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A Comparison between African Philosophical and Christian Theological Views of Life and Death

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Abstract:

This paper discusses a comparison between some of the dominant teachings of Christianity and traditional African religion regarding the mysteries of life, death and destiny of the soul. It does this by first discussing the African philosophical views on the origin and purpose of life. It also tackles the African perception about the causes of death, origin of death and the destiny of the soul. The second section discusses the biblical views on the origin and meaning of life. It also analyzes the Christian teachings on death, resurrection and destiny of the soul. The paper then draws some of the key similarities and differences regarding the questions of life, death and destiny from the two religions. In both cases, it is believed that life is sacred, God given gift that was intended to be permanent on earth. Death is regretted and considered as a consequence of human fall. Both religions argue that woman was the first cause of death hence justifies the second position female on religious affairs. Finally, Christianity promises eternity in the next world while African traditional religion believes in an eternity which occurs in this world.

Keywords: African philosophy, Christian theology, comparative religion

1. Introduction

The need to understand the mystery of life and death is a common problem in all human societies. The concepts of life and death are interconnected to the extent that one is defined with reference to the other. When people talk about death, they obviously refer to termination of life. Consequently, life refers to absence of death. Life and death have thus remained mysteries that perhaps only religion can comprehensively address. The relevance and functionality of a religion is thus judged alongside other factors, based on how convincingly it offers teachings on life and death to its followers. Since African religion has persisted in Africa alongside Christianity, a comparison of these discourses from these religious points of view is significant to understand how they interact to influence African Christians views on life, death and destiny.

2. African Traditional Views of Life and Death

In Africa, life is perceived as holistic wellbeing of a person within a community. It has both personal and communal perspectives. It is mysterious in the sense that it cannot be comprehended fully in human terminologies without making references to the Supernatural Being (God and Spirits). Death on the other hand is known to be inevitable as it obviously follows life. Some communities hold that death and life are given to man by the creator. They are the basis of man's existence and very close to each other. They reveal the superiority of God as the creator and the limitation of man as the creature. Man, can do many things but can neither create life nor evade death. As a result of this, life and death makes man equal to all other natural phenomena that live and die. Death and life occupies the mind of man in its physical and spiritual aspects. Death stands between the human visible and the spirits invisible worlds. It is a transitional bridge between the visible and the invisible realities. It refers to both the state and the process of life termination. Africans also perceive death as normal or abnormal, natural or unnatural. The former occurs as a result of old age while the latter is a premature demise caused by calamities such as sickness, accidents, or witchcraft or curses from spirits.

The African person understands death as a real fact before which man remains helpless. It is an individual affair that cannot be interfered with by anybody when its time has come. The concept of death among the Luo community is that while all other sicknesses are treatable, death can neither be cured nor escaped.

Consequently, life is considered as a gift of God given to man at creation. God is ultimate source of all life. In him there is this life as well as eternal life. Although the African view also links death to the fall of man, God is never blamed for death. All blames go to man's mistake, animals, spirits, and fellow men but not God. For Africans, God's intention was that man would live forever and this intention has never changed except for man's mistake that caused death.

3. African Traditional View on Origin of Life and Death

There are lots of mythical stories among African communities on the origin of death and life. According to these myths death and life are some of the most universal and mysterious experience. Every community has a story about the origin of death and life. Most of these stories have the concept that God intended that man should live forever. Because of this the creator gave man gifts of immortality; the ability of becoming young again after getting old; and the gift of resurrection.

According to some communities' myths, God decided to send two messages to men after creation. These were messages of mortality and immortality. The first to reach was to determine the destiny of man. The myths from eastern, central and southern Africa, points out that God sent a message to the first men that they would either live forever or rise again after death. This message was given to a chameleon but due to his slowness, he delayed on the way. God then decided to send another faster creature that was a bird, lizard or hare with another message that people would die. The latter message reached ahead of immortality or resurrection and since then death existed in the world up to date.¹

The Ashanti people believed that many years ago, God was very close to men. One day a woman was annoyed by the close presence of the divine and compelled God to withdraw from the physical world to the world of the spirits. After some time, the invisible God sent men a goat with the message:

- "There is something which is called death (owe). One day it will kill some of you. But even if you die you will not be completely lost. You will come to join me in the sky."²

The goat took along time on the way grazing. Because of this God sent another messenger, a sheep, to take the same message to men. The sheep altered the original message of life to mean mortality and communicated it to men a head of the goat. When the goat came later with the original message, no one believed him. Death had already taken its course in the world and could not be averted.

