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**AFRICAN CULTURE,  
MODERN SCIENCE  
AND  
RELIGIOUS THOUGHT**

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# THE FUTURE OF AFRICAN RELIGION, ISLAM, CHRISTIANITY AND SCIENCE IN AFRICA

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## Introduction

The nature of African Religion is such that gives serious significance to the physical cosmos. The religion itself evolved via the conception of the African peoples of their environment. To the people, God is seen, felt, and experienced in everything. This is echoed in Bolaji Idowu's popular saying "Africans are everything religious".<sup>1</sup> In this regard the African (especially the traditional African) holds in high esteem all of the creatures of God, both animate and inanimate. Everything, no matter how little, everyone no matter how seemingly insignificant, has its importance in the order of the created world. So modern science readily finds absolute relevance in the religious life of the Africans for it agrees totally with the general African Cosmology.

Furthermore, African Religion and African Science complement each other; they are interwoven. This is largely due to the fact that a lot of spirituality is involved with some preparations of African Science. By African Science we mean an African account of nature and how it works. This account contains hypotheses, many of which are not acceptable to the people of Western culture. The testing ground of all sciences, be it African or Western, is utility.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Africa is a multi-religious continent. Three religions feature prominently: African Religion or Indigenous Religion, Christianity, and Islam. Each of these has considerable followership co-existing in each country of the continent though in varying proportions. Christianity and Islam in Africa are not the same in practice as in the traditional settings of these religions. A bit of African coloration has rubbed on them. This is expedient if they must find relevance and meaning to the African people. In the same vein the dynamic nature of modern science and technology has also influenced African Religion. The science-religion dialogue, which is the most contemporary intellectual discourse, is fast gaining ground in Africa. Courses are now being taught on science-religion dialogue in African Universities; Workshops and Conferences on science-religion dialogue are being organised, and Centers of Religion and Science, to further propagate dialogue between these two giants, are being established.

One major factor that makes Africa a fertile ground for science-religion dialogue is the accommodative nature of the African life-style. It is flexible and adaptive. It is pliable and adventurous. The pace at which technological and scientific presence is invading Africa makes it a lot easier for the religious beliefs of the people to thrive and to be disseminated with ease. It is against this backdrop that we shall consider the future of the science-religion dialogue in Africa among Christian, Muslim, and Indigenous Spiritualities.

At this point, it may be necessary to attempt a brief definition of science and religion. The primary meaning of science is, "knowledge arranged in an orderly manner, especially knowledge obtained by observation and testing of facts"<sup>3</sup>. In its archaic use, science means knowledge; however, it is now often used in reference to

a branch of knowledge that has been accumulated on a subject...admitting of quantitative treatment; *pure science* one depending on deductions from self-evident truths, as mathematics, logic; *natural physical science*, one dealing with material phenomena and based mainly on observation, experiment and induction, as chemistry, biology...<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein, *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* defines science as, "knowledge ascertained by observation and experiment, critically tested, systematized and brought under general principles".<sup>5</sup>

Today, everybody who is seriously engaged in the study of religion has been convinced that to attempt a definition of religion is an almost impossible, if not altogether impossible, task; and every serious scholar is on the verge of giving up the task. However, religion results from people's

spontaneous awareness of, and spontaneous reaction to, their immediate awareness of a Living Power, "Wholly Other" and infinitely greater than themselves; a power mysterious because unseen, yet  $\frac{1}{2}$  present and urgent Reality, seeking to bring people into communion with Himself, reaching out from the depths of human beings for close communion with, and vital relationship to this Power as a source of real life.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the need to define African Religion is crucial at this point, since it is often mis-interpreted.

