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THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY: LESSON FOR THE NIGERIAN NATION

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Abstract

From the Biblical creation narratives, sanctity of human life is the major reason for human existence. The process of life is sustained through the means of procreation and preservation of the essence of human life. In point of fact, preservation and respect for sanctity of human life have become topical issues in human history. Among the Jews, there was oppression of the aliens, fatherless, shedding of innocent blood and injustice. This could be interpreted as disrespect for human life, irreverence, senseless killings, human sacrifices and other social maladies ravaging the society. This research work examined a critical study of the doctrine of sanctity of human life in Judaism and Christianity in relation to Nigerian situation. The research method adopted for the paper was historical and theological, because it addressed an age-long problem that is related to God, comparatively in Judaic and Christian perspectives. The study argues that human life is sacred from womb to tomb. And in that light, human life is expected to be treated with respect and reverence if society is to be safe for all.

Keywords: Sanctity of Human Life, Christianity, Judaism, and Nigeria

Introduction

The Bible, according to Judaism and Christianity is the inspired and inerrant written word of God, and the content is true in its entirety. Hence, it is the ultimate standard by which all other truth-claims are to be judged.¹ The Biblical doctrine of sanctity of life is found in the creation narrative, with the implication that life belongs to God. This is the foundation for all Christian ethics because it teaches that human lives have intrinsic and not merely instrumental value. Human beings have inestimable value in the sight of God, irrespective of gender, race, state of health, dependency or social and economic utility. It is simple and profound because human beings among the creatures of God have been

designed and created for the purpose of enjoying a personal relationship with the Creator of the universe. Humans are, according to the doctrine, the express image of God (*Imago Die*), made in His image and likeness. Humans are said to be a reflection of God's image here on earth with the totality of God's sovereignty and inestimable and irrefrangible rights and sanctity.

It is understandable why the Bible depicts human life as inviolable not only in its origin, but also in its termination. The Bible teaches that God determines the limits of human life. The book of Job states that "man's days are determined, and the number of his months is with thee (God), and thou have appointed his bounds that he cannot pass" (Job 14:5 RSV). Solomon also affirms that for each person, God determines a time to be born and a time to die (Ecc. 3:2 RSV). The biblical sanctity of life concept therefore denies humans the prerogative to terminate life. It is God that determines when life begins and when it ends.² Nigerian society can be seen to be full of evil and many vices, such as killing, murder, kidnapping, bombing, abortion, suicide, human sacrifice, and political hooliganism. Organized crime is also a thriving business which is apparently beyond Nigeria's government.³ This paper examines the age-old problems of sanctity of human life in Judaism and Christianity vis-à-vis the Nigerian situation.

The Old Testament Doctrine of Sanctity of Human Life

Sanctity of human life, as Gushee describes it, is the conviction that all human beings, at every stage of life, in every state of consciousness or self-awareness, of every race, ethnicity, level of intelligence, religion, language, nationality, gender, character, behaviour, physical ability; disability, potentials, class and social status of any particular quality of relationship to the viewing subject, are to be perceived as sacred, as persons of equal and immeasurable worth and of inviolable dignity.⁴ The meaning of sanctity of life is such that, human beings must be treated with dignity and accorded with respect commensurate with the elevated moral status, beginning with commitment to the preservation, protection, and flourishing of their lives.

The Old Testament (OT) concept of sanctity of life is considerably based on its implicit universality. The universality is taken for granted many times by those that are familiar with the Bible. But it is an enormously important dimension of OT creation theology and it should not be overlooked. This study considers the fact that all references to humanity in the early Genesis narratives are referenced to all humanity. God is quoted as saying, "Let us make man in our image." The *Imago Dei*,

as understood by theologians, such as Middleton, is the royal function or office of human beings as God representatives and agents in the world, given authorized power to share in God's rule over the earth's resources and creatures.⁵ Piper, a theologian, sees *Imago Dei* in humans as the whole person. The content of *Imago Dei* ranges from human reasoning through conscience, immortality, spirituality, freedom and personhood⁶. This explicitly includes "male and female" Gen. 1:26-27, and implicitly includes every male and female. The shedding of blood is banned in (Gen. 9:5-6 RSV) on the basis of human life belonging to God. No wonder, Brown describes such as the "democratization of royalty in the creation account"⁷, such that human beings are all kings. There is no hierarchy offered here between sub-categories of human beings; male or female, young or old, sick or well, friend or enemy, there is but one God who makes humanity, and this is a non-negotiable element of the biblical creation story⁸.

