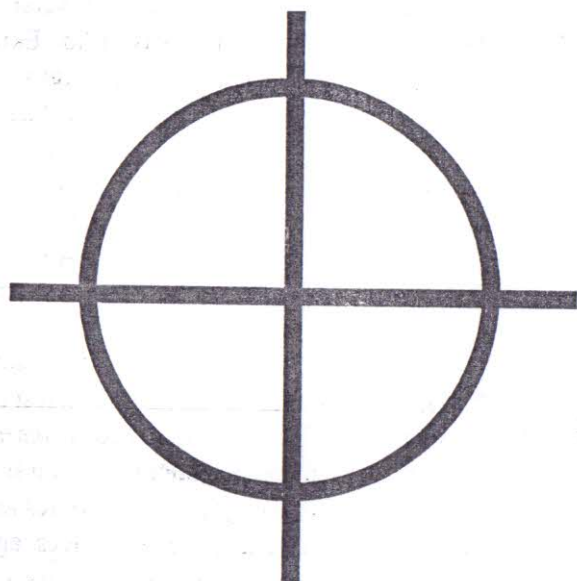


# **AAU: AFRICAN STUDIES REVIEW**



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## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN CHRISTIANITY AND TAOISM

AKITI GLORY ALAMU Ph.D

### Introduction

Moral and spiritual principles are expressed in the Decalogue. The Decalogue constitutes the most distinctive aspect of Judaism, which found fulfilment in the dispensation of grace ushered in by Jesus Christ. Meanwhile, the law is not dispensational and national in practical terms; rather, it has almost universal application. As a matter of fact, the laws of Moses are the exactness and climax of God's pact with His people as applicable to all mankind in all ages. Thus, the Ten Commandments are divided into two segments; the first part expresses men's relationship to God as object of divine mercy who follow His will with obedience. The second part talks about relationship with one another. These, Jesus Christ expounded in His earthly assignment with elaborate condiments. Thus, the Decalogue shows God's plan and standard for the whole of humankind as regards family relationship, human life, sex, property, thought, conduct and speech as well as living in harmony with nature.

Similarly, the Ten Commandments are found in Taoism, one of the Chinese religions. The Decalogue is the practice of virtues, books of divine responses to the conduct of men, morality tracts, diagram of meritorious actions, commentaries *Tao-Te-Ching* (the way and virtue classic) and doctrine. Taoist religion is the manifestation of the *Tao* the way, road, principle, a sort of divine legislation regulating the universe. *Tao* is the ground norm of all existence and the mother of the earth, believed to be the will of heaven. To this end, there is a deliberate concern with the Decalogue in both religions to humankind. As shown above, do the spiritual virtues still abound in both religions? Nevertheless, it is the intention of this paper to

explore the emergence and ground design of the Decalogue in both religions, as well as exploring their similarities and their points of departure coupled with the re-enactment of the Ten Commandments for the balance of divine will and human relations.

### The Decalogue in Judaism cum Christianity

The liberation of the Israelites from Pharaoh Kingdom explicitly ushered in the dispensation of the 'ten words' which served as the Law to the people. Indeed, the 'ten words' are at once the beginning and the heart of the mosaic revelation.<sup>1</sup> The Decalogue formed the pivot for fundamental relationships in the life of humankind with God and the environment as well as neighbours. Thus, around the Decalogue, it is the likelihood to group most of the provisions of the book of the covenant in Exodus 20 and 23, and around the book of the covenant in turn, to group the rest of the Torah.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the 'ten words' form both the most important and fundamental code. As earlier indicated, the 'ten words' are divided into 'categoric and casuistic'. The first is an abrupt and absolute behest admitting no exceptions, while the second begins with an 'if' or 'when'.<sup>3</sup> The second part is well known outside Israel from the legal codes of ancient western Asia which is generally considered as 'case law'. Later decisions were dependent on great early principles, and may probably be assumed to be earlier. Supporting the ten words, it is said that the law is:

Written on the tablets, preserved in the Ark of the Covenant, the ten words were the basis of Israel's law. In form they follow the standard pattern of the Eastern treaties current in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C, particularly those between vassals and their overlords...the book of the covenant is the oldest record we have of the Jewish law. It consists of judgements i.e case-laws and statutes, straight forward commands. Although similar in form to other ancient law-codes of western Asia, the Jewish code has several distinctive features.<sup>4</sup>



Sequel to the above, the categoric or apodictic law is characterized by an unconditional, imperative style, usually in the second person, expressed in the negative without an explicit stipulation of punishment. Thus, the apodictic law was unique to Israel and provided 'true Israelite law'.<sup>5</sup> The casuistic law was engulfed by a conditional style which emphasized specific legal cases, usually with an elaborate varieties of subordinate circumstances. It is argued that the casuistic law grew out of the normal legal procedure of secular lay justice which was administered at the gate and it was common with the Ancient Near Eastern Culture. Meanwhile, a textual problem would arise if the notes of the literature regarding the Decalogue are not displayed for discussion. Suffice it to say that Exodus 20:1-17 is readily available for analysis:

1. God spoke all these words saying,
2. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage
3. You shall have no other gods before me
4. You shall not make yourself an image, or any likeness of what is in heaven above, or on earth below, or in the water under the earth
5. You shall not bow down to them nor serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation of those hating me
6. But showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments
7. You shall not abuse the name of the LORD your God, for the Lord will not leave unpunished the one who abuses His name

8. Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy
9. Six days you have to labour and to do all your work
10. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work, you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your gate
11. For the six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and declared it holy
12. Honour your father and mother, that you may live long in the land which the LORD your God is giving you
13. You shall not kill
14. You shall not commit adultery
15. You shall not steal
16. You shall not testify against your neighbour as a false witness
17. You shall not covet your neighbour's house, you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's.<sup>7</sup>

The essentials of the Decalogue are the long developmental stages in history as well as the present shape it acquired through the institutional life of Israel. The Decalogue, through these developmental stages of its growth, reflected act of worship of the people; preaching and teaching are emphasized in its liturgy coupled with the various pyramids of tradition which are presently glued together.



Today, with respect to form and contents, it has been discovered that these have been tradition historical problem arising from the original function of the ten words. To this end, redaction and textual critics try to interpret the final form of the text and to bring the final stage of redaction into sharper focus.<sup>8</sup> Brevard Childs has buttressed perhaps further the present form of the Decalogue. According to him:

...the present text of the Decalogue reflects certain profile, regardless of the reasons why, can provide a basis for understanding what the commandments came to mean to Israel. An essential aspect of a critical analysis is to describe the feature of the Decalogue itself and then to relate them to the laws in the rest of the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup>

The 'Ten Words' have a pride of place in the Old Testament tradition. Perhaps, the nucleus of the Ten Words emerges obviously from the traditions which were revealed at Sinai by Moses. Furthermore, much has been ethically known concerning the orientation based on the concrete evidence. Therefore, the Decalogue contains the 'dos and don'ts. Put differently, the ten words possess the positive as well as negative laws.

Descriptively, 'Ten Words' have been re-addressed and re-interpreted especially in the present form. This has posed inconsistency in the manner in which the Decalogue has been handed down. The glare of this inconsistency was the direct speech of God. The systematic flexibility in the interpretation has influenced its usage and various meanings. However, the paradoxical complexes of the 'Ten words' which, nevertheless in final form, turn out to have almost the fixity of documents.<sup>10</sup>

It is glaring that the Laws are the compendium and paradigm of the Old Testament. Thus, St. Augustine posited that 'the Old Testament revealed in the New, the New veiled in the old'.<sup>11</sup>

Corroborating this, Graham Scroggie states that "The New is in the old contained, and the old is in the new explained".<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the New Testament is the fulfilment and explanation of the Old Testament. Both Old and the New Testaments are complementary. The scriptures as authoritative and the inspired word of the living God plays a vital role in the life of the community. It has affected, shaped and explored its surrounding as well as the Christians. Again, Brevard Childs asserts as follows:

...the book in its canonical form belongs to the sacred inheritance of the church, it is incumbent upon each new generation to study its meaning afresh, to have the contemporary situation of the church addressed by its word, and to anticipate a fresh appropriation of its message through the work of God's spirit.<sup>13</sup>

The foregoing depicts the fact that the New Testament extensively and variously uses the Old Testament. This established the fact that the Law is not national and dispensational. The spiritual principles and theological discipline of the Old Testament are still abiding in the Christian church. Thus, there is no significant truth whatsoever to think that the ten words have no place in this era of grace. Therefore, it is unscriptural to conclude that the ten words are purely national, hence, "history is an organic whole which cannot be neatly dissected"<sup>14</sup> To this end, nothing conserved was lost and nothing lost was conserved. Corroborating this statement, Alan Redpath stresses the relevance of the Ten Commandments:

Today, in a world that has lost its bearing tragically, the Ten Commandments are an orientation course which speaks with final authority. God himself is the supreme orientation point, and therefore the first four commandments have to do with our relationship to Him. All other relationships in life depend upon these.<sup>15</sup>



In the tremendous account of Jesus' sermon on the mount, he reiterated that he never came to abolish the Law but to fulfil the very word of God:

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law...but to fulfil...until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the law, until all is accomplished (Matt. 5:17).

In the light of the above, it can be further stressed that the Ten Words are all interpreted and expatiated in the sermon on the Mount, which magnified Jesus' intention in the Law as he preached not to the unconverted souls but to his disciples.<sup>16</sup> This has attested to the fact that Jesus re-interpreted the Law to the present situation so as to illuminate the minds of his audience on the basic need of why it was so in Moses' time down to the intertestamental period and the need for re-orientation. The severity of the 'Ten Words' is the most urgent expression of His love towards His objects of divine mercy. It is the type of life God expects His people to live even today so that men may see the beautiful thrill of a life lived under the control of Jesus Christ. The Ten commandments illumine the eyes; serve as 'school master' to the 'Headmaster', regulate human conduct, speech, thought, sex, property, moral living with nature, which are repeated, re-emphasized and re-interpreted in the Christian economy.

### The Decalogue in Taoism

To start with, Taoism can be seen as one of the three main philosophical and religious traditions of China together with Confucianism and Buddhism, though Buddhism is Indian in origin. Taoism was founded by *Lao Tzu*, a Chinese philosopher, born about 604BCE and a contemporary of Confucius. He was the author of the famous scripture *Tao-Te-Ching* (the way and virtue classic), a compilation of hundreds of poems which remain the basic text of

Taoist thought to this day.<sup>17</sup>

It is essential to note that the period *Lao Tzu* lived was engulfed with social unrest. The period of mighty Chou dynasty (1122-256BCE) had degenerated into a dimension that the feudal states engaged in continuous and interminable warfare, much to the distress and crucibles of the noble people.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, this high stake of tumult and suffering consequent upon the warring state weakened both its welders and its target, bending and submitting themselves to the whims and caprices of the priestly rule. Occasioned by this situation, hundred schools sprang up in China. As a result, only two schools of *Lao Tzu* the Old Master and Confucius as Latinized gained influence in China. Thus, *Lao Tzu* or *Li Erh* who established Taoism adopted mystical approach of *wu wei* inactivity to live in harmony with nature. Like Confucius, he gave a rational explanation to the religious tradition of ancient China. Peace was restored as *Lao Tzu* began to explore antiquity, and he was impressed by the way in which the ancients understood the mystery of life.<sup>19</sup> This mystery served a detailed illustration in the iconography which adorned the holy vessels used in the worship of the ancestors. This mystery of life was demythed by *Lao Tzu* and called *Tao*.

