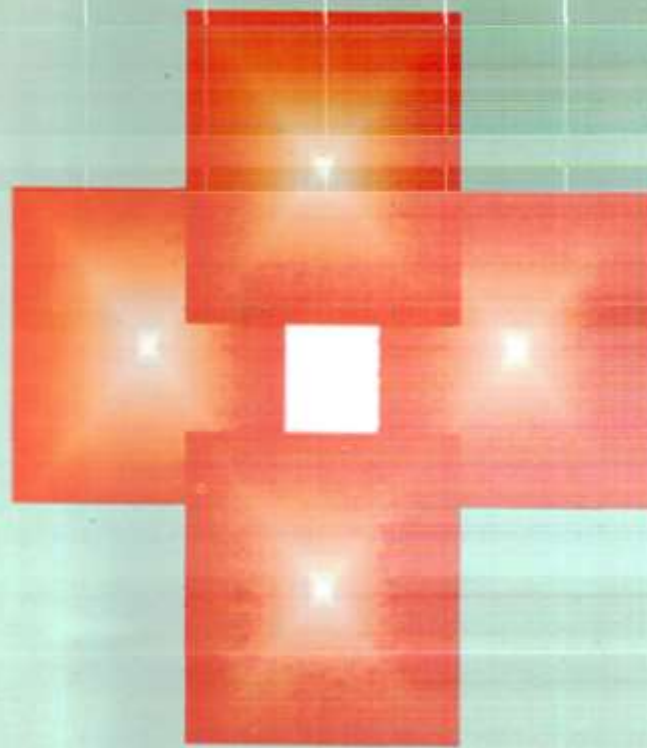


Human Views on God

Variety Not Monotony

(Essays in Honour of Ade P. Dopamu)



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CHAPTER ONE

On Dopamu's 'God Loves Variety and Hates Monotony'

Alamu Akiti Glory

Introduction

Dopamu is accustomed to say that God hates monotony and loves varieties. This popular statement of his is borne out of his academic background as a great scholar of African and Comparative Religion. He believes as E. J. Sharpe stated that "he who knows one knows none."¹ As a scholar of African and Comparative Religion, Dopamu believes that religion is all-encompassing and all-pervading. He also believes, and in fact demonstrates apodictically that African Religion gives prominence to tolerance, hospitality, communality, togetherness and we-feelings. These are African religious identity. In this regard, African Religion as a world religion unequivocally² "pursues a multi-religious agenda where theologians are discovering a God who resists domestication into any single theory of how the world works."³ As a doyen of African Religion, Dopamu believes that African Religion (Afrel) contributes immensely to the growing discussion of the multiform or various relationships of religious faiths, institutions, ideas and traditions to social life. Therefore, no single religion can claim monopoly of truth.⁴ He believes that Afrel creates a new environment for global sharing of which its tradition is "live and let live," which enhances peaceful co-existence almost certainly absent in many world religions.⁵

According to Dopamu, African Religion "is anthropocentric and humanity is at the centre of everything. The metaphysical and the physical, the Supersensible, and the sensible, the Invisible and the visible are all conceptualized in relation to humanity on this planet earth."⁶ Drawing an inference from the foregoing, it is clear that Africans promote life and humanity is above every other concept. Dopamu believes that God is African and He is invisible and as such humanity is the essence of life or existence which acts as His agent. Therefore, humanness should be promoted more than any other existence. Dopamu summarizes that in Afrel, themes like God, humanity and society are inter-related and humanity is at the centre of the three. He espouses:

African Religion is centred more on humanity than God. This human-centredness is what is expressed in all aspects of African Religion....⁷

By and large, Dopamu, as an African, believes that African humanism is not individualistic rather it is a communal humanism. In this perspective, the Africans live, relate and show concern for one another, help one another, share common burden and often do things together; this explicates their corporate existence and makes them real human beings.⁸ Despite the fact that this African communality is alien to foreigners, Africans still exhibit same today. It is germane to state that Afrel embraced, tolerated and still embraces and tolerates the proselytizing religions of Islam and Christianity. Dopamu consistently maintains that:

Afrel has maintained a long history of co-operative interaction with Christianity and Islam in Africa. In the face of ever-troublesome and discouraging history of contact between Afrel and the imported religions, Afrel was able to exercise itself in the style of activity for which it has existed from time immemorial.⁹

In reality, flowing from the above, Afrel still demonstrates that element today. No wonder, when the missionaries arrived in Africa perhaps Nigeria in the 16th century, they mistook African hospitality and tolerance to mean that Africans had embraced Christianity. In other words, the Missionaries took African hospitality for granted as a result of their ignorance of the common African person.

