, p. 45). Therefore, African ethical consciousness cannot be detached from African Religion. In fact, religion and ethics in Africa are two sides of the coin. Speaking about the relationship between religion and ethics in Africa as a whole, Gehman (2013) said that while African Traditional Religion was part of the whole life, man's origin and nature, and his lifestyle are all religious. In fact, Metuh (1981) said that observance of West African moral codes "is a moral as well as religious obligation" (106).

The Place of Man in West African Traditional Religious Cosmology

Since the central focus in the humanistic ethical principles is mankind and his problems, the researcher shall in this section try to show the place of man in West African Traditional Religious cosmology. Onunwa (2011) has observed that the place and role of man (homo sapiens) in West African Traditional Religious world view is one of the areas in which scholars have not taken serious time to explore. However, in the early 1970s and 1980s, Dominic Zahan and Emefie Ikenga-Metuh tried to explore this apparently neglected field of study. He said that in their separate studies they tried to explore the relationship between God and man as well as the unique position of man in African Traditional Religious cosmology. The view of the above scholars clearly shows that the whole of African world view revolves around man. In his effort to establish the dignity of man in Igbo traditional world view, which is a representative of African concept of man in the universe, Anizoba (1986) as cited in Onunwa (2011) states that, "The laws, moral and ethical regulations, covenant enactment and ritual performance in African societies are primarily focused on the central and dignified position of man (homo sapiens) in African cosmos. Ethical laws are enacted to protect man's highly dignified position and enhance his welfare" (p. 43).

This is the reason why in African Traditional Religion, human life is superior to any other creature in the cosmos. The Akans, according to Fisher (1998), have a proverb that says, "The human is the thing. If I call "Gold", gold does not respond. If I call "Clothes", clothes do not respond. The human being is the thing" (p. 64). This is why "Each human being in the community is valuable from birth until death. Even after death, the worth of the human person continues to be respected, because the dead person is living in the community of the ancestors" (p. 64). Their major role in the community of the ancestors as far as African Traditional Religion is concerned is to mediate, protect, promote and provide for the human societies.

Although the above discussion has shown that man is central in African Traditional Religious cosmology, African Traditional Religion is not anthropocentric in the sense which some scholars have suggested. It is necessary to acknowledge that some people are of the view that Africans venerate the divinity not for the glory of the deity but for man's personal development, progress and security (Onunwa, 2011). However, the centrality of man in African Traditional Religion is because in all of God's creatures only man is a relational being; it is only man that God has created to have a religious and ethical relationship with him. Mbiti (1975) rightly points out that "Man is not the master of the universe; he is only the centre, the friend, the beneficiary, the user" (39). Therefore, while it is true that man has a central position in the universe, yet he is not its master.



Peculiarities of West African Religious Ethics

It is paramount to point out here that African ethical consciousness is a religious one, and vice versa. This means that African ethical principles, especially West Africa, are directly influenced by African Traditional Religion. Unlike some Western ethical principles that try to maintain a clear demarcation between religion and ethics, West African ethical principles are product of its Religion. In regard to this, Opoku (1978) says:

Generally, morality originates from religious considerations, and so pervasive is religion in African culture that the two cannot be separated from each other. Thus, we find that what constitutes the moral code of any particular African society—the laws, taboos, customs and set forms of behaviour—all derive their compelling power from religion. Thus, morality flows out of religion, and through this the conduct of individuals is regulated, and break of moral code is regarded as evil and punishable (p. 152–153).

In African world view, it is God, the ancestors and the diverse spirits that define African ethical consciousness. Consequently, Opoku (1978) says that “African ethical consciousness must, and does answer to religious demands” (p. 59). These religious demands according to Magesa (1998) are not doctrinal but ethical, because African Religion is a lived religion. Magesa (1998) said that African Religion does not require conversion like Christianity; rather, one is born into it and learns it from childhood throughout one’s life and through normal socialization and observance of its moral and ethical code. Since African Religion involves the whole of life, it implies that whatever one does is religious, just as Magesa (1998) points out that, “In no way is anything understood apart from the context of God, the ancestors and the spirits” (p. 60).