*Tao*, to *Lao Tzu*, "is an unfathomable mystery. *Tao* is the first principle of being the intelligence of the universe, life-giving, immortal and eternal; it informs and transforms all things"<sup>20</sup> Therefore, *Tao* is non-being in the sense that it implies that there must be something before all other beings come into existence. This non-being is the ultimate reality and first of all. Supporting this assertion Onimhawo and Izibili write:

As the way of ultimate reality, *Tao* is ineffable and transcendent. It is the ground of all existence. It is life's mystery and the rhythm, and the ordering principle behind all life analogous to the mother of the world. *Tao* teaches man the way the universe operates and attunes Him to it.<sup>21</sup>



Umejesi further comments that its activity is distinguished by non-choice, it never acts and yet through it all is done and things are permitted to follow their own course. Perhaps there is nothing higher than Tao and man is called to fashion his life after Tao.<sup>22</sup> Umejesi's argument is reaffirmed in the way and virtue classic;

Man models himself on the earth, the earth models itself after heaven, the heaven models itself after Tao, but Tao models itself by that which is so by itself (Tao-Te-Ching 1:25)

To this end, Tao puts forward as a result of its philosophical background morals which teach simplicity, self-example, moderation and attitude to affluence. These morals existed with Taoism and were given prominence in the Taoist church. Tao in the Taoist church becomes the religion of the master heaven. Though, it never lost touch with the Taoist traditions. These morals help the Taoists in the search for the elixir of long life, and striving to the cultivation of personal perfections. They are particularly conscientious in observing the fast, various restrictions and observances.

Taoism has values, which it considers necessary to its teachings. They include naturalism, simplicity and relativity of values....Taoism teaches that social order will be maintained when every person plays his intended roles and does his duty. To that end, it codifies all human and social relationship, ruler subject, father son, husband wife and so on.<sup>23</sup>

Taoist morality always plays an important role in doctrine, especially in the circle of heavenly masters. Thus, the Taoist morals were mainly the commentaries on *Tao-Te-Ching* from which the Ten Commandments are drawn and enacted by Lao Tzu. Suffice it to give the ten counsels of the Tao:

- i. To obey one's parents
- ii. To serve the Emperor and one's Master
- iii. To be good to all creatures
- iv. To bear generously evil received
- v. To settle differences and get rid of hate
- vi. To sacrifice one's own interest in order to help the poor
- vii. To free animals in captivity and nourish living creatures
- viii. To sink wells, plant trees and build bridges
- ix. To make oneself useful to one's fellowmen by looking after their interest and enlighten their ignorance
- x. To recite the Taoist books and to burn incense in their honour.<sup>24</sup>

These are the guidelines and principles of Taoism. Also, these cardinal virtues of Taoism encompass humility, gentlemanship, resignation, the futility of contentions, the strength of weakness and the importance of failure, as well as securing solace in misfortune by cultivating inward calm, laissez-faire, among others. The Tao became the metaphysical absolute, which only requires that each person be placed within its currents. Within this new quest for authentic living, the Chinese people found the power to live in a spontaneous fashion. Probably, the most famous statement of the freedom of the Taoist immortal is that ascribed to Lao Tzu where he said:

The ways of men are conditioned by those of heaven, the ways of heaven by those of the Tao, and the Tao came into being by itself

Taoism is a religion that claims that life is beautiful but a frightening series of transformations. By this, Taoism evokes a sense of awe and wonder which these transformations give to mankind. Taoists have been the best poets of nature as they seek to celebrate life with serene



resignation and hope:

Just surrender to the cycle of things. Give yourselves to the waves of the Great change. Neither happy nor yet afraid and when it is time to go, then simply go, without any unnecessary fuss.<sup>25</sup>

What sparked off as a philosophical school later gained prominence in China and beyond.

