



Modern Trends in the Teaching of African Religion (AFREL) in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Many had argued that African religion would decline with the advent of secular development. Instead, African Religion has arguably surged in numbers as well as visibility in Africa, the Caribbean, the United States of America, Latin America, Britain and the entire world. How does a discourse on the complementary roles of science and African Religion in promoting social transformation begin? What are the concrete areas of human activity that can be most meaningfully affected? What should be the modern trends in the teaching of African Religion in the 21st century? It is suggested that the discourse should focus on the process of capacity building in the areas of education, economic activity and organization, technological development, good governance, justice and to acknowledge that humanity is a single people with a common destiny and understand that development must cease to be something one does for others. The task of erecting a peaceful and just global society must involve all members of the human family. If the capacities of the world's Peoples are to reach the levels needed to address the complex requirements of the present hour, the resources of both reason and faith will have to be tapped. A vision is needed, and the proper vision will never take shape if the spiritual heritage of the human race continues to be regarded as tangential to development policy and programs. Therefore, the modern trends in the teaching of AFREL in the 21st century must be holistic, comparative, dialogically coordinated and dynamic to meet the internet age.

INTRODUCTION

Humanity as a whole is dynamic. Societies and Religion cannot be static, even though changes may not come in any perceptible form for a long time; this is particularly true of African Societies, as well as the African Religion (AFREL). From the introduction of the Atlantic Slave Trade to the 21st Century, great changes have taken place in Africa and these changes have affected the Africans within and outside the continent socially, morally, politically, spiritually and educationally. Religion has an organic life of its own which results from divine activities and humanity's response. It is a life

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which comes into being and grows in the atmosphere, not only of humanity's response, but also of the one's constancy in loyalty to an accepted faith. Without this loyalty on humanity's part, the manifestations of divine creative and saving activity will be short-circuited and religion will thus become ineffectual or a thing of the past. It has always been the predicament of religion that whereas the activity of the living God is constant, humanity's loyalty can become uncertain in consequence of several factors the vagaries of humanity's mind; the phenomena of change which may mean upheaval and disruption with the consequence of partial or total destruction; and of course death.

One of two things has happened to humanity's religion in any given situation: modification with adaptation, or extinction. The first may be said to have been the fate of religion throughout the world, of any religion, including AFREL. There is no living religion throughout the world that has not taken into itself elements from other religion--cultures. Influences from other cultures and contacts with immigrant religions have brought, not only changes in the complexion of religion, but also modification of its tenets. This is precisely what has happened to Africans and their religion among their kit and kin in the continent in Diaspora (the Americas), in Latin America and the Caribbean. The most particular of religions like Islam and Christianity, have not been able to escape this factor they have been forced by the nature of things to give and take elements to and from even those religions which they regard as their enemies or rivals.

As for the fact of extinction, it is well known that the religions of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, are no longer in existence today, all that remains of them is what can be read from ruins and monuments or observed as having been absorbed into the total character of the ancient races or taken over into a successor-religion. Christianity is an adept in such takeovers.

With particular reference to Africa, in a way corresponding to her vital statistics on the map of the world, carries a question mark in her heart. This is a question within herself and a question about her to the rest of the world. The reason for the question is that Africa is just passing through the birth-throes of a new life. She has been a century-long sufferer: her illness has been written off as chronic, her sickness as sickness unto death or at best, something that would leave her more dead than alive. As for her religion certain factors like independent African churches, lack of propaganda machinery like those of Islam and Christianity, incursion of alien cultures and religion, western education, science and technology, death of many genuine votaries and unending influence of modernization² have greatly affected the traditional religion in certain areas adversely, to the point either of extinction or of the confusion of its tenets. This carries with it some searchlight and calls for modification of the teaching and learning strategies. Consequent upon the forgoing, therefore, besides a contribution to the body of knowledge on the study and practice of African religious traditions, this papers examines some modern trends in the teaching of African Religion in the 21st century. This is particularly urgent and important because the study

and practice of the religion has generated much interest within and outside the continent as the result of competitive co-existence and migration of Africans to the United States of America, Asia, London and other countries of the world. Such modern trends call for the review of the nature, scope and relevance of AFREL. The reason for this is that a teacher influences the curriculum as the receiver, modifier and transmitter and so must constantly ask the self four basic questions: What educational purpose should the school (teacher) seek to attain? (Objectives) What educational experience can be provided that is likely to attain these purposes? (Content, scope). How can these educational experiences be effectively organized? (Methodology). How can we determine whether or not these purposes are being attained? (Evaluation)³.

Answers to these questions call for periodic review of the curriculum to bridge the gap between theory and practice. These and others are the concern of this paper.

Before we do this in any appreciable way, it is necessary to define our basic concepts in our chosen theme. Such concepts include: modern, trends, teaching, nature, scope and relevance.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

“Modern” means contemporary, current, fresh, late, latest, neoteric, new, present, recent, up-to-date, up-to-the-minute, twenty-first century⁴.