OT gives a balanced teaching on doctrine of life, as it teaches on power of creation and punishment. It acknowledges the power of God's compassion, care, and deliverance. God frowns at sacrilege and irreverence to human life and punishes disobedience. It also teaches that God does not only create human beings with dignity but also demonstrates dignity in His own deep compassion.⁹ God puts the first man and woman in the garden where their physical and aesthetic needs were met without arduous labour (Gen. 2:18-25). The two disobeyed God and shame came on the first couple¹⁰. After the pronouncement of curses (Gen. 3), God made a way out for them to cover their nakedness by making for them garments of skin (Gen. 3:21). This shows that human race under judgment receives divine protection, care, and mercy. Therefore, life in turn must be respected.

The study of the OT doctrine of sanctity of human life according to the traditions of Judaism is arranged in an ascending order of authority. That is: Law (Torah), Prophet (*Nebhiim*), and Writings (*Kethuviim*).¹¹ These three sections of the Bible were given canonical authority at different times and to different degrees.¹²

The Law and Sanctity of Life

The Law as received by Moses carries sacred authority that guides human life in contrast to ethics that is based on social power, human reason, or communal tradition. The transcendental nature of the Law means that everybody stands equal before Law that emanated from God¹³. This gives the understanding that rulers and those in power are not above

the Law, and that the dignity of all human beings, even those that are weak and without political power must be upheld. Consequently, courts of law are charged with enforcing and protecting God's ultimate authority over human life globally.

Human life is sacred, because from its beginning, it involves the creative action of God, and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can, in any circumstance, claim for himself or herself the right to destroy an innocent human being.¹⁴ The Bible presents the precept "you shall not kill" (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17) as a divine commandment that recognizes the values in humans and human life as inviolable or not to be violated. Historically, the Egyptians subjected the Israelites to inhuman treatment, including strenuous labour, killing of male folk among others. Thus, Egyptian task masters did not see sanctity of human life as anything because they were enjoying the behest of Pharaoh who ordered the inhuman treatment of the Israelites. After rescuing his people from Egyptian bondage through Moses, God made a covenant with the Jewish people and regarded them as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exo. 19: 6).

Prophets and Sanctity of Life

Prophets in Israel were specially anointed people. They did not come to office by inheritance or by being born into a prophetic tribe or family. Each Prophet was chosen and called directly by God.¹⁵ The Prophets were expected to draw people back to God and His truth. Their task involved warning people of the consequences of their action and a call to repentance. Sometimes, it was a message of God's plan for the future of His kingdom. God spoke His message of love for sinners through the Prophets and He also warned them of the consequences of their sins. As far as Christians are concerned, the heart of biblical message was God's promise of eternal redemption through the coming of the Messiah.¹⁶ Both Jews and Christians would agree that the words spoken by the Prophets were not their own but derived from the Lord.¹⁷

Before some "Prophets" appeared on the scene, Israel could look back on a long history with their God. Many generations such as Moses and Joshua had shared in writing the story of the Patriarchs, the revelation at Sinai, the journey into the land of Canaan, the time of the Judges, and of David. These had given literary forms to experiences with God which was almost confusing in the variety of form and background. The tremendous religious heritage of these experiences was a point of

reference which the prophets could use when talking to their contemporaries. But it had already become somewhat strange to these contemporaries because of manifold political and religious influences to which they were exposed.

The emergence of the Prophets was closely connected with four features of a long standing tradition. The first feature was the degeneracy of Yahwehism because of syncretism. The second feature was of political nature, the systematic emancipation from Yahweh and His offer of protection brought about by the formation of the state, made Israel to throw off Yahweh's guiding hand and became politically autonomous. The third feature laid in the economic and social developments which both kingdoms had undergone. The state with its taxation and its civil service had brought a further disintegration of the old social order with the tribe of Israel. In this connection, the transference of the focal point of the economy to the town was a particular blow. The big landowners, who already lived in the towns gained control of the country people, and the result was severe social injustice. Due to the burden of taxation, the peasant and economically weak became less and less able to remain a free people in their own land. Ownership of land came more into the hands of a small number of capitalist town dwellers.¹⁸ The country people became increasingly proletariat (Isa. 5:8; Micah 2:1).

