

Assessing Adequacy of Pluralist Theology of Religions to Foster Authentic Faith in Africa

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Abstract: This essay assesses the adequacy of pluralist theology of religions and considers the views of some pluralist theologians in a bid to promote authentic faith in Africa. Nigeria is used in this work to represent Africa given the strong similarities that exist among the people and focused mainly on its three major religions. This work adopts historical method through library research to obtain the needed information. The study discovers a sect called Chrislamherb that worship pluralistically as Christians, Moslems and traditionalists to show uniformity of religions in Nigeria. It concludes that, there is an element of God's revelation in all the religions. It recommends that knowledge of all the religions is necessary and good relationship with the adherents could help the Christians in proclaiming the faith and breeding harmonious coexistence.

Key words: religion, pluralism, theology, unity

1. Introduction

The term religious pluralism has generated a number of questions for the theologians concerning the relationship between Christianity and other world religions. These include "if Christianity is the true religion, is it theologically and morally acceptable to maintain that one religion is uniquely true and that the others are incomplete or even false and why are there so many diverse religions in the world?"¹ That and several other questions were addressed by some key figures in the debate of pluralist theology such as John Hick, Langdon Gilkey, Cantwell Smith and Raimundo Panikkar (John Hick & Paul F. Knitter, 1987, pp. 1–227). They insisted that Christian attitudes to other religions must go beyond the conservative exclusivist approach, a position that salvation is only in Jesus Christ or Christian religion and the liberal inclusivist method, a view that God is present in other religions to save the adherents through Christ to a pluralist position, a recognition that all world religions are equally salvific and responding to one ultimate reality (Paul F. Knitter, 1987, p. 3).

Hick advocated for a shift from a theology that is Christ-centered to God-centered (Caleb O. Oladipo, 2009, p. 58). He argues that, further shift must be made from the Christian monopoly of salvific truth expressed in the doctrine *extraeccle siam nulla salus*, meaning there is no salvation outside Christianity through the "crossing of the Rubicon" from the shore of exclusivism or inclusivism to pluralism for the purpose of recognising that neither Jesus Christ nor Christianity is uniquely salvific. According to him, the love of God for the whole world will not

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¹ These are some of the questions raised by some Pluralist theologians due to the claim that Christianity is the only religion acceptable to God.

make Him to save the world through one religion (John Hick, 1987). To him, Christianity is not the absolute, unique and final way to God but one out of many (Gordon D. Kaufman, 2005, p. 4). Similarly, Driver argues that, there are other “salvation histories” outside Christianity and in them, God has different names, different identities, and moves in different ways (Tom Driver, 2005p, p. 212). That implies other religions are heading to one ultimate truth and as a result, there is need for understanding all the world religions for the purpose of unity; thus, the basis of pluralist theology of religions.

Pluralist theology is characterised with a shift from insistence on the superiority of Christian religion or finality of Christ towards recognition of the independent validity of other religions (Langdon Gikey, 2005, p. 37). Gilkey maintains that plurality no longer denotes diversity but now include the concept of “parity” or of “rough parity”. He stresses further that recognising the co-validity and the co-efficacy of other religions foster the new view of each other by the various churches, new ways relating to Jews, new concept of relationships between diverse races and sexes and new interpretations of Christian obligations to the world (Langdon Gikey, 2005, p. 37).

Some pluralist theologians like Paul Knitter, Rosemary Ruether stress the need to promote justice as another reason for pluralist theology (Hick & Knitter, 2005). According to them, Christ’s mission as stated in Luke 4:18 are to liberate the oppressed, the marginalised and the poor; thus for the sake of justice, Christianity should not be held as the absolute religion (Hick & Knitter, 2005). This is necessary if Christianity will continue to maintain its claim as a religion of peace; otherwise, the incidence of inter-religious riot will remain endemic in the society.² Galvin D’Costa made a compelling argument by drawing from the Christian doctrine of trinity, asserting that the notion of Trinity makes pluralist theology tenable because God can reveal Himself in other world religions (Gavin D’Costa, 1990, p. 27). Like D’Costa, Schwobel opines that God cannot be “reduced to be exclusively present in one religion for that will limit His universality to a tribal deity of a particular religion” (Christoph Schwobel, 1990, p. 31). Having considered the main position of the above pluralist theologians, it will be helpful to examine the debate from the African scene.