“Trend” means general direction; tendency, course, drift, flow, inclination, leaning, mode and vogue.⁵ “Teaching” is the continuous tense for teach. “Teach” means advise, coach, demonstrate, direct, discipline, drill, edify, educate, enlighten, give lessons in, guide, impart, implant, inculcate, inform, instill, instruct, school, show, train and tutor.⁶ “Nature” means attributes, character, complexion, constitution, essence, features, make-up, quality, traits; category, description, kind, sort, species, style, type, variety; cosmos, creation, earth, environment, universe, disposition, mood, outlook, landscape, natural history and scenery.⁷

“Scope” means area, capacity, compass, confines, elbowroom, extent, field of reference, freedom, latitude, liberty, opportunity, or bit, outlook, purview, range, reach, room, space, span, sphere, outlet and range of action or observation.⁸ “Relevance” means admissible, applicable, apposite, appropriate, appurtenant, apt, fitting, germane, material, pertinent proper, related, relative, significant, suited, to the point and to the purpose.⁹

Some questions can then be asked: with the progress made by western education, Islam, Christianity the emergence of urbanization, industrialization, e-learning, ICT compliance, e-education, modern telecommunication and the computer age, is the eclipse of African religion imminent? Does it have any future? What are the modern trends in its teaching in the 21st century?

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Hitherto African students entered their studies of African Religion with an academic temper dictated by the attitudes and terminologies of foreign writers and come to learn for the first time about the tenets of the religion even as practiced in their several indigenous localities and so not able to find their way out of western spiritual and intellectual bondage and as such could only discuss the religion by quoting from books. For such alienated Africans it appears at first sight that AFREL is no longer a matter of ultimate concern. This further emboldened certain academic soothsayers to assert categorically that African Religion is on the decline and that it is only a matter of time before it will be stamped out completely.

As from the middle of the 20th century to date a new interest has of course been born with regard to everything African in consequence of nationalism, the political independence of African nations and the general search for identity throughout the continent. Exactly fifty years after Kwame Nkrumah's PAN AFRICANISM (1958-2008), with its advocacy of African personality and philosophy, took as one of its first official steps to restore the soul of African through the introduction of the traditional foundation ritual into government affairs whose purpose is to acknowledge the lordship of God over the whole earth on God's earth and, therefore, must not undertake anything without divine sanction. Thus, traditional prayers replaced Christian prayers at the formal opening of parliament as instituted by the colonial rulers. Again, the significant aspect of "Ethiopianism" is the emergence of Independent African Churches which are positive repudiations of Christianity in commemoration of Ethiopian defeat of Italy in the Battle of Adowa in 1896. Furthermore, some Yoruba adopted *Orunmila*, the oracle divinity as the prophet of God to "the black race" and Christened it as *Orumilanism* and so worshipped God (*Olodumare*) through him. The emphasis here is the replacement of the 'God/prophet' element of Islamic faith with a 'God/prophet' element of the traditional faith. There is equally the *Aruosa Church of Benin City* (Edo State, Nigeria) founded by the Oba of Benin with the avowed purpose of helping the Edo people worship God in the language which God understands. The emphasis here is a replacement of the 'Father/Son' element of Christianity with a 'Father/Son' element of African Religion. To this end, *Osanobwa* is worshipped through his son *Olokun*. In Cameroon, a political Church began as the National Church of Nigeria and Cameroon, changed its name to the National Church of Nigeria with the separation of Cameroon from Nigeria and has since moved between a politico-philosophical kind of Africanism and a kind of theosophy called *Goddianism*. The main emphasis here is a total condemnation of the adoption of any "foreign" or imported religion by Africans¹⁰. The lesson here is that Africa must recover her soul and give the first and supreme position to her God-given heritage, and be obedient to the teachings of her own God-appointed prophets.

The new interest in African Religion is not a phenomenon restricted to Africa. It is global. African Religion has found its way into the curriculum of every higher institution of learning throughout the world; there are European

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and American Professors and lecturers in the field of African Religion and Anthropology. Many of such scholars have never visited Africa. First Degree Projects, Masters Degree dissertations and Doctoral theses are frequently written and accepted on African Religion throughout the world. We have School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. We have International Associations like African Association for the study of Religions (AASR) founded in Harare in September 1992, and few years was admitted as an affiliate to the IAHR at its Congress at Mexico-City in 1995¹².

The interest on African Religion is not only academic but spiritual moral anthropological or sociological. While the academic interest has moved on from the attitude of the anthropological or sociological, curio-collection and is now entering a new phase of seriousness and respect, there is also the deeper interest of those who have come to believe more and more that the religion has satisfying spiritual values to offer. A study of the situation in the Caribbean, the United States of America, Latin America and anywhere there are people of African descent will convince one of this fact. African Religion is practiced in and outside African and will continue particularly as Barrack Obama, an African is for the first time the Presidential Candidate of the American Democratic Party.

