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## Religious imperialism and African religion: In search of religious tolerance

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**Abstract:** The thrust of this paper is driven by the current reactions of Pentecostal Christians to the African religious (AR) material elements in some parts of Nigeria. There have been occasions of touching the AR artefacts and countermining of AR by these Pentecostal pastors. One of the most disrespected religions which receive discourteous treatments in Africa and by Africans of other faith is African religion. Africa religion (AR) stands out to be a prominent dimension that permeated the cosmological, metaphysical and epistemology comprehension of life by the ancient Africans. The religious experiences of this religion fashioned a spirituality of social relation, communal relationship, and opened-mindedness. Almost all descendants of African societies had a taste of this religion's spirituality. However, colonialism cum religious imperialism staged a colossal presence with disregard to its gross to the African religion. In effect, in modern African society, when most Africans pick-up a new religion (whether Islam or Christianity) in sprightliness they treat with contempt the material elements of AR, subvert its beliefs, divest its essence and, retard its progress. This paper will argue that religious imperialism is a moral error which demands a moral virtue of religious tolerance. Before arriving at this conclusion, it looked into the nature of religious imperialism and African religion; analyses the Pentecostal attitudes towards AR, a brief overview of AR.

**Keywords** – African religion, Islam, Pentecostal Christians, Religious imperialism, Religious tolerance

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Before Africans came in contact with Western/European people, whom were they praying to? Was there a 'religion' with prescribed ways of life, a holy book, a sacred place, sacred objects, and beliefs to follow? Or, was there a spirituality that reflected in the lives and attitudes of pre-colonial Africans? In searching for answers to questions such as these, it is difficult. This is because most religious Africans' attitudes towards African religion (AR) is due to the lens and framework of the two imported religions-Islam and Christianity. More so, the religious dominance of Christian/Islam religion over the pre-colonial religious practices of the African can also be seen as a factor; most religions surges and progresses through the condemnation of other religions (through their dogmas, writing and other forms of mind game), or through proselytism.

In the case of African religiosity, colonialism did not only defuse the political and socio-cultural system of Africans, but it also distorted the religious life of the Africans. Africans began to see African religion (AR) as fetish,

primitive, animistic, superstitious, and its adherents as pagans. The consequences of this Christocentric/Islam-centric behaviourism has resulted to the denigration of religious artefacts, religious shrines, African religious names, groves, sacred hills, and mountains. Fuelled by Christocentric/Islam-centric attitude, in Nigeria, Pentecostal Christians, Evangelists, and preachers destroy ancient artefacts, aflame statues, shrines and other olden articles of African Religion, which they regard as symbols of idolatry.

It is these actions of the Pentecostal fundamentalists that form the thrust and the unit of analysis of this article. Some questions that worth considering to guide our analysis are: Do we have to destroy every trace of African religious heritage, in the name of promoting the God of Christianity and Islam? Does the acceptance of a new religion permit the destruction, condemnation, and contemptuous treatment of the former? This paper postulates that the exhibiton of religious imperialism by the Pentecostal Christians which subjugates the African Religion, is a moral error which demands the practice of moral virtue—religious tolerance. Hence, to arrive at the consideration of religious tolerance as an indispensable virtue towards the aggressive actions of the Pentecoastal fundamentalists on African Religion, the paper clarified the term African Religion and moved on to observe literature on religious imperialism in order to showcase the incessant and widespread of dominances by Christianity over African religion.

## 2. WHAT IS AFRICAN RELIGION (AR)?

One aspect which permits primary attention is the question of African religion; what is African religion? The rationale behind this question is driven by the plurality and multiplicity in African religious practices (Shorter, 1977: 49). This is why Ikenga-Metuh, (1987: 45) said the question concerning the homogeneity of indigenous religious belief in Africa is of long-standing duration. The pluralistic nature of Africa society is indubitable. The African world is peopled with different religious systems of beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, and religious leaders. Pertinently, Mbiti (1975) established that one has to talk about African Religions in the plural. Despite the diversities in the religious and cultural expressions, there is one underlying systemic value binding the whole. Put simply, there is unity in the diversity of the religious practices. Accordingly, Le Zoute conference (1968: 79) acknowledged the African people's essential unity: "underlying all the divergence that marks the Negro tribes, there is a fundamental unity of beliefs and outlook upon the world...Africa is a unity- a unity in diversity." Smith (1926: 89) followed suit and postulated that "despite... cultural diversities there is, I believe, an underlying identity in religion. I do not deny the differences you may find between the highly organized Yoruba or Baganda, with their hierarchy of gods, on the one hand, and the more simple peoples, on the other hand...there is sufficient identity to warrant our speaking of African Religion".

