

A Comparative Study of Yoruba Traditional Religion and Morality Differentia

Wòle Olomu
Lagos State University

Abstract

Yoruba cultural notions such as *ẹ̀sìn nìwà iwà lẹ̀sìn* 'religion is morality, morality is religion' often equate Yoruba traditional religion with morality, which may not necessarily be a truism. This paper reviews the reasons underlying such thinking using philosophical theology to provide concise clarifications on the interface between cultural and religious beliefs. Data for the study is sourced from Daramola and Jeje (1975), Aderibigbe and Basua (1999), Adéoyè (1985), and other relevant textual materials. The paper does not argue that religion is superior to morality or vice versa. Rather, it argues that both concepts are not necessarily the same. It establishes that the two concepts can be independent of each other and can be used to proffer solutions to the challenges of multi-ethnic societies.

Keywords: Comparative differentia, Morality, Religion, Yoruba tradition, philosophy

Wòle Olomu
Department of African Languages,
Literatures & Communication Arts
Lagos State University, Ojo Lagos, Nigeria
Phone: +2349053501111; E-mail: oyewole.olomu@lasu.edu.ng

Introduction

Re-appraising the differential of traditional religion and morality for a corrupt world in search of just, peaceful and egalitarian society cannot be over emphasized. This is structured in three parts. The first explored the reality and significance of religion and morality on human lives and its potentials to influence peace and violence in the society. It also discusses ideas relating to religion and morality such as religion, man, and society; the epistemological, psychological and logical perspective of the problem of relationship between religion and morality that has led to series of interpretations in which one is said to be dependent on the other, e.g. the notion of *ìwà lèsin, èsin nìwà* ‘morality is religion, religion is morality’.

The second part introduces element of Yorùbá traditional religion that have sustained and inherent propensity of bringing peace to the society during the pre-colonial Africa. The essence of morality is also examined alongside those qualities of mankind that concerns their living together in peace and unity. Yorùbá traditional devotees have never initiated a war or involve in corrupt practice for commercial purposes in spreading their faith. People of religions of Abrahamic origin that have history of preaching against traditional religion still consult Ifá for direction on how to live a good life.

The third part tries to co-relate the relationship between religion and morality, the similarities and the differences. It explores concepts of religion as being dependent on morality and vice versa.

Theoretical Framework

Philosophical theology theory seeks to make religion belief more reasonable without necessarily involving deductive and inductive reasoning to prove its content of faith like natural theology. According to Macquarrie (1977) as reported in Ogungbemi (2016:45), philosophical theory seeks to show us the logic of theological discovery, or perhaps whether it has a coherent logic at all. Only when these matters have been explored can we judge the claims of theology as having reliable ground for assessing whether it does in fact speak of matters that are of paramount importance. The issue here is that philosophical theology is descriptive and its aim is to present

theological beliefs in a logical and coherent language. In other words, philosophical theology is the arsenal which propagate the content of religious belief because of its relevance to human existential experience of faith and moral values. It seems that using theology is the most appropriate way to explain theological conundrum.

It is necessary to say that the approach adopted for this study is eclectic for obvious reasons, as the number of divinities in traditional Yorùbá religion is rather speculative and perhaps vague; 200, 201, 400, 600, 1060, and 1440. Adeleke (2012:62), Adeoye (1985:8) even affirm that it is pretty difficult to see any experienced ifá priest who can recall all the names of Yorùbá divinities that are the basis of Yorùbá traditional religion.

Overview of Issues

The general concept of morality contains belief about the nature of man, ideas, what is good or worthy of pursuit for its own sake, rules laying down what ought to be done and what ought not to be done and also, motive that incline us to choose the right or the wrong course. Thus, morality is inclined to lay more emphasis on rules than ideas. It is therefore concerned with relations between men and how they ought to behave towards one another based on general rules governing relations between man and man in the society. According to Adéoyè (1985:9), “the province of morality is limited to “those qualities of mankind that concern their living together in peace and unity”.

The explanation given by thinkers on religion can be broadly divided between those that were friendly to religion and those that were hostile. Kant’s thinking epitomized the view of those who believe that religion and morality are mutually necessary. But he was willing to criticize religious excesses and fanaticism. Later, he was convinced that belief in *God* who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked was necessary to ensure full moral commitment.