The survival of African Religion in predominantly Muslim areas in Africa and Arabia in the form of beliefs, rituals, magic and medicine so as to get the best out of both religions is noticed in the mixture of traditional ideas and practices with those of Islam. There are also areas where Africans have completely refused to accept Islam, saying that it is associated with the Arabs who persecuted them, oppressed them and turned their forefathers into slaves. A similar charge is made about Christianity that it was associated with colonialists and racists. Today, however, Islam no longer uses the sword to conquer Africans. Conversions of adherents of African Religion to Islam are extremely few.

Again, the Christian idea of the church has parallels with African traditional life in which kinship and the extended family play a central role. The Church is the Christian family in which all are related to one another through faith and baptism in Jesus Christ. The church also includes those who have died and those who still live. This is similar to the African view of the family of both the living and the departed. In reading some parts of the Bible, African Christians find many aspects of ancient Jewish life which are similar to their traditional life. This makes it easy for them to feel that the Bible belongs to them and they belong to the Bible. There are equally new ideas in the Bible which enrich the Africans' understanding of the world as interpreted through the Bible and Christian teaching. In particular they see Jesus as addressing himself to them and not only to the people of his region and time. His concern for the sick, the poor, the hungry and oppressed, touches at the heart of African concern as well. Africans feel that Jesus Christ is concerned about them in their constant needs. They turn to him for help, and many African Church groups spend much time and prayer asking Jesus Christ and God to assist them in the daily needs of their life.¹³

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Based on the above, the present author can say with certainty that African religion will survive with every indication that the process of modernization and of syncretism with other religions and cultures will continue. It appears also that with the establishment of centres for African studies in many Universities and the change of name from Department of Religious studies to those of Religions and Cultural Studies, there will always be the “faithful remnant” whose loyalty to the religion of their forbears will continue steadfast. This is all the reason why a review of traditional methods is not only necessary but urgent. African religion and institutions are agents of advocacy, funding, innovation, empowerment, social movements, and service delivery. African religion contributes directly to her flourishing or contentedness, and comprises a dimension of human well-being. There is the need to promote dialogue between religious groups, and between the World Bank IMF and religious groups to support case studies, and organize publications and workshops with faiths and development leaders on themes of world Development Reports, on Poverty Reduction Strategy and on the Millennium Development Goals¹⁴.

The profound changes now shaping the human affairs suggest that new models of life are far reaching in their capacity to release potentials which are within the grasp of a rapidly evolving global community. Advances in knowledge across an over-expanding range of disciplines, the emergence of international mechanisms that promote collective decision-making and action, and the increasing ability of the masses of humankind to articulate their aspirations and needs, potent a great surge forward in the social evolution of the planet in general and African Religion in particular. This requires a searching re-examination of the prevailing patterns of social and economic development¹⁵.

Again conditions of justice and equity that foster both individual and collective well-being remain an elusive goal. At one extreme, deprivation and despair afflict vast numbers of Africans, while at the other; a limited segment of the human race is enjoying a conspicuous and unrestrained affluence. Entrenched patterns of dependency and poverty are accompanied by great disillusionment with the modern ethos. As a vision of society, the relentless pursuit of wealth is an impersonal marketplace and the frantic experimentation with various forms of self-indulgence are being rejected as irrelevant to the awakening hopes and emerge of individuals in all parts of the planet. It is no longer possible to maintain the belief that the approach to social and economic progress to which the materialistic conception of life has given rise it capable of leading humanity to the tranquility and prosperity which it seeks. A complex but vital set of questions concerning human nature and purposes need to be incorporated into African developmental thinking. Attention must be brought to a domain of issues that goes to the heart of human identity and motivation. Existing development strategies and programs must take account of the peoples spiritual and social dimensions of life so fundamental to human welfare. Pragmatic approaches to problem solving must obviously play a central role in the development initiatives,

tapping the spiritual roots of human motivation and provide the essential impulse that ensures genuine social advancement. When spiritual principles are fully integrated into community development activities, the ideas, insights, and practical measures that emerge are likely to be those that promote self-reliance and preserve human honour thereby avoiding habits of dependency and progressively eliminating conditions of gross economic disparity. From this perspective, material advancement is properly understood not as an end in itself, but as a vehicle for moral, intellectual and social progress. This of course, calls attention to the teaching of AFREL in the 21st century and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Recognition of the vital link between the practical and spiritual aspects of human life leads inevitably to a reframing of what constitutes well-being and the possible mechanisms for attaining such well-being. This realization underlines the need for a systematic exploration of the roles that African religion play in the development process. Throughout history, civilization has depended upon science and religion as the two principal systems of knowledge that have guided its development and channeled its intellectual and moral powers. In its truest form, devoid of dogmatic accretions, religion has imparted spiritual and moral verity that no way contradict the discovered truths of science.

The study of African Religion in the 21st Century must therefore take account of strong epistemological convergence with the various religious world-views and encourage dialogue that take into consideration a discourse that views spiritual and material domains of existence as interwoven into the process of development which entails a clear break from present developmental methodology. The challenge is the use of material resources, intellectual and spiritual endowments to advance civilization. The new approach must address African problems of corruption, underdevelopment, greed, injustice, nepotism, honesty, good governance and the rule of law. The only Panacea to African problems is Religion with its ideal tenets.

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