Mbiti (1975) and among other African Scholars observed African Religion from the "inside" and agreed that African religion is one in its essence. There is a "basic world-view" which fundamentally is everywhere the same (Taylor, 1963: 34). According to Laurenti Magesa (2002: 16-18 ), the varieties are more those of expression than basic belief. They are much like the varieties of expression we find in any major religion, such as Christianity (in form of denominations) or Islam, for instance. They may be referred to by different names, such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian or Baptist in Christianity, or Shia, Suni, or Sufi in Islam. Nonetheless, they remain Christian or Muslim.

Gathering from the above presentation, the question of what is African religion is expressed as a believing view of life, approach to life, way of life, and therefore a fundamental pattern embracing the individual and society (Hans Kung et al, 1993: xvii), which is expressed differently by different people but synthesized in one common religion. one underlying factor that synthesises the African Religion is the notion 'God', which is named and expressed differently across the indigenous people of Africa. The other spectrum of African Religion that forms the focus of discussion in this paper is the religious artefacts, which play a vital role in the spirituality and practice of African Religion. This will be discussed alongside other aspects of AR.

### 3. RELIGION IMPERIALISM AND AFRICAN RELIGION

Before considering the current negative registrations against AR by Pentecostal Christians, it proves worthy to look into some scholarly presentations concerning religious imperialism and African religion. Religious Imperialism (RI) in its mainstreaming postulation is seen as a form of religious ethnocentrism in which a group of people, in their subordinate labelling, are demanded to convert to a different religion. Religious Imperialism can also present itself in a form of active suppression of other religions (Ojibwa, 2015: 45). Manshardt (1932: 341-4) cursorily referred to it as the historic missionary enterprise, based on the assumption that Christianity is not only the best religion for those associated with the missionary enterprise, and that it is God's will that it should be spread throughout the world. Clifford went on to say that religious imperialism (RI) is the attitude of the mind which says that, that which I believe should be believed by everyone else; and which is will to undergo hardships and make sacrifices for the extension of that belief.

The reality of religious imperialism (RI), and African religion (AR) is traceable to early British missionaries. Nkomazana (2016) in his presentation on the missionary activities in Bechuanaland (current day Botswana), submitted that the missionaries profoundly believed that to become a Christian, Botswana had to abandon their indigenous cultures. They perceived African Religion as evil and moved heaven and earth to ensure it was ousted. They also administered the belief that AR beliefs and practices were inferior, and had to be done away with before the acceptance of Christianity. Fage (1995: 45) in his book *A History of Africa*, described the racially-based logic of the European missionaries of the mid and late-nineteenth-century as one which was generally convinced that their Christian and scientific society was intrinsically far superior to anything about the Africans. This imperialist ideology resulted in the denouncement of African Religious practices as witchcraft and heathenism. This led Ferguson (2003: 45) to postulate that the British missionaries were intentional tools of [Religion] imperialism, while McQueen (2007: 67) established that they were its "advance guard." Inferring from the telling points of these scholars, it can be said that imperialism did not influence the socio-political dimension of Africa, it also dominated and dismissed the African religion.

