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Tolerance in African Traditional Religion

This article looks at tolerance in African Traditional Religion (ATR). A major problem in our world is the inability to live peacefully as people of different faiths. In Africa (based on my understanding from a Nigerian perspective), to a large extent, religion has been at the heart of much of the contemporary conflicts (Barnard 2013:1). A cursory reading of literatures on the history of the relationships among religious groups in Africa will reveal among other things the intolerance that had characterized religious practices in the region for decades (Abdulkadir 2011; Denham and Clapperton 1826:457-461).

Religious tolerance is an essential component in the propagation of any religious view, faith, or doctrines; moreover, in a world with a multiplicity of religious groups the need for religious tolerance can never be over emphasized. The need for religious tolerance in Africa (Nigeria) has been discussed by several authors (Hunwick 1992; Baba, 2003; Momoh and El-Miskin 1989; Falola 1998) but most of these discussions are focused on the relationship between Islam and Christianity. Very little has been said about ATR. The nature of tolerance in ATR and its relationship with other religious groups has not been adequately explored. Thus, a significant aspect of the discussions towards religious tolerance among the various religious groups in Africa (Nigeria) is often ignored. This article explores the nature of religious tolerance in ATR in order to discover what patterns of tolerance exist in its practices that may provide resources for the ongoing discussions on the need for peaceful co-existence among three major religious legacies (Islam, Christianity, and ATR) in Africa (Nigeria).

An Overview of the Beliefs and Practices of ATR

The purpose of this section is to provide the reader with an overview of the beliefs and practices of ATR as a basis for understanding the concept of

tolerance in ATR. Beliefs and practices are essential parts of any religion: beliefs reveals the worldview of a people, their attitudes about the universe and towards life itself, while religious practices show how people express their beliefs in practical terms (Mbiti 1975:10).

According to Mbiti, African Religion emanated from the thinking and experiences of the African people. Thus it is part of the African heritage and it does not have a script or religious book from which the various religions of Africa draw their inspiration (1975:12). ATR was not introduced by foreigners (non-Africans) for it is very much a part of the people's cultural heritage. It does not have founders; there have been no reformers or preachers of the faith. This accounts for the variation in the religious practices of the African people. Despite variations in religious practices, certain characteristics are commonly associated with the religious beliefs of the African people in general. These common features include a belief in God, divinities (deities), ancestors, spirits, and the practice of magic (Ebohon-Igodo 2013).

Beliefs

Although the African concept of God is complex, it is no longer necessary for the enquirer to question whether ATR has a conception of God. It has been confirmed that even among the most isolated peoples on the continent of Africa, a refined concept of God is found (Bolink 1973:19-28). However, the question still remains—is the God in ATR, from a Christian point of view, the same as the Yahweh of the Bible? (20). For the sake of brevity I will not attempt to answer this question. Suffice it to mention that God in ATR is understood fundamentally as the creator and sustainer of life and the Supreme Owner and Ruler of the universe (De La Torre 2008:221). Therefore, I will proceed with a further description of the concept of God in ATR without engaging in a debate of comparing the concept of God in ATR and Christianity.

In ATR, there is the belief in the existence of a Supreme Being whose dwelling place is in heaven (Pobee 1976:2, 4). The concept of God in ATR is expressed in the various proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, appellations, myths, stories, and religious ceremonies of the African people and has been shaped by the historical, geographical, social, and cultural background or environment of each people. The means through which the African concept of God is expressed emanates from their experiences and perceptions of the supernatural (Mbiti 1975:42-43; 1969:29-30). Within the African tradition, it is generally believed that God is transcendent and at the same time immanent. God is considered to be all-knowing because he sees both the inside and outside of human beings. God is considered invisible yet present. God is omniscience, omnipresent, and omnipotent.

God is self-existing, the creator and supplier of all human needs, he is the origin and source of everything (Mbiti 1970:3-18; Brown 1983:7-13).