2. Adequacy of Pluralist Theology of Religion in Africa

Religious Pluralism is not a new phenomenon in Africa,³ given that the three major religions practiced in Africa are African Traditional Religion,⁴ Islam and Christianity. James MaGrath contends that religious pluralism existed during Jesus’ era because the Jews and the Gentiles practiced different religions before the advent of Christianity (James F. McGrath, 1999, pp. 65–82). Africans are notoriously religious, for religion permeates every aspect of their life (P. Yakubu Otijele, 1991, pp. 1–16). They believe in the existence of one Supreme Being who is the creator and the controller of human destiny (P. Yakubu Otijele, 1991, pp. 1–16). They also believe that God, because of His majesty, cannot be approached directly; hence, there are other lesser gods such as *Ogun* (god of iron), *Sango* (god of thunder), and *Osun* (river goddess) which serve as medium to reach Him. So, most Africans usually build shrines to worship and venerate those gods. However the influences of western education, Christianity and Islam have drastically reduced such practices.

² In the past three years several Christians were killed and their houses and properties destroyed by the Boko Haram Islamic sect in Jos, Bauchi and some Northern states in Nigeria.

³ Religious pluralism in Nigeria especially in the South West will be taken for the whole of Africa in this paper.

⁴ The practice of African traditional religion varies from one place to another that some people refer to it as religions; some are Ifa worshippers, some worship god of thunder and some, god of iron and the like

African Theologians that expressed the exclusive view question the rationale for pluralist stance;⁵ they uphold Christianity as the only authentic faith. On this, Deotis Robert submits:

Christian theologian and missionaries have often been the ‘colonisers of the minds and spirits of non-western people. Non-western religions were often dismissed as heathen; the highest compliment was to accept such religion as a preparation for the gospel...’⁶

Bolaji Idowu in a similar submission, debunked the names that some western missionaries gave to the traditional African religion such as heathen, native, primitive salvage, animists, pagan as ‘errors of terminology’ because before the arrival of the missionaries, Africans have been worshippers of deities (Bolaji Idowu, 1991, pp. 188–236). The point to be noted is that there has been battle for supremacy between the three religions. While the Christian exclusivists claim that their religion is the only one acceptable to God, the Moslems affirm: *la hi lauilahlau Muhammodurasulu lai* meaning, “there is no other God except *Allah* and Muhammad is his messenger.” On the other hand, the African (Yoruba) traditionalists usually say *Ema gba gbe ise se* meaning “do not forget traditions” because “it is only a bastard that will use left hand to describe the house of his father”. They say this to uphold the fact that, before the Christian and Islamic religions came, they have been worshipping in their traditional ways.

In that light, Phan observed that “the first requisite of God talk” in Asia is pluralistic (because Asia is the cradle of the world major religions and the birth place of many religions) (Peter Phan, 2004, pp. 115–127). Since Africa and Asia share similar identity, it is possible to say that ‘the first requisite of God talk’ in Africa is pluralistic because of its three major religions and for anyone to propagate his religion adequately on African soil, such an individual must accept that there are some truths in other religions. The next session briefly examines the historical background of the main religions in Nigeria which is taken to represent Africa in this work.

