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Religion and Morality in Ghana: A Reflection

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ABSTRACT: *Several scholars have written extensively on religion and morality. These works generally try to answer the question of what determines morality. While some scholars strongly maintain that religion is the determinant of morality, some are sceptical and others do not accept such stance. Such discourse has found its way into African ethics with views from the west and among some Africans who maintain that the morality of Africans is religious base. With these arguments on board, some prolific Ghanaian writers have argued that whether or not religion determines the morality of Africans, in Ghana however, among the Akan, it is the society and the traditions that determine the morality of its members but not religion. This paper joins the debate to bring to the fore that it is not “the society and traditions” that determine the morality of the Akan and Ghanaians in general. The paper argues that the Akan and the Ghanaian society thrive on religion and almost all the traditions instituted have religious imports. For these reasons, the paper concludes that religion is the determinant of the morality of Ghanaians including the Akan but not society and traditions.*

KEYWORDS: Ghanaian, morality, religion.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, several scholars have raised arguments concerning what determines the morality of a group of people. Whereas some scholars are optimistic about the fact that it is religion, others maintain that it is the society and the peoples' traditions. In Ghana, some prolific scholars have joined this debate. They have argued that whereas religion plays a role in determining the morality of the Akan² people of Ghana, they maintain that it is rather society and the people's traditions. By joining the debate however, I am of the view that almost all Ghanaian traditional societies including the Akan societies thrive on *religion*³. Secondly, almost all the traditions found in the Ghanaian culture have religious imports. In this paper, I will revisit and review some of the arguments on what determines morality and then draw my conclusion.

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² Appiah-Sekyere, P. & Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2012). Teenage pregnancy in the life and thought of the Akan: Moral perspectives. *Sociology Study*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 129.

³ By *religion*, I mean the decrees and sanctions of the Supreme Being (God or Allah), lesser gods and spirits beings.

What is Religion?

The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin word *religio*, which means to 'bind together'.⁴ Over the centuries, influential thinkers have offered their own definitions on the term religion. However, virtually all of such definitions have been found wanting. In some cases, the definitions are too narrow or too broad. In other cases, the definitions are so vague and inclusive that they do not sufficiently delimit religion from other areas of human thought such as psychology, law, economics and physics, etc. However, in this paper I will consider just few of the definitions.

Some Definitions of Religion

In an attempt to explain what religion is, I will consider the definitions by; Clifford Geertz (1973), Durkheim (1915), Hestings James (1952) and Karl Marx (1844). Clifford Geertz (1973) defines religion as "a system of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic".⁵ Adding to Geertz (1973), Durkheim (1915) defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set aside and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them".⁶ Hestings (1952) says, "the term religion, clearly refers to certain characteristic types of *data*, a belief, practice, feelings, moods and attitudes, etc".⁷ For Karl Marx (1844), religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.⁸

However, for me, religion is an embodiment of beliefs, practices and one's attachment to something considered worthwhile in one's life. These beliefs and practices may include; belief in preternatural forces (i.e. Supreme Being, divinities, lesser gods, angels etc.) and making libation, prayers, burning incense, bowing etc. respectively. With one's attachment to something considered worthwhile, I am referring to what a person have delight in and spends much time and attention on. For example, I will be right to posit that a person's religion is football games, eating of some particular meals and avoiding the eating of some other meals, visiting a particular sacred groove at a specific time and performing some acts repetitively.

What is Morality?

Another complex term is morality whose Latin rendition is "*moralis*", meaning *customs or manners*.⁹ The term "morality" can be used either descriptively or normatively. According to Gert (2012) when "morality" is used simply to refer to a code of conduct put forward by any actual group, including a society, whether it is distinguished from etiquette, law, and religion, then it is being used in a descriptive sense. Morality is used in the descriptive sense when it refers to important attitudes of individuals. Inasmuch as one can refer to the morality of the

⁴ Smith, W. C. (1978). *The meaning of end of religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, pp. 31, 112.