Most of the African peoples believe in the existence of God as shown above, and generally, have a well-organized cultic worship practice (Mbiti 1970:178-252); however, in some places God is God without temple or alter, without priest or ritual. The reason for this could easily be deduced from the people's conception of God—how could they build a temple for God who is omnipresent, how could they present sacrifices to him who owns everything and supplies all human needs? (Bolink 1973:21-23).

According to the African view, the universe is composed of visible and invisible parts. It is often believed that in addition to God and human beings, there are other invisible beings in existence. These are the spirits. These spirits are created by God, the creator of all things and are subordinate to and dependent on him. These spirits may be described as deities or divinities (Mbiti 1975:65-66).

In various African localities God is not approached directly, this is a sign of reverence for the Supreme Being who has no equal or rival, both in heaven and on earth. As a result of this reverential attitude towards the Supreme Being, these deities or divinities become the intermediaries through which the worshipers approach God. Deities are given the status of gods, and to a larger extent are worshipped (Jemiriye 2006). In the chain of hierarchy, after the Supreme Being and the deities, come the ancestors who also serve as intermediaries between the people and their God. Ancestors can be easily confused with the deities, however, while deities are considered gods, ancestors are not gods, and are not worshipped. Ancestors are the elder members of a family or clan who are believed to have made it to the spirit world, and as spirits they possess enhanced powers that are mainly used to protect the interest of their families or clan (Oborji 2005:26).

Practices

There is great variation in the religious practices of the African people; this difference in religious practices, to a large extent, is due to the fact that ATR is not a monolithic religion (Ohaegbulam 1990:105), and the religious practices are not derived from a unified sacred scripture or holy book like the Christian Bible or the Muslim Qur'an (106). Adherents can choose their beliefs and express them in practical terms without the danger of being accused of heresy or falsehood (Mbiti 1975:15-16). The lack of holy writings for ATR introduces another dimension to the already existing challenge posed by its dynamic nature.

In ATR no attempts are made by a particular group of people to propagate their beliefs and as a result, no attempts are made to convert others.

The reason for this can be attributed to the consistent common feature shared by all adherents different communities (Ohaegbulam 1990:105-106). Another factor is that religion in Africa is an expression of the people's culture and experiences with nature, thus no one group of people can transfer or infuse their experiences upon another group (106). In ATR, human beings are the pivotal point of God's creation, thus all religious beliefs, practices, rituals, and ceremonies are focused on enabling its adherents to find favor with God (Dyrness and Kärkkäinen 2008:21). The worship of God in ATR is eternalized in different acts and sayings, which vary from one society to another and from one area to another, all depending on the group's experiences with nature and the supernatural (Mbiti 1969:58).

Among the common acts of worship in ATR are sacrifices, offerings, prayer, invocations, blessings, and salutations which are often carried out in order to maintain good relationships between humanity and supernatural beings, and between the spirits and the physical world (Mbiti 1969:58-66). These acts of worship are sometimes done through intermediaries due to the feeling of unworthiness by the individual who seeks the face of God. As mentioned elsewhere in this paper, the reason for this practice is derived to a large extent from the people's political and social life. In most African societies, it is customarily for children to speak to their father through their mother or older siblings and most people in a community can approach their chiefs or kings only through the ruler's close associates (68).

Summary of Beliefs and Practices

African Traditional Religion is part of the African heritage; it is a religion which emanated from the people's experiences with nature and the supernatural. It was not introduced by foreign missionaries, and unlike Christianity and Islam which has scriptures or holy books from where it draws its inspirations, teachings, or doctrines, the survival of ATR depends largely on the evolving cultural heritage as handed down from one generation to another. Although certain beliefs and practices of ATR vary from one society to another, there are some common fundamental features shared among its adherents. These common features (belief in the Supreme Being or creator God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, and magic) partly account for its tolerance. No efforts are made to convert people from one religious orientation to another. The central acts of worship are sacrifices, offerings, and prayers—often carried out through intermediaries. These are means through which the worshiper maintains a good relationship with the gods and the ultimate Supreme Being.