Other myths in African also hold that God forbade the first men to eat certain eggs, or fruit, or animals. When they ate, this forbidden food, death became real in the world. Some communities of Rwanda and Burundi hold to the idea that God used to hunt death whenever it appeared. He instructed people to close themselves indoors and not to open doors for death when they see it running away. A woman went to work in the field and while she was there, death came and asked for protection. She then allowed it to hide under her clothes or to get into her mouth. God came with his hunting dogs chasing after it. In God's great wisdom he discovered that the woman had hidden death, he then told her and the people to keep death and since then death came to being.³

In Africa, death is visualized in personal terms. It is personified as a monster, an animal, or a kind of spirit. In Uganda, it is said that the spirit of death never laughs. It cannot be blamed because its work is to kill, destroy, take away, and terrorize people everywhere. It is widely believed that every death has its cause. Some of the common causes of death in Africa include sorcery, witchcraft, sickness, accidents, old age, lightning, earth quakes, flood, animal attack, evil magic, breaking taboo and others. Whenever death occurs among African people, they must try to find out its root cause.

The terminologies that different communities use to explain the act of dying in Africa are very symbolic. Some of these phrases include: "*breathing the last breath, keeping quite forever, going home, going down to the grave, yielding to the call of death, going to sleep or joining the company of our fore fathers, or becoming God's property.*"⁴ These words show the belief that death is not the final destruction of the individual life. They indicate that there is life beyond the grave. The relatives and friends always comfort themselves that the departed continue to live in the next world. Because of the concept of the continuation of life in the next world, some communities used to bury the dead with part of their wealth, wives, servants, bows and arrows, spears, foodstuffs, and others. The belief behind this custom is that the departed need weapons for self-defense on the way to next world; food to eat on the journey, wives and servants to keep them company after death.

Unlike Christianity and Islam which teaches on a heaven that is far away from this world, Africans believe that the spirits of the dead continue to exist within the homestead hence remain influential members of the family. They believe that the dead are watching at the daily affairs of the family members. Since the dead continue to be part of the family they are always buried in a descent manner stipulated by their culture. For instance, the Luo bury their dead within the homestead with the head facing a specific direction depending on gender and age of the deceased. The children are named after the dead relatives so that through them, their lives and memory can continue in the community. Both Christians and none Christians practice naming of children after the dead or the living family members.

Besides these, obituaries, memorials or tributes to the death in Africa often carry some indications that the dead are still alive and continue to influence the living.

- "Your departure was overwhelming loss and adapting to life without you has been a great struggle, but God has been there for us. You were a true blessing and a precious gift from God. We thank him for those treasured years we shared. Deeply mist by your husband ...children...relatives and friends. We will cherish your memory and let it live on. We shall do what you'd want us to do most and fulfill the plans you had made."⁵

In this example of a memorial statement, it is clear that the dead is a live and is communicated to by the living. The plans and desires of the deceased continue in action through the family members. Despite the fact that they do not come back physically to live with the

¹ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, Heinemann International Literature and Text books: 2010), 110.

² Dominique Zahan, *the Religion Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa* (Chicago Press: Chicago, 1970), 37-38.

³ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 111.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (East African Educational Publishers: Wetlands, Nairobi, 1969), 156-157.

family members, the presence of the deceased is acknowledged. The issues of death and its rites are reality that cannot be avoided in any of the African communities. Despite the dominance of Christianity in Africa, some of the questions that still puzzle the minds of the African Christians include: Is there a Christian way of mourning for the dead? What kind of burial is Christian? What is the Christian view on the African funeral rites? The fact that Christianity has not addressed such issues comprehensively calls for a contextual African Christian Theology that addresses such views.