In the hands of thinkers less friendly to religion, they claim that religion involves the assumption of a morally governed world, which became the simpler assertion that religion represents the effort to morality by adding to the ordinary social sanctions a concocted series of super-naturally mediated reward and punishment. Since

morality could be understood in human or rational terms, it seemed to follow that the use of religious sanctions to support moral conduct was appropriate only where primitive or Morality bankrupt (those with propensity to do evil thing) persons were involved. By this reason, religion was at best useful during an early stage of human cultural evolution where it provided the matrix for moral concepts; in time, and was bound to be replaced by more rational modes of thoughts.

Some thinkers doubt the usefulness of religion in any context. A social critic like Karl Marx, for example, viewed religion as the effort to support the moral norms and codes of privileged strata and ruling groups, while also masking worldly wrongs with the false allure of other worldly rewards. Marx did not usually justify this view and his opposition to religion in moral terms. Indeed, he was equally critical of the moral systems and moral philosophies of his days, believing that they too were deeply involved and compromised by the social and material conditions of the era. Yet in many ways, his attitude towards religion is similar to that of the critical enlightened philosopher who argues that religion is to be rejected because it is ultimately opposed to the development of human freedom and moral responsibility.

Yorùbá Traditional Religion

Yorùbá traditional religion is the indigenous religion of the people of Yorùbá extraction. It was believed to have been handed down from *Olódùmarè* to over 1000 *Òrìṣà* (divinities) with each been assigned different portfolios and it has been practiced from generation to generation. According to Basua (1999:14),

Yorùbá Indigenous religion is an African Traditional religion, it is not the religion preached to them but rather a part of their heritage which evolved with them over the years. They are born and converted in to it.

Yorùbá traditional religion has no founder; it rather grew spontaneously out of the culture of the people. Yorùbá traditional

religion referred to as Yorùbá indigenous religion, which Unah calls Godianism has no sacred scripture, gigantesque edifice like mosque, Churches. Such absence does not mean that the Yorùbá religion cannot be known. The religious ideas exist largely in oral form. The oral forms include myths, proverbs, sayings, liturgy and so on, and worship mode are mostly in festival and divination form as ministers to *Olódùmarè* the Supreme Being and each are assigned different portfolios. Like other religions that have been considered, Yorùbá traditional religion is a monotheistic religion but it is a liberal one because it allows God to be approached through subordinate beings who are his servants.

The Yorùbá hold the idea that *Olódùmarè* is the core and cohesive factor of religion. He is the creator and sustainer of the Universe, Supreme, and Unique, without equal. Yorùbá expresses the attribute of *Olódùmarè* in the name given to their children. *Olódùmarè* is Great, *Olóruntóbi*, mercy of God *Áánú Olúwa*, and God exists *Olórunnbe* and so on. *Olódùmarè* is also a transcendental in Yorùbá traditional religion, which is why no statues or portrait of him is ever made.

The second belief is in divinities. These divinities stand next rank to the Supreme Being, which means that they occupy the place of angels in Christianity and Islam. It was gathered that there are three categories of divinities. The first are the primordial divinities, such as *Obàtálá*, *Òrúnmilà*, *Orí*, they are those believed to be with the Supreme Being from the creation of the universe. The second are the deified ancestors, those human beings who, after their death, were deified as goods. Such *Ògún*, *Sàngó*, *Oya*, *Èlà*, *Obàtálá*, *Òrúnmilà*, *Agemo*, *Èṣù*, *Ọṣanyìn* and so on. The third category are those associated with hills, mountains, rivers, rocks, brooks, thick forest such as *Olókun*, *Ọṣun*, *Yemoja*, *Òriṣà oko*, *Òkè Ibàdàn*, etc. (Dáramólá & Jéjé, 1985). These divinities are regarded as intermediaries between the deity and men. This explains why *Olódùmarè* is not worshiped directly, nevertheless, he is prayed to directly everyday by the Yorùbá who thank him for protection and favour received.