### **What is African Religion?**

It is important and appropriate to clear some grounds of misunderstanding regarding different nomenclatures given to the religion of the Africans. While some refer to it as African Religions, others regard it as African Traditional Religion; still others call it African Religious Thoughts. The question to ask is this, Is African Religion one or many? Or is what is seen as multiplicity to be considered realistically and accurately absolute or merely as various elements and expressions of one reality? E.W. Smith responded this way:

In spite of... cultural diversities there are, I believe, an underlying identity in religion. I do not deny or minimize 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. But the difference is one of emphasis and development, not of essence. There is sufficient identity to warrant our speaking of African Religion.<sup>7</sup>

In recent times, most African scholars including Mbiti and Dopamu studying African Religion from the "inside" agree. They now see African Religion as one in its essence. Although its varieties cannot be denied, there is a "basic world-view" as John V. Taylor asserts in a work published before Mbiti's "which fundamentally is everywhere the same".<sup>8</sup> 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 the form of denominations) or Islam (in its schools of thought), for instance. They may be referred to by different names such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, or Baptist in Christianity, or Sunni and Shi'a, in Islam with their sub-divisions. Nonetheless, they remain Christian or Muslim. Similarly, varieties in African Religion must not be taken to mean diversity of fundamental belief.<sup>9</sup>

Basic African worldview that seems to penetrate all religious traditions in Africa, be it traditional spirituality, Christianity or Islam, is the belief that God is the Creator of the universe. He is the First Cause and the Prime Mover, the Ultimate Cause of the unending, explorable natural phenomena which manifest variously and in various forms. And this is why African spiritualities hold the firm belief that making inquiries into natural phenomena is akin to trying to investigate God. This means that nature is God and God is nature.

Another aspect of African worldview shared by the traditional spirituality, Christianity and Islam is worship. Africans recognize the existence of a Supreme Being who is believed to have created the universe and all there is in it. They worship Him, pray to Him and regard Him as the giver of blessing, joy and protection. This is why He is regarded as a refuge, the last resort. God is worshipped because He is the source and fountain of all things and through prayer and supplication, God is asked for certain things like blessing and protection. And like other religions, Africans also believe in faith as a strong and vital force to cause a thing or desire to come to reality. Faith is the pillar of all the religions in Africa.

Some part of basic African worldview includes the existence and essence of human beings. It is recognized by African traditionalists (spiritualities) Muslim (Islamic adherents) and Christians that God created human beings for a purpose; that God had created human beings for specific task and mission; that human beings are instruments of God and that human beings are given breath by God. Essentially, human beings have and share divine

spiritual breath which they have got or received from God and it is that breath that is the essence of life.

Apart from this, Africans believe in principles of ethics. Ethics is regarded as guardian, moulder and shaper of morality. There is great emphasis on high moral standard. And there are norms, rules and regulations guiding the conduct and behaviour of persons so that there will be peace and harmony.

Closely related to this African worldview is the belief in judgement. Africans believe that when a person dies, his soul never dies rather he reappears or resurrects to face reward either negatively or positively for all his actions and deeds while on earth. The fear of retributive justice or natural justice further reinforces the need for ethical standards and principles. The well-kept or flagrant violation of these ethics serves as measures/parameters for the type of reward one gets in the next world. This is because Africans believe in eschatology which is shared by the adherents of the three religions. And because Africans believe in life after death, they do give elaborate funeral for the dead and even speak to the dead as if they were still alive.

Africans believe that human life revolves around a cycle spiritually and physically. This is expressed in the way they name their children. For example, *Iyabo* - (the mother has come again) or *Babatunde* (father has come again) are the names given to a girl and boy respectively who were born after the death of their mother or father. This means that African worldview fluctuates between belief in cyclic vital forces of the spiritual and the biological. This means also that life has no terminal but is a series of processes of interplay of physical and spiritual forces. This last point cuts across all religions in Africa. It is not peculiar to African Religion.