3. The Genesis of the Three Religions in Nigeria

Both Islam and Christianity are regarded as foreign religions in Nigeria because they were introduced from foreign countries. That is appropriately described in this Yoruba’s statement *Aye la ba ‘fa, aye la ba ‘mole, Osan gangan ni ‘gbagbo wole de*⁷ meaning “we met traditional religion in this world, we met Islamic religion, but Christianity came in the afternoon”. This however, is against the argument of many Christian scholars who uphold that some Africans witnessed the beginning of the church (Acts 2: 10) and accepted the Christian faith long before the advent of Islam.⁸ Nevertheless, Islam came to Nigeria before Christianity through the northeast in the eleventh century and spread in the early 1800s during the Jihad of Usman Dan Fodio (I. O. Umejesi, 1992, pp. 85–96), while Christianity gained access through Badagry in 1842 (J. F. Ajayi, 1965, p. 31). As mentioned earlier, when these three religions came in contact, there were conflicts of supremacy among their worshippers and that is

⁵ The pluralist position is unpopular with a number of African (Nigerian) Christians; in particular some well know pastors and Christian leaders, such as E.A. Adeboye, W.F. Kumuyi and Chris Oyaklilome. These theologians are currently pastoring the largest and fastest growing churches in Nigeria, in fact, the total population of their members may account to 40% of the total Christian population in Nigeria. For more in-depth discussions see: E.A. Adeboye, presentation on “Evangelism: Why Christians must win souls and Evangelise.” December 19, 2008.

⁶ <https://www.nathanielturner.com/contextualtheology.htm>.

⁷ This saying is popular in the western parts of Nigeria and not in the entire African countries, basically because traditional religion is the first religion to be known in Nigeria and even in West Africa, followed by Islam. Christianity came only in the early 1840s.

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still common today because each of them claims to be serving the real God, however, the morals enshrined in these religions make a case for re-evaluation. The writer will thus consider the claims of pluralist theology of religions in Nigeria by exploring the interactions among these three religions.

4. Monotheistic Belief

All the three religions in Africa believe that a Supreme Being is behind the creation of the world. That could be found in their sacred scriptures — the Holy Bible, Holy Qu’ran and Oral traditions. Otijele observes that African Traditional Religion is a monotheistic religion because of its belief in one God who is the creator, the sustainer and controller of all beings and things (Otijele, 1991, p. 1–16). So, African traditional religion believes in one God just like Islam and Christianity. Within the Euro-American context, the Supreme Being is referred to as “God”, the Christians equally address Him as God; to the Moslems, He is Allah while the Yoruba traditionalists call Him *Olodumare*. He is *Ngewo* by the Mende of Sierra Leone, the Akan of Ghana call Him *Nyame*, the Aushi of Zambia address Him as *Makumba*, Xam of South Africa call Him *Kaang* and Yao of Malawi call Him *Mulungu* (John Mbiti, 2012). That confirms the assertion of Driver that “God has different names...and moves in different ways” (Tom Driver, 2011, p. 212).

In the opinion of Watt, God’s activity in the various societies is always related to their world view (William Montgomery Watt, 1995, p. 68). The Yoruba name for God reflects Watt’s argument by the term “Olorun” (the owner of heaven), *aseda* (the creator). This is based on their understanding that God owns and rules from heaven and He is the creator. Therefore, Adelowo argues that if actually there is only one earth, one heaven⁹ and one God who is behind the creation, worshiped by the Christians, who is also *Allah* as worshiped by Moslems and the *Olodumare* that the Yoruba traditional believers venerate, then there is a strong case for religious plurality (E. Dada Adelowo, 2001, p. 47). In like manner, Watt (1995, p. 6) stresses that God has been active in some ways in all the religions of the world and not only in a particular religion. Hick stresses that view further as quoted by D’Costa that religious pluralism is the most plausible explanation for the pervasive religious diversity we encounter and that all religions are different manifestations of the same God (David Basinger, 2002, p. 53). Given the similarity that runs through these religions, it is likely to argue that one religion cannot be the only source of truth about God. Hence, the claim of pluralist theology of religions in Nigeria may be sensible.