The principle of "live and let live" has often been fostered by Afrel. Afrel is never keen in missiology and its tenets are never misrepresented in the scheme of things. "Its hierarchy needs no fear of loss of members or encroachment on its territory by rival religions. In fact, it could boast that it draws its adherents from all walks of life, all confessions and all professions within the society."¹⁰ Africans are conscious of their corporate existence and are also mindful that their foundation is rooted in morality. In spite of the fact that human rationality is the basis for morality, however, as a matter of fact, African morality is uniquely based on African Religion. Afrel is generally acknowledged to be the strongest factor in which the greatest African character influences upon the reasoning and the living patterns of African people.¹¹

This is understandable in view of the fact that Africans love sanctity of life, sanity, orderliness and communality which cater for the total well-being of the people in the society. As this has served as a background, it is correct to state categorically that Africans love, serve and worship God. This is seen in all facets of life. The same tendency makes Africans to embrace Islam and Christianity with the mind that all the religions are not exclusive in themselves. It is this goodwill that makes Africans to believe Islam and Christianity are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters to African Religion hence they embrace each other. Dopamu believes that these triadic religions: African Religion, Islam and Christianity are centred on God, humanity and society, therefore they are various channels to God, respect humanity and protect their society. African dignity to religion is seen in God and sanity and orderliness to their environment. Dopamu sincerely believes that as an African, any channel to God through these triadic religions must be accepted by God who is the centre of worship and focus by humankind. He believes that God enjoys varieties of religious summits than one way-fold to reality, which is always monotonous to God. He believes that since there are varieties during carnivals, and people love such, nothing moves God than varieties or species of worship. In other words, nothing deprives God-Supreme Being from enjoying such varieties because God cherishes innovation and new discoveries. There are many ways that lead to God. To this end, Dopamu believes that since God made and still makes human beings differently, God also expects human beings to worship Him variously, hence His wisdom for such variety.

As a scholar of Comparative Religion, he is not over-enthusiastic to deride any religion, if he should at all do so it is his own belief system. He imbibed the spirit of an impartial, neutral and tolerant adherent who never for once castigates any religion. He thus, is not "over-enthusiastic to exhibit maniac tendencies in either bringing useless and far-fetched points of similarity or exposing unnecessary, unimportant and artificial points of differences amongst religions."¹²

As a scholar of Comparative Religion, Dopamu strongly believes in factuality and reality than mere academic exercise. To him, religion is a very sensitive, touchy and all-pervading issue that must be handled with utmost care and caution. Comparative study in this magnitude requires a handful of attributes that must be carefully observed and followed in order to be certified a comparative student and scholar. Tiwari puts the attributes as follows:

A very balanced mind-unbiased, unprejudiced, trained in scientific neutrality and yet sensitive to the deeper convictional aspects of religion-is required to undertake and accomplish this task.¹³

Sequel to the foregoing, Dopamu possesses and exhibits all these attributes. By extension, he combines his genuine critical acumen with his real sense of sympathy and large-heartedness for other religions.¹⁴ His descriptive, historical and hermeneutical approach to the study of religions has earned him "natural leader" in the understanding of religion. In this intellectual exercise, Dopamu is guided by stupendous task of utmost sincerity and seriousness: i.e. analyzing beliefs without any prejudice or one-sidedness.

In the methodological approaches to the study of Religion, Dopamu was vehement and blunt in rebuffing the various statements and positions of the various socio-anthropologists except P.A. Talbot who made fundamental submissions as regards religions with reductionist tendencies. As a student and scholar of Comparative Religion, he believes that nobody should create the impression that his own word is the last word or final authority on the subject of religious studies. Again, Dopamu added that "the academic truth of today may become the fallacy of the future as caution should be exercised in the making of categorical statement about other people's beliefs."¹⁵ He again cautioned that whatever evaluative statements are made about other people's religions, it must be resident in the mind that they are recognized as fair in the context of the particular religious belief such appraisals are made. This latter statement is in

conformity with the opinion of Cantwell Smith who stated that "it is the business of Comparative religion to construct statements about religion that are intelligible within at least two traditions simultaneously."¹⁶

In the field of Comparative Religion, Dopamu does not give preference to his own belief as a convinced Christian or any other. Rather, as an astute believer of Comparative Religion, he embraces all religions regardless of their historical or cultural backgrounds. With this framework, Dopamu objectively evaluates each religion with an open mind such that standards derived from one religion are not imposed upon others. A basic and adequate knowledge of other belief systems have afforded him the opportunity of appreciating and acknowledging these beliefs without syncretism. Even, his social life reflects this aspect. Dopamu is detached from his religion in order to be sympathetic and charitable towards other religions. Sympathy and charity towards other faiths are necessary spices for the scientific study of religions. This scientific and objective approach has consistently helped him in the exhibition of wise and fair attitude towards religions other than his.