African Religion is, therefore, the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation to generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion but a religion that millions of Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it.<sup>10</sup> This is a religion that has no written scripture, yet it is "written" everywhere for those who care to see and read. Its scripture is what I call the "Book of Universe." It is largely written in the people's myths and folktales, in their songs and dances, in their environment, in nature, in their liturgies and shrines, in their proverbs and pithy sayings. It is a religion that is alive. It is also a religion whose historical founder is neither known nor glorified; it is a religion that has no zeal for membership drive, yet it offers persistent fascination for Africans and non-Africans, young and old.

### **The Future of African Religion and Science**

African Religion is as old as human existence. It is a way of life. It recog-

nises the supernatural forces, places or beings and in hierarchical order. It places the Creator of all things (the Supreme Being) over and above all other supernatural beings. African Religion also recognises the existence of deities, gods, goddesses and natural forces. It explores and exploits nature makes use of the products of nature and appeals to nature to meet its needs and provides for its wants.

African Religion permeates the lives of African peoples and the religion has bequeathed to them some inexplicable phenomena which they have explored, exploited and utilized to their own advantage in their day-to-day activities. Through African Religion, the people have been able to tap nature's potentials and resources to cause rain to fall, to send messages to distant places,<sup>11</sup> to cause lightning and thunder to strike, to control the moon and the sun. They have also devised some technology which can only be explained by the way it is done and the effect it will produce, but unable to explain in direct verifiable scientific way, what and what have interplayed or interchanged to produce such an effect.

People believe that African Religion has solutions to most human problems within their cultural ecology and environment - tapping natural resources. Through this, Africans have been able to develop their own science, the type that emerges from the observation of nature or natural phenomena. The preparation of items which have magical and supernatural effects is systematic, procedural and fixed. It is also quantitative without which its efficacy and potency will be rendered useless. For instance, systematic placement of items, plucking of herbs at a particular time, the precise number of items to be used, all have scientific procedural approach to make it efficacious. But modern science and its knowledge which Africans lack generally make the "scientific discoveries" of Africans in the areas of bullet proofs,<sup>12</sup> telecommunication means and wireless communication unscientific, mysterious, and magical in nature. And just as Africans lack the knowledge of modern science and technology and unable to explain their nature-based discoveries, so also the Western scientists lack the knowledge of "unscientific" African science and technology which had sustained them for millions of years till this day, and which the Western scientists have openly appreciated to have utilitarian value.

In the light of this, African Religion has a lot to offer modern science in terms of African bullet proof, accident detector, acid neutralizer, as science also has a lot to offer African Religion in their respective developmental efforts. To achieve this, for the benefit of humanity and to break the barrier between science and religion, there should be a mix of spirituality and science where the Western scientists would meet the Africans to discuss ways which they can collaborate to conduct research on their supernatural powers, which they have been using since their pre-historic and pre-scientific

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age and which still endure till this day. The scientists should also seek the counsel of the custodians of African cultural heritage for their ideas and approaches, to studying their inherited source of supernatural powers. There should be a cooperative interaction between African Religion and modern science because of the invaluable benefits the collaborative efforts will produce. This becomes necessary because although African Religion and its adherents have great respect for modern science, the modern scientists, on their own, cannot understand African science. A real understanding of the true nature of African science emanating from African Religion can be properly grasped by mutual understanding, cooperation and interaction between modern science and African Religion.

The problem which modern science has with African Religion is basically on the mystery and secrecy which shroud the activities of traditional African science. Nevertheless, with the type of cooperation suggested above, positive results are likely to be achieved.

### **The Future of Islam and Modern Science in Africa**

Islam, as a faith and culture, has a clear attitude towards the acquisition of scientific knowledge and emphasises its subjugation to its ethical norms.<sup>13</sup> Islam in African context manifests in cognisance for value for human lives, respect for elders and contemporaries, and peaceful co-existence. This is so because for it to find relevance amongst Africans it has to be indigenised. Cases of religious crises, where lives and properties were wasted, were initiated by bigotry, iconoclasm, and for political reasons. The perpetrators could not have been true Muslims. The injunctions of the Holy Qur'an are quite clear on how Muslims should live peacefully with their neighbours.