4. African Traditional View of the Destiny of the Soul

The African concept of destiny of the soul suggests that the go to the next world which is likened to the present one except that it is spiritual. Death remains the only transition to the next world. Occasionally people remember that they are candidates of death when they witness relatives and friends die. The deceased are considered to have gone ahead of the living to the next world. The souls of those who died are known to the living. People thus believe that they will not be strangers when they get there because they know each other. The next world is invisible but very close to that of the living. There is a view that the next world has rivers, mountains, lakes, forests, homesteads, fields, cattle, sheep, goats, and all the things we find in the present world including the departed relatives. Africans further believe that the next world is situated within the present earth where they live. However, the second world cannot see except by the spirits who live there. Some communities believed that the dead used to travel for several hours or days before they reach the next world. This is the reason why some communities buried their dead with food.

Most of the African communities do not expect any form of judgment or reward in the future (after the physical death). The Yoruba community is one of the exceptional on judgment. To them, individuals are judged by God as each give account of his or her earthly life. As they state: *"All that we do on earth, we shall account for kneeling in heaven...we shall state our case at the feet of God."*⁶ Lodagaa believe that there is suffering that a waits bad people after crossing to the next world. They argue that this severe suffering and punishment will be executed by the older and perfect spirits.

Some communities in Nigeria and Ghana held that the dead are always judged by God based on the kind of life they lived before death.⁷ After the judgment those that practiced good deeds before death join their departed relatives who lived a good life. If they happened to have lived a bad life, they join the departed relatives who were judged and are in a place of torment. Unlike Christianity and Islam that teach about an eternal hell, these African communities believe that God will eventually have pity on the condemned souls hence withdraw the punishment and take them to a better place.

Majority of the African peoples believe that there is no heaven or hell. They also do not believe in any kind of reward or punishment after death. Instead, they believe that a person continues to live a similar life as was in this world. Once a person is dead he cannot return to human life in his total being but exists in spiritual form. Sojo community believes in putting on the tribal mark on a soldier for an easy recognition by their hero. Such marks are believed to give them identity even after death hence enabling them to continue occupying their normal positions in the next world.

Many communities locate the homes of the departed around people's homesteads. Because of this they keep part of the dead body as symbol of the presence of the deceased. They believe that after the death of a person, the spirit hangs on around the body or homestead. The spirits retain the identity he had when he was a living person. At this state the living dead appear to the living relatives in a dream, and vision as they were before they died.

The bodies of the departed friends and relatives do not go to the next world. The journey to the next world is spiritual. This is the reason why they bury the bodies. The body is a subject to physical death. Since there is no concept of resurrection after death, the hope for the body ends with Physical death and burial. Even though there is no hope for the dead bodies, they still treated them with a lot of respect in honor of the soul that occupied the body.

5. The Biblical Views of Life and Death

Christian theology should be informed by the Biblical truth. But it is also important to acknowledge that such a theology must be deeply rooted in the cultural context. The origin of life and death are both documented in the genesis story of creation in Genesis 1, 2 & 3). Here, it is noted that man was created in the image and likeness of God. Human life therefore has a divine origin therefore should remain the reflection and continuity of God's own life. Although all life is sacred, human life is special since it is a reflection of God's own image (Genesis 1:27).

Human life is also looked at from two dimensions: physical and spiritual. The physical life is manifested in the body while the spiritual life is the soul. The two are part and parcel of each other, divinely united yet are different in nature. The body is said to have been created from the earth/ground while the soul was breathed from God. Since the body originated from a creature (soil) while the soul originated from the creator, man has both senses of mortality and immortality. The body is mortal while the soul is immortal. All other issues related to life and death is thus rooted on the understanding of the mortality of the body and the immortality of the soul.

The Genesis story of creation also reveals that the original intention of God was that man would live forever. Genesis 3:1ff addresses the issue of death as a consequence of man's disobedience. Death was pronounced on man because of sin. The first physical death was experienced when Cain killed his brother Abel. After which, man had to learn to cope with this enemy that was proclaimed by the creator.

⁵ October 16, 2016, *Saturday Nation*, 39

⁶ Idow, E. B., *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London / New York, 1962), 189, 199.

⁷ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 117.

