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AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGION IN AN AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY: THE CASE
OF ST. NICHOLAS SEMINARY, CAPE COAST

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ABSTRACT

There is no gainsaying in the importance of the need to study the religion of the indigenous African in theological institutions in Africa. The reasons are not farfetched as the trainee priests would be plying their vocation among the indigenous believers and would need to understand the beliefs of those people in order to effectively operate among them. This paper seeks to make a critical assessment of the teaching of the African Traditional Religion and African Philosophy and Values in an African theological seminary. The paper focuses on the teaching of the subject in the St. Nicholas Theological Seminary in Cape Coast. The paper traces the history of the seminary and teaching of the African indigenous religion. The paper analysis the course contents and finds its suitability for an institution such as this. Using the questionnaire and interview as the main instruments, the article found out from students, both regular and sandwich, how the study of the courses has and would impact on their practice as priests in their area of operation. The article concluded that for trainee priest to effectively operate in their area of operation, and for those who may be sent to the very remotest parts of the country where in most cases the indigenous religion of the African have a strong hold on the inhabitants, the need to have a firm

knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the indigenous African is important if they are to succeed as priests.

Key words: African Indigenous Religion, theological seminary, trainee priests, philosophy, values

1.0 Introduction

The need to study the indigenous African religion in a theological seminary in Africa cannot be under estimated. The reasons are not farfetched as the trainee priests would be required in most cases to work among rural Africa where the indigenous religion is still very strong among the people. If they are to be successful in their vocation as a priest, it is incumbent on them to understand the indigenous religion of the people so as to be able to operate in their place of vocation. This article intends to examine the teaching of the African Traditional Religion and African Philosophy and Values in an African theological seminary by using the St. Nicholas Seminary (SNS) in Cape Coast as a case study. The article will be divided into four parts. Part one will discuss theological education in Africa, the research methodology and the establishment of the SNS looking at its core mandates and mission. Part two will discuss indigenous African religion as a religious heritage, the teaching of the African Traditional Religion and African Philosophy and Values by looking their cause outlines and contents. Part three will discuss the importance of the teaching of the courses in the Seminary through the analysis of the questionnaire administered among the students. Part four will draw a conclusion.

1.1 Theological Education in Africa

In his foreword to *Theological Education in Africa: Quo Vadimus*, Amirtham¹ makes the point that “theological education is vital to the life and mission of the churches.” Pobee² in the preface of the same work says of theological as a venture of faith following after Christ. Oduro³ on his part defines theological education:

as the process of equipping the clergy and laity to have a firm grasp and a broad perception of the dynamics of Christian theology and ministry which leads to formulation and articulation of theologies that distinctive and relevant to their respective, yet in consonance with the overall Christian theological beliefs and practices.

According to Moyo⁴

Theological education deals with the ministry of the church. It is therefore, concerned with the very essence of the church, with its confession and its mission. It is an enterprise in which the entire life of the church is involved. It cannot be understood apart from the church since it is an activity of the church taking place within the church.

Oduro⁵ identified seven types of theological education. These are formal or Western, periodic – seminars and workshops, mentorship/apprenticeship/discipleship, theological education by extension (TEE), distance learning, self taught and adult Sunday school teaching manuals.

1.2 Research Methodology

The research was done in the field of phenomenology. It aim was to establish from the students of SNS, both regular and sandwich, whether their study of African Traditional Religion and

African Philosophy and Values as part of their formation would be beneficial to their ministry. The case study was used as research design since the study was conducted among one selected theological seminary in Cape Coast, SNS. The population for the research was the student body of SNS, both regular and sandwich. A sample size of 31 respondents comprising levels 200 and 400 students in both streams was drawn. Even though this paper was purely a qualitative research work, the quantitative instrument of questionnaire was used to gather the data for the work. The questionnaire was analysed using the qualitative method of data analysis. The *Corporate Strategic Plan 2010-2015* of St. Nicholas Seminary, Cape Coast was also perused to find out the history, core values and objectives of the SNS.