In Islam generally, for any scientific knowledge to be meaningful, it should be tapped and utilized for the realization of people's lofty goals and make the world a better place for all or at least for the greatest number of people. Above all, from the Islamic point of view, such knowledge or science should be predicated on unshaken faith in the Almighty God, the Omniscient who created knowledge and gives it to whomsoever He wills, to test their sense of judgement and gratitude.<sup>14</sup>

Islam regards the acquisition of scientific knowledge as of prime importance. It even regards such knowledge as the criterion of superiority amongst God's creatures. This claim is, of course, predicated on the agreement between theory and practice on the part of the scientists concerned. In other words, a scientist is supposed to be a pious and righteous person. Because the possession of scientific knowledge should be positively applied, whatever comes out of it should make life better for the people. This is mainly because, according to Islam, God has placed in human beings immeasurable intellectual

powers that should be utilized positively. This is why He placed them above His other creatures.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, Islam enjoins people to get involved in pursuit of knowledge. Such intellectual exercise is regarded as essential for people of intellect to understand better the greatness of God.<sup>16</sup> Learned people are so highly valued by Islam that they are regarded as the only ones who really fear God.<sup>17</sup> Knowledge or science in Islam is not confined to the narrow compartment of what is called religion. Rather, it embraces all forms of scientific and artistic knowledge by which people will understand the natural phenomena around them and the relationship between them and their Creator. In other words, the type of science that Islam encourages is the one that can help humanity to overcome its multifarious problems without creating in people a sense of pride and impiety believing that God is the greatest scientist who has created all scientists by giving some of His scientific knowledge to people while creating them.

In view of the above, it is evident from Islamic point of view that Islam is not averse to science, rather Islam has immensely contributed to development of science even before the development of Western or modern science. Islam and science therefore co-exist harmoniously and complement each other. In view of this, there is need for Islamic scholars and experts who are Muslims in Africa to look into the best way to solve human problems and produce a blueprint which could be a model to others, a model devoid of corruption, exploitation of one's compatriots or of people of other lands, a model that emphasises the concern for humanity as enjoined by Islamic tenets.<sup>18</sup>

The problem of a kind of slavery created by the disruptive and agonising economic system of borrowing and debt servicing which has crippled most economies of Africa is still crying for attention. The whole system is predicated on inhuman practice euphemistically called "interest rates". How far have Muslim economists and their colleagues in Islamic Studies gone in evolving a new economic system for Africa? At least, Islam recommends an interest-free economic system for the benefit of humanity.<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion there is the need for the Ministry of Education throughout Africa to create their curricula in such a way that Islamic schools create subjects (right from elementary level) marrying science and Islamic tenets, so that as they encounter other subjects, their dreams and aspirations are guided by religious truths and supportive scientific evidence. This is bound to evolve a new generation of scientists, theologians and scholars that put the fear of God, the sanctity of human life and respect for humanity over and above any other consideration in their daily activities.

With the above universalistic stand of Islam on scientific discovery and domestication for human needs, the African Muslims would be able to con-

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tinue to contribute meaningfully to the cultivation of scientific knowledge in Africa and the world at large. The only problem which greatly threatens that goal is the inability of some Muslim groups in Africa to follow the tenets of their religion to the letter. These groups constitute a cog in the wheel of progress in their environments. Some of the "religious" riots in Nigeria, for instance, involve these idle hands which are, of course, ready to champion a course they are ignorant about.<sup>21</sup> Otherwise, Islam is a religion of peace and many Muslims in Nigeria are peace-loving.