The incessant reality of religious imperialism and African religion is an indisputable fact. Mbalisi, Okeke and Obiakor (2015) reported that since the dawn of Christianity in Nigeria, its relationship with African Religion has been shrouded in contestation and tensions stemming from mutual antagonism for superiority and dominance. There has been constant disillusionment, suspicion and conflict of all forms. The long-standing Christian mentality that AR and its adherents are barbaric, fetish, inferior and evil have led more Christians faithful to tag AR adherents as pagans. Lamenting over the infernal perpetuation of Religious Imperialism, a Central African Kwena man expressed these words to David Livingston: "to be plain with you,... we should like you much better if you traded with us and then went away, without forever boring us with preaching that word of God of yours." (Desai, 1962: 46). Religious imperialism has infiltrated the African society to a level that a conversion from Christian/Islam to AR is socially and religiously offensive. It is unthinkable in more practical parlance. What we often hear in *World Religion* statistics is the glorification of those who have been converted from AR to Christianity or Islam and not the other way round. As often portrayed, a convert from AR to Christianity is seen as a 'sinner' who has repented of his/her evil ways. Hence, the angels in heaven leap in jubilation. This aligns with the presentation of Gort (2008: 45) that they are perceived as expressions of heathen unbelief and evil superstition, and the world outside Christianity is seen as the 'kingdom of darkness'—the conversion from AR to Christianity is seen as a transition from the darkness to light.

In expressing the asymmetrical relationship between Religious Imperialism and AR Magesa (2002) said that the dialogue between Christianity and AR has never been a real conversation. He further held that the contact between Christianity and AR has been historically been predominantly a monologue, bedeviled by assumptions prejudicial against the latter, with Christianity culturally more vocal and ideologically more aggressive. Consequently, we largely hear of Christianity speaking about AR, and not AR speaking for itself. Mokhoathi (2017: 56) supported this

claim by saying that the problem is not the representation of AR by Christian scholars. The problem arises when the representation of the AR begins to show some element of bias and does not fairly reflect the premise of the religion. Regrettably, some scholarly works of Christian scholars have taken this dimension. Westerlund (1985: 234) asserted that scholars of religion have engaged themselves in the understanding and description of AR have clearly been influenced by theological biases and thus tended to Christianise AR. Mndende (2009: 34) further argues that the works of these scholars often falsely refer to the AR as: "an ancestor worship characterized by spirit possession... primal religion..." In effect, Christianity becomes the touchstone from which the epitome of AR is continuously seen and captiously judged (Meiring & Meiring, 2015: 23). Religious imperialism continued into present societies in Africa. It has translated into an aggressive and discourteous treatments by Africans of other (Christianity) towards African religion, especially, its religious artefacts. The next section looks into this reality closely.

### 3.1. Attitudes of Pentecostal Christians towards African religion

The attack on African religious practices has been a commonly heard issue in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. This action is most of the time initiated by persons who have newly taken up a new religion like Christianity, by religious fundamentalists, and by orthodox preachers. Bishop Chinasa Nwosu of the Royal Church is a fierce critic of traditional beliefs. Since the early 1900s, he is known for ripping down shrines, setting ablaze what he labelled as 'idols' and, deracinating what he condemns as "evil trees" (Unigwe, 2015). Some of the trees are ancient sacred objects draped in 'white' or 'red' pieces of cloth. They are sacred to adherents of African Religion who venerate and offer petit sacrifices to them. Some of these sacred trees can be found in the family residence, in most communities, and in the remote forest area. According to bishop Chinasa "God does not want us to practice idol worship. African Religion, most of the time, is based on idolatry," more so, "Blessings come when you remove those accursed things".

Bishop Chinasa is said to be against the view that Benin Bronzes and Ife Heads in the European Museums should not be returned to Nigeria. This is because the artefacts as such are not consecrated to God, hence, they are idols. In most cases, when someone accepted either Christianity or Islam, they are asked by the religious leaders to torch their every traditional statue, with great disregard to the historical contents, they carry. Also, these African religious statues are seen as a source of bad luck and the cause of poverty and calamities in a community, and in a family. In most Igbo Christian dominated towns like Achina in the south-eathern part of Nigeria, a novel Christian fundamentalism is apparent. The highly respected gods of the adherents of African Religion is being associated with the devil, and the staunch Christian preachers are urging their rejection as well as their destruction (News, 2019).

Ikechukwu Nzekwe, from *Achina*, a farmer who is a member of traditional masquerade cult, lamented over the actions of his younger brother a born again Christian who wracked the family's masquerade costume, including smithereens which has been in the family for about seven generations. The role of the masquerade was to performe songs and dance during festivals. and also act as a traditional police; its members helped enforce mores and customs. In today's contemporary society, the task of the masquerade is limited to the theatre, including performances and races by men in costumes portrayingancestral spirits. Unigwe (2015) in an article "*Crime and Christianity are killing off our religious traditions*" narrated that in his father's village *Afia Olu* there has been series of explosion of an ardent brand of evangelical Christianity which is fervently in contrast to local traditions and culture. In *Afia Olu*, shrines have torn been down, and converted to Christian religions abandoned traditional names that sound as though they might have "pagan" connections in favour of biblical names. In *Osumenyi*, (a town in Nnewi South Local government area of Anambra State, Nigeria) some churches are discouraging their congregation from participating in *Afia Olu* rites and festivities.