The third belief of the African is in the spirits which usually make natural phenomenon their abode. Some of them have abstract

power, which take on human shape. Some of the spirits of the dead people who were not properly buried and as a result roam about as wandering spirits. Objects such as trees and animals are believed to be inhabited by spirits and such objects are therefore regarded as sacred. This notion is still alive with the Yorùbá people. A recent example is the report by Punch Newspaper on 6th June, 2017 about the controversy that surrounded cutting down of a tree that reportedly obstructed road construction at Ìkéré Èkìtì by Governor Ayòdélé Fáyòṣe. The action was vehemently opposed by the king and the Youth in the community. To *Olúkèrè* of *Ìkéré Ọba Ọbasoyin*, “Cutting down tree amounts to killing him because bunches of the tree is cut down only when the king dies”.

The Yorùbá also belief in ancestors. Ancestors are given different names by different tribes throughout the continent. The Yorùbá call them ‘*Baba Nlá*’, the Ashanti call them *Samanfo*, the Ewe call them ‘*Neshuwe*’, while the Igbo call them ‘*Ndichie*’. The ancestor, though no longer visible but now spirit still play prominent role in the running of the affairs of the family to which they belonged while they were on earth. African go to ancestral shrines to have communion and communication with their ancestors, to ask for and to appease from a wrong done, to thank them for the past gifts. In the Yorùbá religion, it is not everyone that becomes an ancestor but they that live good lives and were given decent burial. They are venerated and prayed to by members of their families.

The Yorùbá also believe in sacrifice, charms and medicine. Sacrifice, charms and medicine are not spirits but Africans believe that they can be used by men to conquer his environment. Oral poetry element like *àásán*, *àlùwó*, *Èpè*, *ògèdè*, *ofò*, *mádààrikàn*, *àṣe* charms, are used as protection in the African societies against (evil forces) like witchcraft, sickness & death Yorùbá equally uses charms to harm other either to fight against their enemies or to gain advantage over other people.

Yorùbá traditional religion believes that man is composed of three element namely the soul, spirit and body. When a person die, the soul goes to the spiritual world, though reincarnation may connote different things to different people in different cultures but the central

point is the same as it is centres on body, soul, spirit and immortality. To Yorùbá, majority of the people believe in reincarnation while western and eastern world religion fanatics are trying to persuade them not to buy the idea of reincarnation as they say that it is the idea of devil or Satan for instance the Christian extremist will quote from the bible that “it is giving unto man to die only once and after judgment” this negates the idea of rebirth to this kind of people. Yorùbá traditional belief on reincarnation is firmly rooted it cannot be erased, their belief in this phenomenon is that human being don’t die but reincarnate, some in to new born child while other come to life in other place without being recognized, the body decays while the spirit comes back and is reincarnated within the family circle. When a dead relative comes back in the form of a newly born child in the Yorùbá society, the child is given a name to show such as “*Babátúndé*, *Babade*’ (father has come back) and “*Yétúndé*, *Iyabọ*” (mother has come back).

Finally, religion is centered on God consciousness, who sees all, knows all even those things that are done in secret. He never fails to render justice; the evil doer cannot escape the justice of God. Apart from stealing, killing adultery, telling lies, the Yorùbá culture frown at disrespects for elders and making jest of disabled people. This religion encourages hard work compassion, kindness, generosity, hospitality humility, honesty and so on.

The Essence of Morality

Longman dictionary of contemporary English asserts that morality is derived from a Latin word ‘*mores*’ which means manners, moral and customs. It is a normative science that tells us what men actually do and actually think is right to do, but what men ought to do and what they ought to think it right to do. In this view, morality has to do with the standard by which we judge action to be right and wrong, good and bad. In an ethical term, morality has a special aim of guiding people in practice of right conduct or the act of living the good life. Yorùbá people have deep sense of right and wrong and this moral sense has produced customs that guides people’s behavior. In every human society there are behaviors that are considered good and

reprehensible. These moral values often influenced the general conduct of people in the society. Olomu (2021:130) states that:

Good morals (*Ìwà*) are regarded by the Yorùbá as one of the aims of human existence, every individual must strive to have morals in order to live a good life.