### **The Future of Christianity and Science in Africa**

It is an accepted norm in Christendom that wisdom, intellect, brilliance, good judgement, knowledge, and understanding come from God. It is also an established fact that nothing good is given to people, except that which comes from God. It is, therefore, expected that whatever knowledge and skill people possess, should be used to glorify God, and also to bless His creation. Throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, we see an ethic of revelation characterized by the conformity of human activity to the will of God: what God commands people to do and the reactions of people as well as the consequences. African Christianity is not excluded from these biblical injunctions. It only adds to those laudable African religious moral values. And so whatever skill or knowledge, gift or talent, intellect or brilliance, people have should be applied to better the lot of humanity and not to complicate or destroy it. This is why African Christians are extremely patient people. Because they know that to spill blood or claim a life is a grave offence with grievous attendant consequences, fearing that he who kills by the sword will die by the sword.

The subject of love that is epitomised in the person of Christ is the guiding light of the African Christians. Hence, any manifestation of humanity in terms of scientific discoveries, inventions and applications are welcomed, and are viewed as acts of glorifying God the Master Creator. Hence, science finds relevance with African Christianity. As earlier mentioned that Africans are very accommodating, and are willing to learn anything new, an African Christian is smart enough to know that any knowledge or skill acquired must be applied positively since if otherwise utilized, it will have a ripple effect on the society.

Africa has quite a number of Christian scientists, engineers, medical practitioners, computer analysts, who have written their names in gold as far as making life better for humanity is concerned. Scientific inventions and technological discoveries have eased planning, organisation, communication, activities in Christian religious programmes a great deal. For example, in the

course of a huge Christian crusade, television monitors are placed in different halls for the teeming crowd to have a view and the feel of what goes on at the crusade ground. But for scientific invention such would not have been possible. In such a situation, we have heard people muttered, "Thank God for technology and science". This implies that God created technology and science by creating a creator of science and technology in form of human beings.

### **The Way Forward for African Spiritualities and Science**

Several attempts are still required to further break the enmity between science and religion in Africa. This is because science views religion in Africa as unrewarding gyration of the globe and world of primitive people who lack anything "scientific". Science brings with it enlightenment that is synonymous to civilization and modernization. The nature of modernization is such that it creates room for excessive freedom that accommodates vices and frivolities. In this regard, science has been viewed with disdain and considered to promote godlessness in some quarters in Africa. Such vices as violence, immorality, seductive dressing modes, disrespect for elders, craze for riches and materialism are believed to have come with modernization associated with the dawn of modern science.

Courses marrying religion and science should be designed or created, and be introduced right from the kindergarten, through elementary, primary and secondary, to University levels of education. Workshops, and conferences, should be encouraged to go through all African countries. The aim is to educate people that science and religion are sisters and partners in progress and that their co-existence and mutual interaction would produce a better world for humanity. This will not be much of a difficult feat to accomplish since all the three major religions in Africa place importance on science as revealed physical manifestations of God's presence in human affairs. ✓

To further explain the type of interaction between religion and science, many Africans who have acquired modern scientific knowledge still have close affinities with the priests of African Religion, especially in times of distress. Even though such modern scientists cannot verify empirically the power they are acquiring from such priests or herbalists, they have full confidence that, as Africans, they should not lose their roots and get swept away by the gail of modernity. That implicit confidence in their African roots and solutions will continue to make African science relevant for the future.

## Conclusion

The role of science and religion in the enhancement of human existence has been underscored even as it has been posited that science and religion need not fight each other because the knowledge of God and His creations is the beginning of science and this is appreciated by human beings through the relationship with God which takes the form of religion.

Islam, for example, made great advances on algebra, geometry, optics, medicine, and philosophy, but left the mysteries of physics to the power of Allah. On the other hand, Biblical teachings fostered the development of science in the Christian world. There is the increasing need for science and religion to work mutually so that the world could reap the benefits of the two. Modern science and technology have, through diverse means, improved the human condition. From historical viewpoint, science and religion show a complex and fascinating interdependence. The link between them has been seen in various forms as complementary rather than conflictual. Religion is the source and store of values, while science is the repositon and exposure of power to implement them just as values derived from religion give room for interaction with the various possibilities that science offers.

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