The situation in Nigerian society today is not of any difference from what obtained in Israel then. The political and economic powers are in the hands of a few. The rate of social injustice and abuse of power is so big that the weak and the less privileged are at the mercy of God. In Israel then, the Prophets' messages had some common factors and characteristics. One of their characteristics is that, they had their roots in the basic sacral traditions of the early period because without that, their offices will not be conceivable. They worked using the most extraordinary means to convince their hearers of the binding force and undiminished validity of ordinances from which the latter had long broken away, and of which they were perhaps indeed no longer aware.¹⁹ A Prophet therefore brought his message in a way to inspire the people to turn from their sins and live truly for God, because their ministry is carried out in a politically, socially, morally, and spiritually chaotic era.²⁰

Yesterday and today, the functions and characteristics of Prophets are expected to be the same. It is their duty to deliver the truth and talk of imminent danger if the society and the people in authority fail to conform to the message of Jehovah. It is disheartening that in Nigerian society today, false Prophets and Priests have taken to their own ways declaring

what will benefit and promote their selfish interests. It takes the spirit of discernment to differentiate the Prophets of God from false prophets.

The Writings and Sanctity of Life

The Writings give the Biblical testimonies that God made men and women with a uniqueness that was not present in other things He created. Men and women are created in God's image and it is only human beings that have this special honour, privilege and uniqueness among creations.²¹ The Psalmist declares that, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139). The Psalmist's declaration shows that human beings are not product of chance but specially created. The mode of human creation shows the uniqueness, no wonder, God takes every act of violence fellow human beings with seriousness.

The Bible does not view procreation as occurring independently of God's ongoing creative work. Psalm 139:13-16 asserts that God creates human life in the womb, when David says, "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb; your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written the days that were formed for me". David's use of personal pronouns implies his humanness and personhood as a foetus. Psalm 139.15 metaphorically compares a mother's womb to the depth of the earth when David sings, "I was being made in secret, intricately woven". This metaphor points to the creation account where God breathes into the dust of the earth a "living soul."²² The Psalmist expresses God's value of humanity in Psalm 8: 3-6. Looking – up to heavens, a person appears dwarfed by creation's grandeur. But looking down from God's perspectives, humans are kings, exercising a royal dominion over the entire creation²³ (Gen. 1: 28). The position of David the Psalmist on sanctity of human life can be seen in the account of the killing of King Saul at mount Gilbo by a man who came from Saul's camp. Despite the fact that it was King Saul who requested the man to kill him, so as not to die in the hands of his enemies (II Sam. 1-16), the killing did not go down well with David. He ordered the man to be killed for killing the anointed man of God despite that Saul has been rejected by God. It cannot be said that the doctrine of sanctity of human life was completely adhered to among the Jews. The OT accounts testify to the level of oppression of the poor by the rich, injustice levelled on the common people, and the blood of the innocent was being shed. There was a high level of conspiracy, such as the killing of Naboth by King Ahab and his wife over his vineyard.

Assyria and Babylon conquered, destroyed, and divided the tribes of the Jewish people which had been weakened by the nation's division into northern (Israel) and southern territories after King Solomon's death in the tenth Century B.C. As a matter of fact, sanctity of human life was violated in the instances as hundreds of thousands of human lives were sent to their early graves consequent upon the conquests and destructions. The Hebrew Bible interprets the destruction and exile of the Jewish nation as God's condemnation for worshipping of other gods, acting wickedly, and breaching the oath that God had made with the Jews centuries before²⁴ (2 Kings 17: 7-20).

The Bible gives the understanding that God is the author of life; that He formed human's body out of the dust of the ground and breathed into the nostril the breath of life. The book of Job (33:4) shows that, it is only God that gives life and He only holds the prerogative to take it. This is to say that the Writings condemn unlawful killing in its entirety. Death is sure to come, as it is the tremendous door way through which humans pass into one of the two eternal destinies: heaven or hell. God is the only One who has the right to open that door.²⁵

Job is an example of a man that understands God in all areas of life. Disasters struck him. Wave after wave of devastation flooded over him. He lost everything in a day, but through it all, he responds to all the disheartening news²⁶ with:

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1 : 21).