The Nature of Tolerance in ATR

The absence of any religious scriptures in ATR from which its teachings might be derived makes it difficult to present a systematic outline of the nature of its tolerance. However, the lack of religious scriptures in ATR such as the Christian's Bible and the Muslim's Qur'an from which both religions derive their teachings or doctrines and beliefs tends to provide another basis through which the nature of tolerance in ATR might be understood.

As Mbiti asserts, the lack of scriptures in ATR has enabled the religion to move with the times without producing any religious controversies. No one is in danger of being accused of falsehood or heresy for holding different religious views (1975:15). Moreover, even though, the indigenous religious practices of the African people are determined by their different societies (Gilliland 1986:11), they share some common features in their conception of God and the supernatural. These commonly shared religious beliefs tend to discourage proselytization among and across the various African peoples, thus providing an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence (Ohaegbulam 1990:105-106). It is commonly known that most acts of religious intolerance arise due to differences in religious views and sometimes due to the desire to make converts through aggressive proclamation of religious views or doctrines. With ATR it is not so. The religion "evolved slowly through many centuries, as people responded to the situations of their lives and reflected upon their experiences" (Mbiti 1975:14). The religion does not have an individual founder who can be referred to like Jesus Christ in Christianity and Mohammed in Islam. The reference point in ATR is its traditional or cultural legacies, which have been handed down from one generation to another.

Benezet Bujo, a Catholic theologian, asserts that there were no religious wars in Africa prior to the introduction of foreign religions (Christianity and Islam) to the continent (Bujo 1992:55). Similarly Ali Mazrui, an Islamic scholar, made his argument even more poignant by asserting that, among the three major religious legacies in Africa (ATR, Islam, and Christianity), ATR is the most tolerant. He further posited that it might be safe to argue that before the introduction of Christianity and Islam to Africa, there were no religious wars on the continent because the indigenous religions did not engage in any sort of proselytization activities. The absence of proselytization efforts almost automatically leads to a lack of bitter rivalry against other creeds.

> Indigenous African traditions have not sought to convert the whole of humanity. The Yoruba do not seek to convert the Ibo to the Yoruba religion—or vice versa—and neither the Yoruba or the Ibo compete with each other for the souls of a third group, such as the Hausa. Because

> they are not proselytizing religions, indigenous African creeds have
> not fought with each other. Over the centuries, Africans have waged
> many kinds of wars with each other, but they were rarely religious
> ones before the Universalist creeds arrived. (Mazrui 1998:71-91)

Matthew Kukah also suggests that the tolerance displayed by adher-
ents of traditional religion in part accounts for the spread of Islam and
Christianity in Nigeria (1993:9). Mazrui's argument provides additional
framework upon which the nature of tolerance in ATR might be under-
stood. The fact that Christians and Muslims waged several religious wars
in human history is undisputable. Therefore, the absence of such historical
records of religious wars involving ATR provides a strong point of refer-
ence as to its tolerant nature. What is noteworthy is the nature of tolerance
in ATR. Primarily, tolerance in ATR is not the result of written religious
doctrines or creeds and this lack of written religious codes seems to allow
for an accommodation of a variety of religious practices.

Also, the absence of an individual founder of the African Religions cre-
ates an atmosphere devoid of aggressive competition or proselytization.
The evangelistic nature of Christianity and Islam is not an issue to be ar-
gued. The founders of these religions, Jesus Christ and Muhammed, ad-
monished their followers to go make disciples. However, in ATR there is
no such mandate given by an individual founder. Thus adherents of ATR
are under no obligation to make converts, and by implication, there is no
interference with other people's religious lives.

Moral values in ATR also contribute to the shaping of its religious tol-
erance. Morals address the question of what is wrong and evil in human
conduct. Such morals in African communities developed over the course
of time and produced customs, rules, laws, traditions, and taboos which
are observed in each society (Mbiti 1975:175). In ATR moral ethics relates
to belief in God, human origin, and religion in general, and because the
African does not separate his or her culture from religion, everyone liv-
ing within a community knows what is right or wrong or acceptable and
unacceptable. The knowledge of such acceptable norms is not based on a
written code or book which defines the moral values of the community,
but rather the communal life lived by the people and their familiarity with
the environment leads to an understanding of how situations are dealt
with from past experiences (Sundermeier 1998:175). Such past experiences
are often related to the people's religious practices.