The argument now is if everything one does has religious implications, then it is logical to conclude that West African ethical principles are religious. Speaking about the religion of Akan, Opoku (1978) says, “Religion among the Akan is allied to moral ideas and is indeed the basis of Akan ethics” (p. 157). Therefore, in the West African Religious system, it is said that “being” is “doing”, and vice versa (Opoku, 1978, p. 60). This means that what an African man is in his nature as a religious person is what he does in his ethical life. Mbiti (1969) says:

To say, in African societies, that a person is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ has extreme profound connotations, for it summarizes the whole image or picture of the person in context of his actions. One does not ‘love’ in a vacuum: it is the deeds which signify that there is love behind them; one those not ‘hate’ in a vacuum, it is the deeds that signify what lies behind them (p. 215).

Therefore, in the West African world view, all other ethical principles that one could think of are religious. In fact, there is no ethical principle in West Africa that is detached from religion.

Humanistic Principles in West African Ethics

The word humanism assumed a change of context in the course of its history. Hinnells (1995) as cited in Elejo (2014) said that since the 16th century, the term humanism has been commonly applied to persons “with a set of non religious beliefs and values” (p. 302). Therefore, it will sound strange to talk about humanism in relation to West Africans who are known worldwide as being “notoriously religious” and whose “traditional religions permeate all aspects of their lives.” However, African humanism is unique when compared with Western



humanism. This is because while Western humanism is circular and individualistic, African humanism is religious and communalistic.

Idowu (1996) in relation to the Yoruba people, as cited in Elejo (2014), observes that, “In all things, they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and all the governing principle of life for them” (p. 303). In fact, the African man who is “incurably religious”, allows his religion to affect his humanistic ethical principles. Indeed, the humanistic principles in West African ethics do not treat man as an atheist who is only conscious of himself. On the contrary, African humanism treats man in relation to his Creator and in relation to the universe where he is occupying a central position. Gyekye (1995) as cited in Edeh (2015) also says that, “For the Akan, religion is not seen as hindering the pursuit of one’s interest in this world... Akan humanism is the consequence not only of a belief in the existence of a supreme being and other supernatural entities but more importantly, I think of the desire to utilize the munificence and powers of such entities for the promotion of human welfare and happiness” (p. 207).

Another characteristic of humanistic principles in West African ethics is that it is not only religious, it is anthropocentric, that is, it is centered on the human person. This implies that West African humanistic ethical principles aim at promoting the welfare of man, who is at the center of the universe. For instance, the Igbo of South Nigeria according to Onunwa will insist that “Agwa bu nma”, which means “character is the essence of beauty”, and “character is essential to achieving good living conditions” (p. 46). Weir (1982) says that, “The value of human actions in African religions is based on the effects, negative or positive, that they have on one’s life, and the contribution they make to the society” (48). The implication here is that an immoral act will incur the wrath of the spirit beings, who could withhold rain, fertility and other blessings from the people.

Indeed, West African humanistic ethics is understood in terms of the good or bad which it brings on the individual and the community. Onunwa (2011) says that because of the “high premium placed on the central position of humans in African world view, we can appreciate why all ethical principles, systems and norms are geared towards the preservation, protection and enhancement of human conditions in African society” (p. 48). Africans generally believe that without morals, people will experience chaos and confusion that will affect their lives in every aspect, but when they do what is good it will bring them prosperity (Mbiti, 1975).

Although some scholars are of the view that African laws and moral constructs are made only to enhance the position of man on earth as earlier seen, however, the above discourse has shown that African laws and moral constructs are both religious and humanistic in nature. This is because it is not possible to rule out the religious aspect in any moral law that is interwoven with religion. Opoku (1978) opines that, “Religion is a crucial factor influencing moral values, for it is believed that God, the ancestors and the deities punish those who do not keep the moral code, and reward those who uphold it” (p. 160). While it is true that prosperity, in African world view, is directly connected to ethics, it is important to acknowledge that prosperity is only one aspect of West African ethics. Just as it has been noted in the early part of this paper that religion and ethics are inseparable, so also the humanistic ethical principles in West African ethics cannot be detached from religion. In fact, they work hand in hand.