1.3 The making of St. Nicholas Seminary (SNS)

The SNS was established in 1975 as an independent Anglican Seminary in response to a decision taken by the Synod chaired by the Late Most Rev'd Dr. Ishmael Samuel Mills LeMaire. In 1992, the Provincial Synod of the Church of the Province of West Africa resolved to adopt SNS as a Provincial institution opened to students from the Province. It remains the only active Anglican Seminary in the Province.⁶ It is the mission of SNS to educate lay and ordained leaders for the church and world.⁷ Makhulu makes an important observation of opening up theological seminaries in Africa to lay people when he said: “the church in Africa will die, or at least be much poorer, if theological literacy becomes the sole preserve of clergy and theologians.”⁸

1.4 The Seminary's core values are as follows:

- SNS is grounded in the Anglican traditions and committed to growing in relationship with other Christians and faith traditions.
- Serve as an academic community of biblical, historical and theological enquiry that respects students as responsible learners with valuable experience and supports spiritual and ministerial formation.
- To form leaders of hope, courage and vision to witness to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Encourages critical intellectual engagements, prophetic, spirituality and social action, sustained by contemplation, worship and prayer.⁹

The SNS main philosophy is to inculcate in its students a real capacity for leadership, grounded in a personal dedication to ministry and an intellectual ability to address contemporary concerns by probing deeply into the theological tradition.¹⁰

1.5 Student enrollment

The student enrollment of SNS as the 2012/2013 academic year stood at 71. These are made up of 39 regular students and 32 sandwich students. The regular students come from all the dioceses of the Anglican Church and non-Anglican. The sandwich students are made up of both Anglicans and others from different faiths.¹¹

1.6 Programs

The SNS runs programs in Bachelor of Theology (BTh) and Diploma of Theology (DTh) all awarded by the University of Cape Coast for full time and sandwich students. Among the

courses offered by SNS are comparative religions, African traditional religion, introduction to Islam, biblical studies, Hebrew, Greek, church history, Christian theology, African philosophy and values etc.

2.0 Indigenous African Religion as a Religious Heritage

Africa has a religious heritage that is unique and must be appreciated by all. The early writers on Africa sought to erroneously create the impression that Africa had no knowledge of God. Evidence from the religion however, showed that the Europeans were wrong in their assessments. In commenting on the religion of Africa, derogatory remarks were made in their description of the religion. Terms such as fetishism, idolatry, paganism, polytheism, and animism were used to describe the religion of the African. The period of scorn for, or misunderstanding of African culture gave way to a period in which it was recognised and positively valued.¹² As a religious heritage, its unique features consist of the belief in a Supreme Being, variously name by the people. Among the Akan, the Supreme Being, Nyame, is believed to be self-created, is unique, separate from all the rest, invisible yet alive, actively sovereign, independent, unreachable and unapproachable, and yet guiding men and things very closely and with absolute efficiency.

A belief in the Minor Deities who are believed by the indigenous Africans to be agents of the Supreme Being on earth placed here by the creator to meet their needs. A belief in the Ancestors is also very prominent among the people. Mbiti¹³ will describe the Ancestors as the living-dead.

Asare Opoku¹⁴ citing Danquah says of the ancestors: “they act as friends at court to intervene between man and the Supreme Being and to get prayers and petitions answered more quickly and effectively.” The Ancestors were formally members of the society who have transited to the spiritual world and are believed to superintend over the affairs of the living. The ancestors are such an important institution that ceremonies are put in place by the people to venerate them. The people also have belief in other spirit beings such as witchcraft, sorcery etc. The indigenous African religion has had some influences from its contacts with other religions such as Christianity and Islam. Several of its members have left the religion to embrace the new faiths introduced by the Christian and Muslim missionaries. Pobee¹⁵ records the population of the indigenous African religion’s adherents in Ghana over the period as follows: 1948, 66%; 1968, 38.3%; 1978, 21.61% and 1980, 21.4%. The 2010 census also put the population of the religion at 5.2%.¹⁶ It is clear from the statistics that the number of adherents of the religion over the period keeps dwindling but the world view of the religion is still very pervasive among the people. By worldview, I mean what Ikenga-Metu¹⁷ defines as “the complex of a people’s belief about the origin, structure and organization of the universe, and the laws governing the interaction of beings in it.” An indigenous belief such as witchcraft is so pervasive that most church services in Ghana are inundated with prayers against the activities of the witches. There is also the belief in other spirit beings such as charms, amulets, talismans, witchcraft, sorcery etc.