#### **4. A REVIEW ON AFRICAN RELIGION**

Africa has a long-standing heritage, which past generations of African's forefathers and mothers have thought, lived, and transmitted unto their children. One of the most influential and pivotal parts of this heritage is Africa religion (AR). It dominated their thinking to an extent that it shaped their culture, social life, political organization, and economic activities. Just like other religions such as Christianity and Islam, African Religion has a system of beliefs; it is a religion that centres on the Supreme Being—God. Almost all indigenous people of African origin have notions and names for God, long before their encounter with the Western religions. For example: *Olodumare*; Yoruba, *Chukwu*; Igbo, *Ubangige*; Hausa, *Onyankopon*; Asanti, *Mawu*; Ewe). It believes in human life, spirits, and life after death. It has practices; this involves how the people express their beliefs in practical terms. There are ceremonies, prayers, making of sacrifices, rituals and festivals to mark harvest times, childbirth, rainy season and victory over enemies.

It has religious objects; these objects are normally in possession of the individual, family, or the community. Many of the objects used for sacrifices and offerings automatically become sacred objects. the religious priest used them as a medium of communication to God. In other words, they are the concrete expression of human intentions to God and the invisible world. More so, there are ritual objects used in performing the ritual concerned. They are normally kept out of ordinary reach. (communal ones may be homed in the house of a priest or a king). In bringing them out to the public and taking them away, much ceremony is observed. This includes ritual drums, sacred tools (like the ones used in the coronation of chiefs or kings), rain-making stones, masks for certain festivals and masquerades, and other sacred statues, staff, and other insignia. Without these sacred objects, rituals would be meaningless. These objects embody the beliefs attached to the rituals; they are the external concrete symbols of the internal ideas, beliefs and values which are demonstrated in the ritual (Mbiti, 1975: 10-27).

Furthermore, colours play significant roles in the spirituality of African religion. The prevalent colours are red, black, and white. Black is associated with purity and sacredness as in the case of (Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe). Elsewhere like Ghana the Asanti specifically, black signifies death, and sorrow (Gymfuah, 2021). Red signifies bloodshed, mourning. White is associated with purity and sacredness, and in other parts of Africa, white signifies death and spirits. Another element of AR which worth considering is sacred places. These are not used for common or careless use. Some of them are artificial and others are taken over in their natural form. Artificial religious places are those that have been constructed for religious usage. Natural places are set apart as religious places by common belief, and consent in the area concerned. In both cases, the places are used for religious activities like praying, making offerings and sacrifices, and other major ceremonies. Examples of some religious places are shrines, temples, altars, mountains and hills, groves, forests, and trees.

##### **4.1. Rethinking attacks on African religion: a call for religious tolerance**

Inferring from the preceding discussion, AR is an organized religion possessing enormous essences to its adherents and, in comparison with other religions. However, all religions are the consequence of human initiative. This suggests that religions have their functional and dysfunctional aspects. And, AR is not excluded from this submission. The destruction of African religious artefacts in the promotion of Christianity and other religions is an action that demands a strong moral consideration. Amid a socially and culturally heterogeneous society, tolerance is one the most encouraging virtue to practice. Relationally, the religious diversity of African societies— as in the case of Christianity, Islam, and African Religion, religious tolerance is an indispensable virtue. Tolerance is seen as the appreciation and the capacity to live and allow others to live. It is the strength to exhibit a fair and objective attitude towards those whose opinions, practices, and religion are so different from one's own. In its etymological affiliation, the words 'tolerate' 'tolerance', 'toleration' are derived from the Latin terms *tolerare*, and *tolerantia*, which suggest enduring, suffering, bearing, and forbearance (Fiala, 2016). Hence, tolerance is the enduring, accepting, and



bearing with the diversity of the world's culture, and forms of expression and ways of being human. (UKEssays, 2018).