Although death is accepted as God's proclamation on his creature, it is also an enemy since it destroys the physical life. The manner in which Jesus struggled with death on the cross implies that death is a strong and worst enemy of humanity. St. Paul qualifies death as the last enemy of man to be conquered. As he states:

- “. Death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all died in Adam, so will all be made a live-in Christ...The last enemy to be to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:21).

Christianity further teaches that victory over death is attained through resurrection. The resurrection of Christ is believed to be an open defeat and triumph over death which transcends all its power. This victory is thus attained by faith to those who believe in Jesus, the true resurrection. Christians also view death as both physical and spiritual. As Millard J. Erickson says:

- “The potential of death was within the creation from the beginning, but so was the potential of eternal life. Sin, in the case of Adam and each of us, means that death is no longer merely potential but actual.”⁸

The physical death is real separation of the body from the soul. Consequently, the spiritual death is symbolic. It is the separation between man and God. Jesus further warned his followers not to be afraid of the physical death, but the spiritual one. In his words, he stated: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of one who can destroy both soul and body in Hell,” (Matthew 10:28).

6. The Biblical Views on the Destiny of the Soul and the Body

The Christian bible teaches about two possibilities of termination of this physical life. Thus, is either death or rapture. As St. Paul states:

- “Brothers we do not want you to be ignorant about those who have fallen asleep or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope. We believe that Christ died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep to him. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air....” (1Thessalonians 4:13-17).

This means that the transition into eternity is expected to take place while some have gone through the physical death while others are still alive in the body. The former will thus be resurrected while the former will be rapture hence marking the end of this physical existence for Christians.

Although death appears to be a painful reality, Christians are encouraged not to fear it or to mourn hopelessly for the dead. The hope for the eternity makes physical death considered as an inevitable transition into a more glorious life. It is the final stage of physical life that all must accept without regret.⁹ This justifies why St. Paul looked forward to his own death (2 Corinthians. 5:1-10; Phil. 1:19-26). Here, death is not just viewed as a consequence of sin, but as God's bridge into eternity. It is the transition into another life that is free from physical struggles and challenges associated to this physical existence.

The biblical teachings also give lots of hope to both the body and the soul. (1Corinthians 15:12ff; 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18; 1John 2:2d). The physical body is said to be perishable while the new body which is promised after resurrection is immortal. It is the very cloth that is required for the coming kingdom. At the resurrection of Christ, he is believed to have risen back to life with the entire body which had been changed into immortality. When he appeared to his disciples he was the very Jesus they knew before whose body was physical hence they touched and saw the crucifixion wounds. The miracle of crucifixion made him have real body which was endowed with the gift of immortality. This is what Christians expect to be after the eternal victory of death. The eternity of life is finally expected to be realized in paradise for believers and in abyss for unbelievers after the last judgment.

7. Conclusion

The views on life, death and final destiny of human soul remain some of the issues that dominate religious beliefs in almost all religious of the world. A comparative review of these subjects from a Christian and African perspectives reveal a number of similarities and differences. For instance, both Christianity and African religion believe that life is a gift from God given to man at creation hence remains sacred. Both religions also affirm that God's original intention was that man would live forever. However, death emerged to terminate this physical life as a result of human fault. From both cases, the woman is accused for being the first to cause this fall that resulted to death.

Both religions also believe that death is not the end of all existence. The belief in life after death is deeply held in both Christianity and traditional African religion. However, the manner in which death is defeated is differently explained. For Christians, death is conquered at resurrection that is guaranteed through the resurrection of Jesus. For the African traditional religion, death is conquered through the gift of procreation. Through procreation, the departed are both replaced and reincarnated in the new born through naming. Regarding the destiny of the soul, Christianity teaches of a heaven for believers and hell for nonbelievers. It also indicates that the fate of humanity will be determined on a judgment throne. For Africans, there are no such concepts as heaven or hell. Instead, the departed spirits continue to live among them within the community in unseen form. The eternity is thus part of this world and occurs in this world. The African worldview thus does not imagine of any end of this world. Furthermore, they do not have concepts of believer hood hence no possibility of judgment.

⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology Second Edition* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1998), 631.

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *The Way of Wisdom*, (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1951), 53

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