2.1 Courses

Two courses in the area of indigenous African religion are taught in St. Nicholas Seminary. These are African Traditional religion at level 200 and African Philosophy and Values at level 400

2.1.1 BT 206: African Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion is taught in the Seminary as an introductory course. The main objective of the course is to enable the Seminarians appreciate the indigenous African religion by the study of its beliefs and rituals to expose the African understanding of the universe, human's place in it and the importance of the religion. The course is structured into two sections. Section one deals with the understanding of the religion. The topics were chosen to let the Seminarians appreciate the value of the religion of the indigenous African. Topics treated under this section include the following; what is African traditional religion? Should it be in the singular or plural? Terminologies used by early European scholars in describing the religion – a critique of the terminologies. The belief system underpinning the religion, scriptures of the religion, worship life of the indigenous African, preparation for worship and essence of the rituals, religious personages, places and time in the ritual of worship, divination, sacrifice, prayer/libation and dreams/ visions. The second part of the course is devoted to the discussion of ethical issues in the religion. Topics taught under this section include: foundations of indigenous African ethics, taboos (sex and sexual taboos, environmental taboos, murder and suicide taboo) and bio-ethics (euthanasia, abortion).

2.1.2 BT 420: African Philosophy and Values

This course is designed to introduce and guide reflection on philosophy and values from an African perspective. The course is aimed at exploring the nature of beliefs, practices and

institutions as embedded in cultural philosophy and values of the African people. The course critically examines the meaning and significance of African maxims in community life of the people of Africa. The students are encouraged to deepen their appreciation and practice of African cultural values. The course has been structure in four sections. Section one deals with the worldview, philosophy and religious values underpinning the people's philosophical thinking. Section two discusses the African ethical community. Issues such as the moral personhood, humanity and brotherhood, the African understanding of community, the individual and the community and the ethical dimension of the community are discussed. Section three looks at the social and moral foundation where topics such as moral formation and African traditional values, Ancestors and morality, virtues and vices, an ethic of responsibility, Justice and morality, and socio-economic and political ethics are treated. Section four discusses the challenge of moral values in contemporary Africa. Under this section, issues such as tradition and modernity, child abuse and neglect, ethnicity and ethnocentrism and Corruption and abuse of power are discussed.

After thirteen weeks of lectures for the regular students and four weeks for the sandwich students, it was the cardinal objective of the course to inculcate into the students the spirit of tolerance and appreciation for the indigenous religion of Africa since most will be working in societies where adherents of the religion may be residing.

3.0 Importance of the teaching of indigenous African religion and African philosophy and values to the Seminarians

3.1 African Traditional Religion

This section will discuss the issues covered under the questionnaire that was administered to the Seminarians. The questionnaire was administered on two set of Seminarians. The first set of

Seminarians comprised of the regular students, made up of nine levels 200 and five level 400. The second set was administered on the sandwich students who were fifteen.

The questionnaire comprised of ten questions with the sole aim of soliciting from the Seminarians their assessment of the course and how the studying of African Traditional Religion would do to their ministry as potential priests. Analysis of the questionnaire answered by the regular students follows.

3.2 Regular students

The Seminarians were asked to give their understanding of African traditional religion. The Seminarians showed the understanding of the religion of the indigenous African. The religion was said to be the religion of Africans handed down orally from generation to generation. A respondent puts it simply: “African traditional religion is about the beliefs, practices and customs of indigenous Africans.”

The respondents were clear in their minds that the teaching of African traditional religion in the Seminary was beneficial to them. They were of the view that the course had helped them to broaden their knowledge about the African culture and help them appreciate the religion. A respondent made the point that “teaching of ATR in the seminary is very necessary because it helps to clear the minds of Seminarians about certain conceptions and perceptions about the religion which were wrong. The course will also help us to relate properly with the religion and its adherents.” Brown makes a similar point when he posits that

As we study traditional religion or Islam (or Christianity for that matter), we must constantly bear in mind the correlation between the general phenomena of religion and the specific aspects of each particular faith. Every religion tries in some way to explain

human existence and our links to certain absolutes of time and being. In the fullest measure possible, we should learn how the followers of any religion feel and breathe these connections. To do this with reverence and intensity will bring us not only to a better understanding of how our neighbours live their faith but also to a deeper appreciation of the essence of our own.¹⁸

On the question of the relevance of the teaching of African Traditional Religion in the Seminary, the respondent were unanimous in the views that the course was relevant for them as trainee priests who may be sent to the rural areas where in some case the indigenous religion may still be strong, it will help them in contextualizing the gospel of Christ.