In *Odù Ọsẹ̀ Méjì* of Ifá literary Corpus, *Ọ̀rúnmilà* emphasises the importance of good morals (*Ìwà ọ̀mọ̀lúàbí*) thus:

Ọ̀sẹ̀ Méjì

Inú bíbí ò da nńkan
Sùúrù baba iwà,
Àgbà tó ní sùúrù
Ohun gbogbo ló ní
A díá fún orí
A bù fún iwà
Tiwà nikan ló sòro
Orí kan ò burú nílẹ̀ Ifẹ̀

(indignation does not bring forth anything good;
Patience is the best character
A patient elder has everything
Divination was performed for head and moral
Morality is the difficult thing
No destiny is bad in pristine Ifẹ̀)

(Abímbọ́lá, 1975)

Various moral rules and norms are laid down by *Ifá* for Yoruba to diligently follow. The ultimate goal, harmony, pleasure, happiness are examples of what is arrive at when people are morally upright which leads ultimately to satisfaction. Every individual in each society is expected to be morally upright for the society to be in peace and harmony.

Relationship between Religion and Morality

The relationship of morality to religion is a subject that has been widely and frequently discussed. That morality has its root in religion is a major misconception. One of the significance of religion is that it teaches and encourages morality. It sees to it that people lives moral life, the Christians emphasizes it and so also other religions. Every religion has its own way of teaching morality and this has led many people to believe that morality is based on religion and there can be no morality without religion.

Before actually looking into the misconception that has been stated, it will be of immense necessity to state the relationship between the two concepts, morality and religion. The similarities between the two concepts as well as the differences will be considered. In comparing religion to morality from a view point of striving towards the same goal, Adéribigbé (1998:17) said that ‘moral doctrines have had a very central place in religion, that is, religion can hardly be concept without ethical groundings’. All known religions of the world depict ethical grounds which guide both membership and conducts of followers who belong to particular religions. Thus there exist Christian ethics, Islam ethics, and Traditional religion ethics, et

There is always the setting down of rules which the members must live by and this is done in order to stipulate the type of behavior expected of members. Based on this, Adéribigbé therefore opined that, “religion may be one with ethics which main preoccupation may be seen primarily as that of cultivation of the attitude of the obedience to given rules and regulations, and the attitudes of always choosing the right from the wrong.

Morality has a very central place in religion. In fact, religion cannot be conceptualised without moral grounds. According to Kant, “religion and morality are identical”. Apart from the religious ethics, religions of the world are built on absolute demand of obedience from followers. Thus, there is a laid down law by which members must live.

Having considered the area of agreement, it will be necessary to discuss their conceptual differences. Moral philosophers opine that ethics could be undertaken with the notion that God is dispensable,

which shows that the relationship between God and morality is an independent one. Therefore an action is not morally right because God approves it but God approves of it because it is morally right. One can then say along with Adéríbigbé that, ‘the moral rightness or wrongness of an action is independent of God’. On the other hand, religion certainly would not agree with the position but will rather say that what is right or wrong is so because God ordained it.

Secondly, religion sees the Supreme Being as the most essential thing in man’s existence but morality sees man as the final determining factor. Thirdly, perhaps most significantly moralist demand for man’s goodness is strictly for the betterment of man in relation to making humanity and the world he inhabits a mere human and better place to live in. While on the contrary, humanity and the world are secondary for the religionist, whose demand is for man to be good, so as to create reunion with the Supreme being his Creator.

Finally, the religionist stress that since God, the Supreme Being is good and moral then the commandment lay down will be strictly followed in order to attain such morals. This cannot work because man being a self-centered person will want to do things that would bring him happiness or pleasure even if he has to deviate or violate the commandment. Therefore religion has not done enough to put moral values in man but rather attainment of morality is determined by man’s intellect in achieving moral standards.

Religion Dependent on Morality

Every religion teaches morality, it is a major part of the religion teachings. Everyone that is religious ought to be moral even though not all of them are highly moral but moralist needs not to be religious. Morality can stand on its own without religion but religion cannot exist without morality; therefore morality aids religion in order for it to be termed as religion.