However, Tiwari partially disagrees with Dopamu's position that "no comparison seems possible at first sight, because each religion in its wholeness appears to have its own distinctive character with specific features of its own."¹⁷ Mugambi supports Tiwari by saying that such an ideal, however, is impossible to realize, only partial achievements are possible.¹⁸ With sincerity, Tiwari has assigned sober fact to the comparative study because a particular adherent of a particular faith must not accept any belief other than his own. Also, to a "new comer" or a "new convert" of Comparative Religion, he must be overwhelmed by this herculean task of which he can be tempted to take side with his own faith and any attempt to be neck-deep into the study of other people's beliefs, it is believed that syncretism has crept in. This is in line with Tiwari's "first sight."

But Tiwari is not totally correct, because the task of a comparative believer is to be open-minded and sympathetic. To make profitable study of religion comparatively, a scholar must appreciate the innuendoes and each religion must be seen in terms of its own perspective. A scholar of comparative study is always a business-like person with an ideal combination of non-aggressiveness, sociableness and pleasantness. Dopamu recognizes the various faiths of the world have different cultural backgrounds. Yet, these belief systems lead to the same Supreme Being - God, whichever name is called. In agreement with the submission of Dopamu, Parrinder argues that honest comparison must be entered into so as to avoid prejudiced and unwarranted aspersion on other religions. He adds:

As a precaution against such tendencies, comparison however to be justified seriously, must not imply judgement, and less depreciation of any faith.¹⁹

Invariably, both Dopamu and Parrinder are of the opinion that scientific nature of the study of comparative religion is all-embracing and acceptable. Dopamu believes stoutly that the distinctive features of any religion must be objectively and sympathetically studied internally and externally. Internal and external in this context means that participatory observation or *dramatis personae* in all the aspects must be studied. This will exonerate a student and a scholar of comparative Religion from armchair or a biased critique.

In the same vein, the position of Dopamu will not appeal to religious fundamentalists. They believe that Dopamu has overblown the position and extent of a comparative student. Therefore, it is impossible to please religious practitioners since the study of Comparative Religion is academic in nature that does not involve human practice. Apart from the foregoing, they advance that complete passion must be shown to a particular religion especially the one they belong at the expense of others. In fact, a committed religious believer cannot be at the fence. In other words, no middle path for a religious believer; you are either there or not, especially on religious issues that affect adherents. However, in a multi religious country like Nigeria, religious co-existence, harmony rather than confrontation should be the basis. Therefore, Dopamu believes that religious truth stems from the academic, which reflects in the society. Put differently, academic environment is the microcosm that rears or breeds human resources and man power that develops and as well rules the larger society as the macrocosm. He advises religious stakeholders to patronize the academic where religious objectivity is addressed and practiced. He is of the view that the academics should serve as a reference point, a model and a blueprint, which would be rewarding and profitable to the entire society.

This method or model has been the philosophy of the Department of Religions that houses Christian Studies, Comparative Religious Studies and Islamic Studies in the University of Ilorin. Dopamu has been emphasizing and promoting this course or philosophy every time. In his lecture on "Religions in Nigeria" Dopamu domesticates the essence of religious harmony hence every government parastatal, ministry and company employs both Christians and Muslims. In the social sphere, Dopamu states categorically that in "marriages, naming ceremonies, funeral ceremonies and the like are attended by Muslims, Christians and Afrelists irrespective of the religious beliefs of the celebrant."²⁰ He even used University of Ilorin as a case study by describing the fact that the Vice Chancellor is a Muslim but he has numerous Christians working with him in the administration of the University.²¹ Even before he joined the "church triumphant" he advocated a hermeneutic approach to the study of religions. This religious hermeneutic advanced by Dopamu means a religious interpretation that includes a multifarious approach to religion, which although they may disagree among themselves, are united by a common interest in religions as systems of symbols or kinds of languages which impart meaning that must be interpreted.²² By extension, this approach is primarily a historical-phenomenological one. Here, it must be established that the major concern and widespread interest of Dopamu is the extensive nexus that religion is an essential or even imperative aspect of the social machinery, part of the complex system by which human beings are enabled to live together in an orderly arrangement of social relations.²³