In response to how the impact of the studying of African Traditional Religion will have on their ministry priests, they were clear that the course will help them to understand indigenous believers and enable them relate well with people. It will help them to witness to the people effectively now that they have learnt about their religion.

3.3 Sandwich students

The sandwich students comprise people from other denominations other than Anglicans. There were among them Methodist Priests and non-priests. They responded to the same set of questionnaire as the regular students. The respondents were clear in their minds that the teaching of indigenous African religion in the Seminary was important because it helped them as students and priests to appreciate the indigenous religion of the African and would help them to relate well with the adherents. A respondent made this point more saying “it would enable Seminarians to go out of the Seminary well equipped with a comprehensive understanding of the religion of

the Africans.” Another respondent, a Methodist, says, “Priests who are trained must be all round and know about the faith of others even before thinking of winning them.”

In response to a question on the benefit of studying the indigenous religion of the African in the Seminary, respondents were unanimous that the course has benefited them a lot. A respondent makes this point clearer, “the study of ATR has been very beneficial to me as it has erased my previous negative thought about the subject into a very positive one and have come to appreciate it.” Another says, “I have come to appreciate the religion of my own people. ATR teaches me how to relate with those who practice the religion. ATR enables me to understand the reason why they do things in certain peculiar way.”

On how the study of the indigenous religion of Africa will impact on the ministry as priests, the respondents were clear that their ministry as priests will be greatly enhanced by the course. One respondent put it thus, “as a priest, the impact will be great since I can understand the religion as a way of life, a religion that abhors evil and uphold goodness and justice. It is a means of the people’s expression to the creator.” Another says, “It will help me to appreciate the indigenous African and again not to brand them as sinners, pagans and fetish.”

3.4 African Philosophy and Values

The questionnaire was administered on the sandwich students to solicit their views on the teaching of the course in the seminary. The respondents were asked on their understanding of the course. The students made the point that they understood what the course was about. A

respondent put it thus: “an academic enquiry into the philosophy and values of Africans especially as it relates to religion.” Another state, “it is an attempt to expose students to the various traditional values in Africa and how modernity has affected them.” On the question on what they thought of the teaching of the course in the seminary, the respondent made the point that the teaching of the course would help them appreciate the African moral values. One respondent says: “this course is important to every seminarian since they will be part and parcel of the communities they may find themselves. They need to know why the African does things in certain ways.”

On what they had benefited from the teaching of the course, the respondents were clear in their mind that the course had done them a lot of good. One respondent had this to say: “I gained much insight into the norms, proverbs and systems of adjudication of the indigenous African. Also, I became aware that in Africa, people do not live in isolation but they relate to one another.” Another says, “I have understood the moral and ethical values of the African and as an African, going to put them into practice.” The respondents were clear that the course would have an impact on their ministry as priests. One had this to say: “it will help me to fully understand that the African has a system which they use to order their lives and it need to be appreciated.” Another said: “as a priest, this course will enable me to open up and respect the African tradition.”

4.0 Conclusion

This article has been an attempt to show the importance of teaching the African Traditional Religion and African Philosophy and Values in an African theological seminary. The respondents, regular and sandwich, attested to this fact in the responses to the questionnaire.

From the study, it became clear that if the trainee priests will be very successful in their chosen vocation, it was necessary for them to be acquainted with the religion of the indigenous African. This is important as it will help erase any negative attitude the Seminarians may have against the indigenous people. The awareness that the Seminarian will be operating in a plural and multi faith environment is important if he/she is to succeed. Moyo makes this point more succinctly when he says:

The root cause of the crisis of the ministry and Church in Africa most probably lies in the lack of a dynamic theological perspective on the part of the current Church leadership, in the application to Africa of theological responses to circumstances in Europe or America, and in persistent neo-colonialist ministry structures which were developed within the context or even in collaboration with secular colonialist regimes. What is needed is an indigenous African Christian theology, and the professional ministry or ministers must be equipped for theological activity through an aggressive and contextual theological education program.¹⁹

St. Nicholas Seminary in Cape Coast is in the forefront of making theological education relevant and responsive to the African context with the teaching of the African Traditional Religion and African Philosophy and Values as courses in the Seminary

End Notes

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