5. Belief in Divination

Average Africans perform divination for they are very particular and anxious about the future so as to prepare for unforeseen circumstances. They consult diviners to know what the future has for them; a new born baby is taken to a diviner among the Yoruba to find out the child’s destiny which they call *akosejaye* (S. O Biobaku, 1973, pp. 43–45). That practice is very common among the adherents of African Traditional Religion; however, some votaries of the Islamic and Christian religions also practice divination. This is a major area of contact among the three religions in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. Arabic word for divination is *Kahanah* meaning “foretelling the future” (E. Dada Adelowo, 1989, pp. 206–226) and many *Alfas* are diviners in Nigeria. Likewise, there are some Christian prophets (Seers in the Bible, Saul consulted a Seer when he was searching for his father’s lost donkey). There are diviners especially among the *Aladura* (Prayer warriors) and the indigenous African churches. It is not

⁹ Heaven is called *Al-Jana* in Arabic.

uncommon to see some Christians in Nigeria consulting diviners from other religions similar to the Moslems and traditionalists because of their desire to know about the future and prepare for it. On that, Adelowo clearly states that the word “divination” carries the same innuendo in all the three major religions in Nigeria; it serves dual purposes of issuing guidance concerning the future and giving the etiologies behind certain occurrence in man’s life (E. Dada Adelowo, 1989, pp. 206–226). Thus, the work of all diviners irrespective of their religious affiliation is to foretell the future and instruct on how to prepare for it.

Adelowo argues further that divinatory systems in all the three religions are similar in the sense that the *Ifa*¹⁰ worshippers use *Opele*,¹¹ some look at their clients’ hands or legs and some make use of water. Among the Christian adherents, the Roman Catholic use rosary while the *Aladura*, like the traditionalists use water. The Moslems also use rosary that is called *tasbith* in Arabic (Adelowo, 1989, pp. 206–226). The writer has witnessed some Moslems citing their *tasbith* after prayer and Catholic Christians counting their *rosary*. *Tasbith* is a means of divining in Islam and the Ifa worshippers among the Yoruba traditionalists use *Opele* (which is just like the rosary) for divining. Rosary beads are used in various ways by some Christians, the Roman Catholic use it to pray after which they use it to rub their face, the Yoruba traditionalists and Moslems use the *Opele* and *tasbith* to rub their faces after praying, they use that to avert some unforeseen dangers. Moreover, in Nigeria today, the association of spiritual healers include the African traditional healers, the Moslem healers and the Christian healers (Adelowo, 1989, pp. 206–226). All these are possible explanation for the pluralist theology of religions in Nigeria.

6. Oneness in Prayer

The religious pluralism in Nigeria motivates some politicians and some people that are facing terrible problems regardless of their religious background to seek for God’s intervention by means of all the three religions. These people approach the only one God by going to Church to pray for divine blessings, they also go to the mosque to solicit the Imam’s prayer and later to the shrine to receive blessings of the traditionalists and ask for the support of the deities.¹² Some even consult the traditional rulers who are believed to be the custodians of the traditional prayer to ask for their blessings. This they do probably because they believe, there are elements of God’s revelation in all the three religions.

7. Unity during Festive Period

In Nigeria today, all the adherents of the three religions felicitate with one another during each of the religion’s festival. The Christmas, New Year and Easter celebration are not done exclusively by the Christians; the holidays declared by the Government during the festive periods are not exclusively for Christians or the Moslems. It is common during those periods seeing the votaries of all the religions exchanging pleasantries. The traditional festivals are also celebrated by some Christians and Moslems, though the Federal Government of Nigeria may not declare holiday, but some states do and even sponsor these festivals especially the *Argungu* fishing festival in the north, the *Iriji* new yam festival in the east, the *Osun* (river goddess) festival and *Eyo* (Masquerade) festivals in

¹⁰ Ifa is an oracle of divination in Yoruba traditional religion which uses sixteen literary corpuses known as Odu-ifa and the Grand chief priest is Orumila. Babalawo (Father of the secrets) and Iyalawo (Mother of the secrets) are the initiated priest and priestess that perform the divination

¹¹ Opele is one of the ifa divinatory items. It is a kind of chain containing some nuts, it looks like rosary.