Emphasis on Religious Sameness in all Faiths

Dopamu strongly believes that religious co-existence, tolerance and accommodation should be the watchword of all the adherents of all religions. He emphasises that God in His infinite wisdom would have made or created human beings to look alike, do things the same way and to practice the same religion, but He did not do so, which means God enjoys varieties. Dopamu supported this when he cites the words of Peter in Acts of Apostles that "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."²⁴ In addition, Dopamu asserts that Prophet Muhammad (SAW) also knew that the religions of the world before Islam contained great truth about God, and he thus enjoined Muslims to believe not only in him but also in all other prophets of the books before him:

Say ye: we believe in God; and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from the Lord; we make no difference between one and another of them: And we bow to God.²⁵

According to him, the corollary from the foregoing is that if God has wished the whole world to worship Him in the same way, He should have done so in His infinite wisdom. But He has not done so because He hates monotony and enjoys variety. That explains why there is variation in all the things He has created. This variety stems from the various approaches to reach God either in songs, dance, prayers, and speeches. God cherishes these varieties on the parts of all the adherents of all the world's living religions.

As a scholar of African and Comparative Religion, Dopamu believes that there is the need to be scientifically objective in viewing other faiths and to accept the belief-practices of other faiths. Dopamu applies all the elements of a comparative study to arrive at his formula of God hates monotony and loves variety. He believes that there are many ways that lead to salvation. Salvation to him is not linear which normally raises mutual suspicion and mistrust among the adherents of the proselytizing religions of Islam and Christianity. This concept of salvation has led the practitioners of these two religions in face-off, blood-letting and maiming in the name of religion. According to Dopamu, religions have not failed mankind rather it is human factors that have turned religion to a two-edged sword - cohesion and division.²⁶ There is plurality in the way of salvation, which he consciously advocates.

Dopamu discovers that despite his advocacy for religious tolerance and co-existence in contemporary Nigerian society among the triadic religions of African Religion, Islam and Christianity, Afrel has been cleverly and conspicuously relegated to the background. He remarks that the composition of Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), apart from Islam and Christianity, which are fully represented, African Religion which is being practiced by millions of Nigerians is isolated. To him, this position is unfair to those who believe, and hold fervently to their belief, in the spiritual satisfaction they get in African Religion.²⁷ In agreement with Dopamu, many Afrelists are still Muslims and Christians.

With this spirit, he advocates that a slot should be given to Afrelists in NIREC, in order to strike an equilibrium as well as even and mutual representation. He sums up that "in an increasingly pluralistic society, where religious dialogue is given a prominent place, Afrel can supply principles and ideas among adherents of all religions, as it did in the early days of Islam and Christianity in Africa. The principle of live and let live has often been fostered by Afrel."²⁸

He said among others that in his retirement, he would establish what he referred to as "Afrochrislam", that is, establishing a temple to keep the adherents of Afrel on ritual worship Saturday, adherents of Christianity on Sunday worship and Mosque for Friday Juma'at prayers. As an embodiment of the triadic religions, he is simply referred to as High Priest, Baba Ijo of Anglican Church and Aafa Issa. All these he answered with liberty before he joined the church triumphant.

Conclusion

Having understudied some of the religious thoughts of Dopamu, we discovered that he is not over-enthusiastic at deriding or condemning any religious faith even if he was not a member of that particular faith. The sensitivity of Nigerian state with regard to religion informed him of his acceptability and tolerance of other faiths. This revealed that as a scholar of both African and Comparative Religion, he is at liberty to interact and freely relate with people of other faiths. This is the essence of social relations, and he used religion to achieve it. Dopamu believes that God loves varieties of approach to His worship and hates regimented and straight-jacketed or monotonous worship. Dopamu cheerfully clamours for multifarious approaches to the worship of God as Africans cherish humanistic diversity in an attempt to live as neighbours from the same source – God – with only different religious affiliations. This tendency strikes at the fact that all religions must be respected in all ramifications no matter the differences in numerical strength. Dopamu permits this in order to promote co-existence, religious interaction and promotion of human welfare and environment. This religious we-feeling and togetherness makes God to love variety and subsequently hate monotony. The underlying principle of these efforts is to achieve peace, which has consistently eluded the society. It is therefore strongly advocated that all believers in God must as a matter of devotion to Him make peace with Him and fellow human beings – peace-loving and peace-making is the urgent need of our beleaguered human race.

Endnotes

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