Speaking about West African ethics, Opoku (1978) said that the reward meted out by the supernatural agencies for those who uphold the moral code are good health, prosperity and long life, whereas the punishment for contravening may take the form of ill-health, poverty or death.



This however does not mean that people in West Africa do good and avoid evil because of the humanistic incentives. They do what is good or right for its own sake, for what is morally upright and worthy of pursuit has an intrinsic value in itself.

Another important aspect of West African humanistic ethical principles is that it is communalistic in nature. It is generally believed that West Africans do not think of themselves as discrete individuals; they rather understand themselves as part of a community (Eleojo, 2014). In his inversion of the well-known aphorism, “Cogito ergo sum” (I think, therefore I am), Mbiti (1996) as cited in Eleojo (2014) says, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (p. 305). This means that when one does what is ethically right, it is for the good of humanity as a whole. In fact, West Africans believe that when one observes the ethical rules faithfully, it will be to the good of one and one’s society, but if otherwise, it will bring disaster not only to one but also to one’s community (Awolalu & Dopanu, 1979). The Igala perspective of “team-spirit” *udama* (Igala communalism) says:

Your husband is our husband

Your wife is our wife

Your daughter is our daughter

Your son is our son

Your father is our father

Your mother is our mother

Your farm is our farm

Your problem is our problem

Your joy is our joy

Your pain is our pain

Your promotion is our promotion

Your demotion is our demotion

Who hurts you hurts us

Who fights you fights us

Who derides you derides us

Who insults you insults us

Who bewitches you bewitches us

Who pursues you pursues us



Our wife therefore must be cared for whether you are alive or dead

Our children must be cared for whether you are alive or dead (Elejo, 2014, p. 306).

The above clearly shows that the major concern of humanistic ethical principles in West African ethics is not on the individual in relation to himself; it is rather in relation to all members of the community. In fact, the West African humanistic ethical principle is all about doing the right thing that will bring prosperity for the entire community. This is indeed true because the tribal society in West Africa was a mutual society that was organized to satisfy the basic needs of all its members and, therefore, individualistic tendency is never allowed (Kaunda, 1978).

CONCLUSION

Thus far, this paper has discussed the religious and humanistic principles in West African ethics. We have seen that religious and humanistic principles are major elements that have characterized West African Traditional Religion. The reason why West African ethics is religious and at the same time humanistic in nature is because the African man, who is incurably religious, is at the center of African cosmology. Consequently, in West African world view, religion and ethics are two sides of a coin that cannot be separated but are interwoven, working together to maintain a good relationship between man and the divinities on the one hand, and on the other hand bringing prosperity to man for the good of the community.

Although one cannot rule out in this context the tendency of emphasizing the humanistic aspect because of its concern for the welfare of man (perhaps a tendency that made many scholars to conclude that West Africans are only manipulating the divinities for their personal needs), yet as far as African Religion is concerned, this conclusion is not being fair to Africans as a whole. For everything Africans do has religious implications, or to put it the other way, life in West Africa is a religious life. While the religious and humanistic principles in West African ethics appear to be a balanced form of ethical principles, it is important to humbly acknowledge that so many things that are happening in Africa appear to be contrary to its ethics. The communal nature of the West African religious and humanistic ethics is good because in its effort to cater for the welfare of man, it is not self-centered and individualistic, but is for the good of all and sundry. If this knowledge could be revived and inculcated in contemporary Africa, it will go a long way in reducing the inhuman ways in which some Africans treat their fellows.

Recommendations

1. Effort should be made to inculcate African moral values on the younger generation in order to help them see the value of human life.
2. The communal nature of the West African religious and humanistic ethics should be emphasized in our communities to help people see the value of peaceful coexistence.
3. Religious bodies should promote peaceful coexistence by helping their adherents to respect the fundamental human rights of their fellow human beings.



4. Efforts should be made to help people understand that inhumanity to fellow humans is a crime against humanity.

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