¹² Some politicians in Nigeria do go to Okija shrine in eastern part of Nigeria irrespective of their religion to pray and ask for the deity support.

the west,¹³ some Christians and Moslems join them to celebrate these festivals. That must be the reason for Adelowo's submission thus:

When you watch the Egungun, Oro and Olojo in Ile-Ife, Idiroko in Ado-Ekiti, Ogun, Osun, Obatala festivals in Yorubaland generally, celebrants are either James, Peter, or Al-Masud, Ibrahim, Yusuf and so on...those that still celebrate the autochthonous practices, are both Christians and Moslems (E. Dada Adelowo, 2006, p. 25).

The *Egungun* (Masquerade), *Oro* (a deity that woman must not see), *Olojo* (the deity that owns the day), *Obatala* (creation divinity) are some traditional festivals in Nigeria and it is a fact that some Christians and Moslems regularly join in the celebration. In addition to Adelowo's submission, Olupona affirms that there are practicing Christians and Moslems in Nigeria who are also traditional religion functionaries (Jacob K. Olupona, 1991). Even in some cases in Nigeria, members of the same family practicing different religions are still living together.¹⁴ Moreover, as some states Government do sponsor some traditional festivals in Nigeria, the three tiers of Government equally sponsor some Christians and Moslems for holy pilgrimage to Jerusalem and Mecca annually.¹⁵ This is probably to show that, there is only one God that is working in all the three religions.

8. Denominations among the Three Religions

Just as there are diverse denominations in both Christian and Islamic religions, there are different sects of traditional religion in Nigeria also. This buttress Adeiza's submission that, the practice of Africa traditional religion varies widely from one place to another that some people tend to call it religions in the plural rather than one religion. It recognises the Supreme Being and sees the lesser divinities merely as intermediaries between the Supreme Being and man or agents of God.¹⁶ Adeiza stresses further that the divinity in African traditional religion could be related with Christ in Christianity and Prophet Muhammad in Islam.¹⁷ This writer disagrees with his view for the fact that, there are many divinities in the African traditional religion such as *Obatala*, *Ogun*, *Sango*, and the like but Christ as a person is one and Prophet Muhammad (S. A. W) is also one.

Moreover, the various Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, the Methodist, the Baptist, the Pentecostal churches and the Islamic denominations such as the Tijaniyya, Quadriyya, Ahmadiyya (Jacob K. Olupona, 1991, p. 39), Ansarudeen and Nawairudeen (E. A. Odumuyiwa, 2001, p. 12) worship God according to the dictate of their doctrines. For instance, the Baptist believes in baptism by immersion and religious liberty (Heschell H. Hobbs, 1971, p. 1430, which is quite different from the teaching of the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Methodist. Their difference does not stop them from coming together under the umbrella of the Christian Association of Nigeria. The Tijaniyya and Quadriyya (found mostly in the northern Nigeria) while the Ahamadiyya movement (found in the west) differ in doctrine but they all belong to the Moslem Society of Nigeria (Olupona, 1991, p. 39). Equally the *Egungun* worshippers, the *Ogun* worshippers, the *Sango* worshippers, the *Osun* worshippers are all under the umbrella of African Traditional Religion.

¹³ <http://www.world66.com/afica/nigeria/festival>.

¹⁴ In the writer's extended family, there are Christians and Muslims and my uncle who is a traditional ruler practice all the three religions.

¹⁵ The writer has witnessed this several times in Nigeria.