According to *Encyclopedia of philosophy*, “rather than morality emerging from religion, it seems that religion look on a morality quality” From this, one can deduce that it is actually religion that use moral quality to keep its members in check. All the moral qualities such as justice, mercy and love, which had been in existence,

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are being attributed to God as its attributes and this is the reason why many people think that morality emerged from religion. In the same vein, the creeds and rituals which are the essence of religion have been manipulated into conformity with moral development. This shows that the religion norms that were laid are actually in line with moral norms and for this reason it was said “religion had already been to a large extent moralized”

Morality, it has been said, is the basis of religion and it is clear that the rule of morality as laid down in the religions of the world are basically the same. If the basis or foundation of a structure is removed, then the structure will collapse. Therefore, in like manner, if morality is removed from religion then it will collapse and disintegrate. Therefore any religion that has no moral basis cannot be regarded as religious.

Another way in which morality aids religion is that moral laws are taught in all religions. These moral laws such as humility, love, kindness and so on are taught in religions so that those claims to be religious will also be highly moral in their dealing with fellow humans. Religion therefore teaches and encourages morality so that the society can be sanitized. Many people who practice no religion tend to live exemplary life of high moral standard; therefore religion is just one of the perspectives from which morality can be revived and not the ultimate: morality is a necessary condition for true worship. According to Omeregbe, (1998:27),

religion is the servant of morality and it would have no reason to exist if it fails to promote the cause of morality. Morality therefore helps religion to keep existing as an institution. Since morality is concerned with goodness, religion needs it to regard as religious; it is the judge of religion.

From the view of Okilo (1995:52), religious history confirms that the founder of the great world religions such as Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam proclaims great moral and religious truths...” Those truths were not confined to any particular

place for people but it was universal. Even though they were proclaimed at different places and time through different languages their meaning still remain the same.

Morality Non-Dependent on Religion

It has often been said that morality is an off shoot of religion that is morality is dependent on religion. Is it reality true? The contention that no morality, no religion is disputable because not all moralists are religious and vice versa. Is morality based on religion? Is it dependent on it? Several writers have concerned themselves with this problem.

According to Omoregbe (1996:21), he rejected the view that morality and religion are inseparable. It is often believed there can be no morality without religion. Therefore, he said that any good man is a religious man even if the person in question is an atheist.

Religion and morality are not synonymous. Omoregbe further said, that morality is independent of religion and therefore does not need religion to exist not that does man need to practice religion in order to be moral. On the other hand, it is religion that needs morality in order for it to gain acceptance, morality does not need religion. Many people who do not practice one religion or the other tend to be morally upright than those who claim to religious.

In relation to morality, Omoregbe asserts that, “religion is simply a perspective one of the several perspectives from which morality can be viewed. In other words, morality can be viewed from difference perspective. Some men view and practice morality from the religious perspective and they attain a high moral standard than the so called religious ones.

From the view of Unah (1995:42), morality is regarded to be the fruit of religion. What this mean is that morality gave birth to religion. In other words, “morality is the mother of religion”. Even though morality and religion are intertwined, they are separate and distinct.

The view that morality is an off shoot of religion and wholly dependent on it is not limited to anthropologists but cuts across the whole world through Western Europe. For instance, Christianity emanates from two traditions, the Hebrew and the Greek in which

religion and morality are intertwined. It is therefore not surprising that both concepts are inseparable as It is one thing to say that religion affects moral character, quite another to say that religion either prescribe or sanction moral duties.

Conclusion

This paper has examined various definitions of religion, comparative religion on morality and discovered that religion and man in the society could hardly be divorced because man is a spiritual being. In everything he does, he tends to be religious; in the field, at home and among friends, he displays his spiritual inclinations.

The study also considered the essence of morality, morality and society, and the universality of morality. It concluded that it is critical that humans should act morally, because it is a sign of being virtuous, and the virtuous man is a wise man with foresight.

On the relationship between morality and religion it submitted that though both concepts could be intertwined, morality can exist without religion but religion needs morality to be accepted and practiced. Morality helps religion in the sense that religion puts on moral qualities just as religion emphasises love, kindness, justice, etc., which are moral virtues.

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