The African does not believe in individualism. One does not live apart
from the community; therefore, it is an ethical principle to behave in
accordance with the community, and to promote and strive to maintain
it. Thus, inhabitants of a community are expected to show reverence

or respect for one another—reverence for humanity is a fundamental form of conduct which renders communal life pleasant and harmonious (Sundermeier 1998:180). From the perspective of the Yoruba traditional religion in Nigeria, the myth of creation holds that all humans have a universal common descent from the same Creator God. From this arises the African belief for the need to respect all human religious orientations as a condition for peaceful co-existence among peoples and nations (Abimbola 1990:138). The point is that no community crosses its boundaries to another with the aim to introduce its cultural practices based on the assumption that its religious beliefs and practices are superior to that of other communities or people. People are basically more or less concerned with their immediate communities.

In summary, the nature of tolerance in ATR may be understood from various angles. The absence of a holy book or scriptures that could provide unified doctrinal beliefs and practices allows for change in religious belief without creating religious controversies. Also, ATR does not trace its origin to an individual founder who might have commanded his or her followers to proselytize people of other faiths—a situation which often leads to bitter religious rivalries and controversies. Moreover, African moral ethics, which places high value on humanity as the pivotal point of God's creation, help create an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence. In ATR, it is held that all human beings have a common universal descent from the same Creator God. This lays the foundation for respect of all human religious orientations.

Summary and Conclusions

This article has suggested a basis through which tolerance in ATR might be understood. As shown from various perspectives, the nature of tolerance in ATR is derived to a large extent from its religious beliefs and practices. ATR originates from the rich heritage of the African people through their experiences with nature and the supernatural. It is a religion without a written script or holy book like the Christian's Bible or the Muslim's Qur'an (Mbiti 1975:10). This lack of a unified holy book or script that describes or prescribes how religion might be practiced accounts for the evolving nature of ATR without creating any religious controversies.

Although ATR is not a monolithic religion (Ohaegbulam 1990:105), and its practices vary from one people to another and from one nation to another, the religion shares some common universal fundamental features such as the belief in a Supreme Being, divinities, spirits, ancestors, and magic (Ebohon-Igodo 2013). These commonly shared religious views among the various African societies seem not to encourage proselytization

in ATR (Ohaegbulam 1990:105-106). Subsequently, the absence of proselytization leads to the absence of bitter religious rivalries which are often the cause of religious intolerance.

In addition to the above aspects of tolerance in ATR, its religious moral values further lay a foundation on which tolerance is promoted. The idea that all humanity traces its origin to the same universal descent from the Creator God tends to create a sense of respect for all human religious orientations (Abimbola 1990:138).

There are some radical implications to be considered due to the basis on which tolerance exists in ATR. What would have been the outcome had ATR had a founder like the Christian's Jesus Christ and the Muslim's Muhammad? What would have been the disposition of its adherents toward people of different religious orientation had ATR own a religious scripture or holy book from which it derived its teachings or doctrines? Had their religion encourage proselytization, would adherents of ATR demonstrated a similar attitude of tolerance as they presently have toward people of other faiths?

Tolerance in ATR is primarily a natural occurrence which emanates from the absence of certain religious features such as a written unified creed, a religious founder, and the need for proclamation. The moral teaching that promotes peaceful co-existence in ATR is a secondary factor creating religious tolerance among the various indigenous African religions.

To state my point in another way, if ATR had similar religious characteristics to that of Christianity and Islam, its adherents would probably have also been intolerant of other religious orientations. Therefore, religious tolerance is a derivative of certain religious tenets, how they are interpreted, and how they are applied in practical term.

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