¹⁶ <http://www.nairaland.com/nigeria/topic-378056.0.html>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The various denominations or sects within a religious group are a kind of religious pluralism which Javeed Akhter called “intrapluralism”.¹⁸ It can be deduced from Akhter view that the various denominations that exist in some religions of the world account for pluralist theology of religions. The question now is which of the denomination can claim to be the one approved by the only one God since all of them found their teachings in their inspired scriptures? If none, the universal God must have revealed Himself to all the world religions. Even according to Edmund, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC) plenary Assemblies admitted that other religions are truly “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation” (Edmund Chia, 2003) and that religions of Asian have been the source and inspiration for generations of people before others came and these have helped in the spiritual development and growth of the whole continent for thousands of years.¹⁹

FABC thus affirmed that, for any religion to thrive well in Asian continent there is a need for its votaries to give honour and reverence to other Asian religions that God have used to draw people to Himself for several years.²⁰ It is therefore necessary for every religion to know more about other religions since there are some elements of truth in all religions. That probably might be the reason for the formation of *Chrislam* in Nigeria by Prophet Sakariyyat. The sect does not go against teachings of any of the three major religions but maintains the validity of all of them. Hence, the group reads from Bible, Quran and seek guidance from *ifa* oracle. Based on all these arguments, one may subscribe to the claim of the pluralist theology of religions as adequate form of religion in Nigeria. However, religious pluralism in the opinion of Sarah Abbey is contradictory and cannot sustain itself because of its contrary claims that all religions of the world are true and teach the same thing.²¹ If truly all religions teach the same things about God, then there should be only one religion in the world. Different teachings about the nature of God — on strict monotheistic of Islam and Trinitarian doctrine of Christian would not be necessary. Therefore, the next session would discuss Christian teaching in a pluralistic society.

9. Christian Faith in a Pluralistic Society

Based on the preceding arguments on pluralist theology, this writer wishes to uphold the Evangelical position that faith in Christ is the only sure way to heaven. Jesus Christ makes it clear in John 14: 6 that “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me”. Similarly in Acts 4:12, Peter declared to the rulers in Jerusalem that “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which people must be saved”. This writer admits the Bible submission that all have sinned (both Christians and non-Christians) and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). The only remedy from sins is to have genuine salvation through genuine repentance and accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour just as the early believers did which made them to be called Christians first in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Although, Oladipo argues that, the early disciples were not Christians prior to the event that changed their nomenclature in Antioch. It was the action of the disciples that warrant the appellation ‘Christian.’ In other words, nobody called them Christian when they believed and stick to the teaching of Jesus Christ. So, in his word, those who followed the teachings of Christ will be saved whether they are Christian or not and those who did not follow His teachings would not, even if they called themselves Christian. Contrary to Oladipo submission, a person

¹⁸ <http://www.ispiusa.org/erruentarticles/pluralism.html>.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ <http://christianapologeticsalliance.com>.

becomes Christian once he confesses and accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. So, the disciples have been Christians since the day of their conversion to follow Jesus Christ even though they were not called Christians then. It is therefore germane to know that, the essential thing for salvation is faith in Jesus Christ. The Christian religion is the only one that guarantees salvation out of the world religions.

It is therefore imperative for Christians to keep on proclaiming the message of salvation to everybody in the world as Christ commissioned His followers in Matthew 28:19-20. That is contrary to the view of the pluralist theologians who see no basis for evangelism since all religions are authentic. However, in extending the Christian message, there is a need to realise the fact that there are diverse religious adherents who also claimed to be serving the “real God”. It is therefore good to respect their religious background just as Apostle Paul did in Athens and not to start condemning their faith. Relating well with people from other religious background in a pluralistic society would promote friendship, peace, healing and reconciliation.

10. Conclusion

In this paper, the writer assessed the adequacy of pluralist theology of religions in Africa (using Nigeria to represent Africa). After considering the claims of some pluralists like Hick, Gilkey and Adelowo, it is convincing to hold that, there is only one heaven, one earth, one God and there is a revelation of this God in all religions of the world though worship in different forms of experience. However, the declaration of Christ in John 14: 6, and Apostle Paul in Acts 4: 12 reveals that faith in Christ is the only assurance for salvation. The writer submits that it is important to have knowledge of all religions since there are some elements of God’s revelation in every religion, and this call for interconnectedness, interrelationship among people of different faiths. This would make Christian message acceptable as well as promote peace, love and harmony in the land.

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