The life of Job testifies that Sanctity of Life can only be meaningful if one comes to the realization that God owns all. If humans will hold unto this, the attitude of bombing, kidnapping, raping, ritual killings, killing of innocent people, and other anomalies and immoralities will reduce and a new dawn of a society with less criminals and crime will be born. Job's concept of sanctity of life could be adopted because he submits all to the Creator and giver of life. He compared himself to his servants when he asked: "did not He who made me in the womb make them?" Did not the same One form us both within our mothers?"(31:15). He went further to declare that God "shows no partiality to princes, nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of His hands" (34: 19).

The foregoing comments of David and Job about sanctity of human life lend credence to the fact that societies will be worthy of living

and life will be positive if the leaders and the rich can come to the realization that all human beings exist by His providence.

New Testament Doctrine of Sanctity of Life

The New Testament (NT) affirms the immeasurable values of human life that run counter to endangering human life, threatening human life, or human being at the mercy of others, oppression, injustice, etc.²⁷ Below is the holistic framework within which all of the problematic ethical matters are viewed collectively. It is not equivocal if one states that NT teaches love, unity, justice, as “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

The NT offers various descriptions and glimpses into the growth of communities of Christian faith of astonishingly expansive love. From an initial core group of discouraged Jewish followers, huddling in the ashes of crucifixion, the Church grew exponentially across racial ethnic, national and linguistic lines. The scattered Christians across the known world that form communities with vision were sent and empowered by the Holy Spirit.²⁸ Therefore, they must be treated with reverence commensurate with this elevated moral status. It has to start with the commitment to the preservation, protection and flourishing of lives.²⁹ Without any prejudice, the NT offers overwhelmingly important resources for the above conviction. This could be authenticated from John 3: 16 that illustrates love of God for the whole world.

Jesus’ Teaching on Sanctity of Life

It should be noted that before the coming of Jesus, the bias to the poor which Jesus preached against was nothing new in Judaism. The poor were so greatly disadvantaged from the mere fact of their poverty, that “the God of Israel” extended His special protection to them in order to avenge injustices to them. Judges in Israel were directed to uphold the cause of the poor and those without protectors, including widows, orphans, and strangers.³⁰

The environment where Jesus found Himself was a place where the lowly and weak were people that had no status, voice or rights. What would have been regarded as right by the ordinary individual were trampled upon. This was the typical situation of the Jewish society in Palestine then.³¹ From the economic point of view, there were only three groups: the rich, the social outcast, and the poor. The poor and social outcast classes were about ninety-five percent of the population and they

were predominantly found in the rural areas as hired labourers, peasant farmers, small scale artisans, fishermen, and beggars. The social outcasts were hired shepherds, tanners, prostitutes, the sick, and the demon-possessed. These were the types of social untouchables that were collectively called sinners (Luke 15: 1), while the remaining five percent were the rich found in the cities.³² The rich men and women comprised of the wealthy high priestly clans, the remnant of the older Jewish aristocracy, and prosperous merchants. The rich were despised by the poor because politically the poor had no right and power concerning the political destiny of the land. Religiously, the poor were regarded as ignorant and uninformed as far as legal prescriptions (about prayer and tithe) were concerned.³³

The poor so-described were the particular set of people that Jesus reached out to because He was part of them (Luke 15: 2). He stepped into the void of their existence as the Protector and Comforter of the weak (Luke 4: 18). He gave new meaning to their lives, filling them with self-esteem, lifting them up to where they belonged and gathering them into the fold of God's people (Mat. 5: 3-10; Lk. 18: 9-14; Mt.21: 31-32). Another area by which Jesus could be seen teaching sanctity of life was in the area of how he recognized the children by elevating them from the status of potential to full believing members of Israel. This is because in the past, children were not reckoned as worthy of the kingdom of God since it could not be expected of them to fulfill the requirements of the law. That position then left them to the mercy of their father meditating for them. They were restricted to the so-called women's court. With the teaching of Jesus, women and children were included even in the national assembly by Christians.³⁴ In the middle of the first century A.D., several Jews found themselves increasingly in friction with Rome. Rebellion followed. The first Jewish War lasted from AD 66-70. It was a watershed moment in Jewish history during the early Church. The Romans crushed the Jews and destroyed the Jewish temple. Seventy years after the destruction of the temple, the Jewish rabbled again, which was described as the second Jewish war (132-35 AD). Hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed or enslaved. Moreover, the Romans headed by Emperor Hadrian (76-138AD) eradicated all Jewish presence from Jerusalem by exiling Jews on penalty of death, prohibiting circumcision, burning Jewish scrolls, and renaming the areas.³⁵