### The Decalogue in Christianity and Taoism Compared

Having examined the Ten Commandments in both religions, it is clear that both were given in different circumstances. The ten words in Christianity form both the important and fundamental code specifying unbroken relationship in the life of mankind with God, neighbours as well as the environment. This is solely met for the stiff necked people. In Taoism, the ten words are the will of heaven geared towards illuminating the mind of the masses on their conduct with mankind, vis-a-viz Tao, coupled with natural harmony. These ten words appeal solely to the ignorant masses.<sup>26</sup>

Both religions strongly believe that there is power responsible for the conveyance of the Ten Commandments. In Christianity, the Ten Commandments were revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai to the Israelites by God, while in Taoism, the Ten Commandments were revealed to Lao Tzu by Tao the Ultimate Reality or the will of heaven. This Ultimate Reality is strongly seen as the traditions of the ancients, although it is argued that everything is God and that by contemplation, man can first perceive and then become identical with God. But the Tao or the Ultimate Reality was spoken of as the image of that which existed before God.

In Taoism, the founder desired harmony between the cosmic order and the social order, so that justice and happiness would prevail among men in their larger groupings.<sup>27</sup> In Christianity, Moses and Jesus who expounded the essentials of the Decalogue gave God's

plan and standard for humanity with regard to the harmony in family relationship, essence of human life, sex, property, thought, conduct and nature.

Ten words in Christianity are spiritual principles and theological discipline which aid, in practical terms, mankind, while in Taoism, they are moral precepts, books of divine responses to the conduct of men; a sort of divine legislation regulating the universe. Thus, morals are the bedrock of all religions. Any religion void of morality is non-existent. These morals, supported by other spiritual guidelines, form religion. This aspect finds its place in both religions. The morals promoted by both religions, appear to be preserving life, keeping the essence of our being intact, and not injuring our material existence with things.<sup>28</sup> These morals, when fully harnessed as described by both religions are capable of making life simple, plain in which striving is discarded, cleverness abandoned, selfishness, covetousness, profit minimized and desires resulting in killing, stealing, conspiracy reduced.<sup>29</sup> In Taoism, these moral ideas are ethical lessons drawn from nature, which are the standard for Heaven and Earth coupled with man. It is, therefore, not out of place to assert that the ten commandments in Taoism and Christianity are eternal laws, universal principles of existence, absolute laws of harmonious living, which are *sine qua non* to the highest good, state of quietude, and all pervasiveness. These morals are a stronger fibre of Christian community and Chinese ethics even today.

Interestingly noted is the fact that the first four parts of the Christian law laid emphasis on obeisance to the 'I am that I am', God of the Christians. The need not to make graven image in heaven or earth, beyond and underneath was stressed. No one should serve any other God except Him. Abuse should not be rained upon the living God of the Bible was all emphasized in the first four parts of the Law. But, in *Tao-Te-Chin*, no emphasis was laid on the concept of living God in the biblical law-codes. Instead, humans



are urged to model themselves to 'that which is so by itself'.<sup>30</sup> The "that which is so by itself" may or may not represent the concept of God.

As a matter of fact, both Christianity and Taoism emphasise human relationships, social interaction, the dos and don'ts, social order, maintenance of social harmony and social well being in the community. In Taoism, it is stressed in the *Tao-Te-Ching* that Taoist books should often be recited and incenses be burnt in honour of the sages. However, it is only emphasized in Christianity that the book of the Law should not depart from our mouth, but it should be meditated upon both day and night.<sup>31</sup> The burning of incense to the sage is totally and conspicuously absent in the Law of Moses.

In respect of the Golden Rule, it is stated that a hand of fellowship should be extended to neighbours as should be expected of us. This is emphasized in the Bible. This Golden Rule of 'do to others what you wish yourself' was expressed in the Sermon on the Mount. In the beatitudes, Jesus urged humans to extend the frontiers of goodwill, or best wishes to fellow neighbours what you want them to do to you and wishing others good that you would wish yourself. The Golden Rule is fundamentally true for the realization of ethical goal in the human society. This is known as the "*Summum Bonum*", that is, the highest good in catholic theological parlance. The Golden Rule is a service to humanity as well as moral behaviour devoid of any self-regarding motive. Thus, it is a virtue that conduces the welfare of the world. The Golden Rule is the highest moral law that unremittingly work for the good of humankind. Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism grasped the Golden Rule in the *Tao-Te-Ching*. The principle of Golden Rule in the Taoist view is put thus:

Recompense injury with kindness (SBE, 39:106). To those who are good to me, I am good; and to those who are not good to me, I am also good. And thus all get to be good. To those who are not sincere with me,

I am also sincere. And thus all get to be sincere. (SBE 39:91)<sup>32</sup>

Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, rightly implored human beings to follow peace with nature and fellow human beings. He urged human beings to reward good with evils and extend goodness, truthfulness, piety, diligence to others who are plotting evil deeds. Similarly, human beings must be sincere to others even when they are insincere. This Golden Rule is not based on utilitarian formula of "the greatest good of the greatest number", rather human beings, the objects of divine mercy, could be the good of all, the weak being served at first. The Golden Rule is the principle that is regarded as the touchstone of all morality. Bharathi rightly observes that "he who is not prepared to order his life in unquestioning obedience to the laws of morality cannot be said to be a man in the full sense of the word".<sup>33</sup>

This Golden Rule, when faithfully and religiously applied in the order of the Christianity and Taoism, humanity will not only have outstanding moral conduct but also there will be a serene and peaceful genuine humaneness within the new era determined positively or negatively by the way the Golden Rule is viewed and sustained.

Looking critically at the relevance of the Ten words, it is pertinent to state that the spiritual principles and theological discipline are still abiding today in Judaism and Christianity. In other words, the Laws are not purely national and dispensational<sup>34</sup> in Christian church. Likewise in Taoism, the ten counsels are still vital and extant. Buttressing further Wing-Tsit Chan claims as follows:

The virtue of sages earlier or later was not different,...the Heaven of earlier sages was the same as the Heaven of later ages. Heaven does not change, and its material forces do not alter. All were endowed with the original material forces, which are pure and harmonious and are not different in earlier or later ages...<sup>35</sup>



Virtue is discussed in both religions. These virtues are at the same time the compositeness of human nature. They consist of humanity, propriety, faithfulness, righteousness, and wisdom, among others. These virtues are good and subsequently perpetuate the essence of human existence.

To this end, it is strongly objective, rational and realistic not to consider these moral virtues platitudes and vain talks, but as the pragmatic ideals that the law must be proclaimed to the people and be applicable to all. In spite of their suppression of the rights and desires of the people, they spiritually and unwittingly promote humanity and morality. This is the whole duty of mankind as both scriptures support these claims:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter:

Fear God, and keep His commandment:

for this is the whole duty of man (Ecclesiastes 12:13)

Hold onto the Tao of old in order  
to master the things of the Present.

From this, one may now the primeval  
beginning of the universe.

This is called the bond of Tao  
(Tao-Te-Ching 14)

### Conclusion

Our excursion so far has revealed the Semitic and the oriental "Ten Words" at a glance. It has been observed earlier that the 'Ten words' in Christianity are the urgent and ultimate expression of God's love towards His objects of divine mercy. God, the giver and the source of the Ten Commandments in this regard, expects His people to live with them so as to see the beautiful thrill of life now and hereafter.

In the same light, Taoism reacted and opposed diametrically to the injustices, suffering, devastation, ignorance and futility that bedevilled the Chinese. He posits that the perfect way to find everlasting peace and harmony was to get in touch with the traditions

of the ancient. These ancient traditions, as argued, are that 'everything is God and that by contemplation a man can first perceive and then become identical with God.'<sup>16</sup> In as much as Taoism never talks about the concept of God as in Christianity, there is the strong belief of the ethical norms which are channelled towards Tao- which is the will of heaven as well as a sort of divine legislation. This will make man to be at peace with the universe.

We must, however, be content with the fact that the second part of the Decalogue in the Semitics is well known outside Israel of today from the legal codes of ancient Western Asia which is generally considered as case law. The law follows the standard pattern of the Eastern treaties. To this end, it is strongly apposite, rational, and realistic not to think that these morals are abated and irrelevant to contemporary situation; rather, they are spiritually, theologically, sociologically and psychologically satisfying and relevant. This must be upheld as the whole duty of mankind.