The linkage of tolerance with respect, equality and liberty by recent philosophers (Michael Dushe, John Rawls and Michael Walzer) as led to the conclusion that tolerance is a positive, civic and moral virtue and a moral duty between individuals. This is why religious tolerance would be referred to as the necessary moral virtue for the acceptance and appreciation of the spiritual values, beliefs and existence of other religions by all individuals. At the centre of religious tolerance is self-control. When we tolerate a religious activity other than our own, we resist our urge to forcefully prohibit the expression and domination of its activity we find unpleasant. In effect, the reality of religious imperialism in the guise of Christianity by most Pentecostal fundamentalists demands the practice of religious tolerance towards African religion; It is a moral obligation that involves respect for the adherents of African religion. One point which I would like to reconsider is the postulation of the above-mentioned philosophers that tolerance is a moral virtue. If tolerance is a moral virtue. It follows that religious imperialism is a moral vice, error, and defect. It follows that it demands a moral virtue (religious tolerance) to correct and manage the vice of religious imperialism and other forms of religiously aggressive behaviours towards African religion.

Religious tolerance as a moral duty should go beyond the oral and the written spectrums. It should be pragmatical to accept and respect the functional and dysfunctional aspects of other religions and be willing to engage in a symmetrical dialogue with other religions. Kung (1991: 137-8) said, "we need a more rigorous philosophical and theological dialogue of theologians and specialists in religion which takes religious plurality seriously in theological terms, accepts the challenges of the opposite religions and investigates their significance for every person's religion." Religious tolerance as a moral duty towards African religion should go as far as seeing it as a believing view of life, approach to life, a way of life (not directed by a book or an institutional decrees) which man/society orients themselves intellectually, emotionally, and existentially. Africa religion per se is a religion like other religions. Therefore, it demands respect as a religion alongside its systems of beliefs, and respect for its adherents. The acceptance of a new religion should not warrant the destruction of the former. In tracing the history of pre-colonial Africa, African religion is a major factor that can provide prominent historical elements and render answers to questions such as: did Africans knew God? How were religious activities organized and performed? How did their religious framework affect their worldview? Is there African spirituality?

To conserve the African Religious Heritage, national museums should be built and protected under strict regulations in every States. Converts to Christianity or Islam should be encouraged to offer any traditional artefacts to the national museums. In this regards the initiatives of Reverend Paul Obayi should be recognised and supported, (Okunnerere, 2021). Traditional Chiefs can get involved in the preservation of rejected religious artefacts, especially the ones that are considered the source of bad luck and calamities. A cordial dialogue between the traditional chiefs, African Religious priests, and leaders of other religions can foster proper management of the invasion and bonfire of African religious artefacts. One fact can be said Every Christian and Muslim African was once an African Religious adherent—which centres on God. Every African has a God notion. Accordingly, the acceptance of a new religion is either a continuation of the worship of the God they have known from (AR) or the acquisition of novel ways on how to worship the God they knew from (AR). Put differently, if an African pick-up a new religion whether Christianity or Islam, he or she is learning new ways on how to worship the God they previously knew from AR. This is because the foundation of their God-Knowledge is based on African Religion. Therefore, dismissing and vilipending of AR as a religion of Animism, superstition, the torching of AR religious objects, and tagging its adherents as fetish and pagans is a misconception and denial of one's history.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The thrust of this article was to examine the reaction of Pentecostal churches and adherents of other faith on African Religion. This was done with particular reference to the torching of African Religious artefacts by some



Christian leaders and fundamentalists in Nigeria. It was discussed that African religion is one of the pivotal dimensions of African heritage. The objects used for worship are the necessary components of the material aspect of African Religious practices and spirituality. As a religion that centres on the Supreme Being and spirituality of social relation, initiated by pre-colonial Africans, it has its functional and dysfunctional aspects like other religions in the world.

Hence, it is a cardinal error to destroy every trace of African religious heritage in the name of promoting the doctrines and teachings of Christianity and Islam. More so, the acceptance of a new religion does not permit the destruction, condemnation, and contemptuous treatment of the former. Religious tolerance is indispensable in this regard.

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