Lessons for the Nigerian Nation

Nothing else can matter if human life does not matter. As Abogunrin rightly notes, even a growing economy counts for nothing if human life does not matter.³⁶ In religion and ethics, sanctity and inviolability of human life is a principle of implied protection. It is widely acknowledged that human life is seriously endangered in Nigeria. During this period (2019/2020) Nigerians are facing security challenges arising from war against Boko Haram, mushrooming armed bandits due to mass impoverishment, injustices of financial corruption, and other related evils cannot be over emphasized. There s the report of a landlord in Idumota, Lagos Island, who poured petrol on a tenant and set him ablaze as a result of a misunderstanding that had already been settled but was not over with the landlord. As the Tenant struggled to put out the flames, the landlord pushed him down from the top floor of the three storey building and landed with a thud as the flames ate through his body.³⁷ All of that and more are happening notwithstanding Christian doctrines and other religious teachings that are prevalent. In some instances, criminals are proclaimed heroes and worshiped, while the influential ones are treated like sacred cows.³⁸ The current situation in Nigerian society is such that sanctity of human life is seriously endangered, what with armed robbery, kidnapping, rape, senseless killings, human sacrifice, ritual murder, communal and religiously induced clashes, etc.³⁹

With specific reference to the Boko Haram insurgency and the Fulani herdsmen terrorists raping, killing and sacking agrarian communities, .Kukah remarks that the two forces have become the subject of opprobrium, ridicule, defamation, calumny and obloquy. As Kukah describes it, the northeast and northwest have become one large grave yard, a valley of dry bones, and the nastiest and most brutish part of Nigeria. On a general note, the nation is plagued with high indices of dehumanization, poverty, squalor, and destitution.⁴⁰ Thus, the travail of social dilemma as couched in the lack of respect for the sanctity of human life in Nigeria lends credence to the parochial interests of the northern hegemony and the collaborators, nationwide. The quest for sanctity of human life has been rendered more arduous by the sector of the elite and other vested interests who manipulate Nigeria's religious and ethnic differences for the attainment of their narrow selfish ends.⁴¹ The level of insecurity and lack of respect for human life in Nigeria is better imagined than narrated.

As it were, for a people who profess much love for God and equal affection for religion, the near total disregard for human life is a sickening contradictory irony. Through numerous examples of murder and killing, it is indeed obvious that lives of the weak and vulnerable are not valued to any appreciable degree. In most cases, the poor are not recognized as people but are routinely robbed of their human rights and dignity. The unwholesome slaughter of fellow human beings has shown that anything can be used as a weapon for extermination. To freely kill a fellow human being is unarguably the most atrocious crime that can be committed and it is reducing Nigeria to the level of animal kingdom.⁴²

The scenario painted above has been creating atmospheres of tension among the common people and showed that sanctity of human life is at stake. The situation has equally beclouded the nation's international status with the negative image of being a nation lacking in security and full of criminals.

Conclusion

In the light of the above, Judaism and Christianity believe that life is given by God and it is only God that has the power to take it. That means that human being has inestimable values in the sight of God, irrespective of gender, race, and state of health. As such, human beings are not expected to be dehumanized, murdered, raped and kidnapped. The study likewise revealed that when love, unity, and concern are shown, and put into action in Nigeria, there would be peaceful, adorable, and sanctified society where life is seen as worthy of reverence. All of that will be realized if the scriptures on sanctity of life are followed. Human beings at every stage of life will be perceived rightly as sacred and of inviolable dignity.

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