⁵ Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books, p. 90.

⁶ Durkheim, E. (1915). *Elementary forms of religious life*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., p. 47

⁷ Hestings, J. (Ed.). (1952). *Encyclopedia of religion and ethics*, Vol. X, New. York, p. 662.

⁸ Raines, J. (Ed.). (2011). *Marx on religion*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

⁹ Morality comes from the Latin *moralis* meaning customs of manners, See: http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:-jT0jJW272MJ:www.pearsonhighered.com/assets/hip/us/hip_us_pearsonhighered/samplechapter/0205053149.pdf+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=gh, Retrieved on 17th July, 2013.

Greeks, so one can refer to the morality of a particular person. The normative sense of “morality” refers to a universal guide to behaviour that, in plausible specified conditions, all rational persons would put forward for governing the behaviour of all moral agents.¹⁰

It must be established that morality can be applied in many aspects. Some of the aspects are religion, morality and nature, individual morality, and social morality. Religious morality refers to a human being in relationship to a supernatural being or beings. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, for example, the first three of the Ten Commandments pertain to this kind of morality. “Morality and nature” refers to a human being in relationship to nature. Individual morality refers to individuals in relation to themselves and to an individual code of morality that may or may not be sanctioned by any society or religion. Social morality concerns a human being in relation to other human beings.¹¹

Some Definitions of Morality

There are many definitions for the term morality. However, I will consider the definitions of Kwasi Wiredu (1992), Kwame Gyekye (1996) and Austin Fagothey (1959). For Wiredu (1992), “morality in the strictest sense is universal and essential to human culture. Morality for him is, simply, the observance of rules for the harmonious adjustment of the interests of the individual to those of others in society. He adds that morality does not just refer to the conformity to the requirements of the harmony of interests, but also that conformity to those requirements which is inspired by an imaginative and sympathetic identification with the interests of others even at the cost of a possible curtailment of one’s own interests”.¹²

Gyekye (1996) seems to share similar view with Wiredu (1992). For Gyekye (1996), morality is “a set of social rules and norms intended to guide the conduct of people in a society. He explains that the rules and norms emerge from and are anchored in people’s beliefs about right and wrong conduct and good and bad character. For him, morality is social, arising out of the relations between individuals; if there were no such a thing as human society, there would be no such thing as morality. It is in this same vein that Gyekye (1996) posits that because morality is essentially a social phenomenon, it can emerge only in a human society in which there is an overriding concern for harmonious and cooperative living consideration for the interest of others and hence, a sense of duty to others, are intrinsic to the meaning and practice of morality”.¹³

Fagothey (1959) defines morality as the “quality of human acts by which we call them right or wrong, good or evil”.¹⁴ In other words, morality to Fagothey (1959) is the rightness or wrongness of human acts. He further explains that morality is either objective or subjective

¹⁰ Gert, B. (2012). *The definition of morality*, *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, (Fall 2012 ed.), Edward N. Zalta (Ed.), Retrieved on 17th July, 2013, from <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2012/entries/morality-definition/>>

¹¹For notes on religious morality, morality and nature, individual and morality and social morality See: http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:-jT0jJW272MJ:www.pearsonhighered.com/asset/s/hip/us/hip_us_pearsonhighered/samplechapter/0205053149.pdf+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=gh, Retrieved on 17th July, 2013.

¹² Wiredu, K. (1992). “The moral foundations of an African culture”. In P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (Eds.), *African philosophy reader* (p. 306). London and New York: Routledge.

¹³ Gyekye, K. (1996). *African cultural values: An introduction*. Accra: Sankofa Publishing Company, p. 55.

¹⁴ Fagothey, A. S. J. (1959). *Right and reason: Ethics in theory and practice*, (2nd ed.). Rockford, IL: Tan Book and Publishers, p. 112.

according as it overlooks the personal peculiarities of the doer of the act or considers them. It is natural or conventional according as it finds right and wrong in the very nature of the act or in determination by positive law. For Fagothey (1959), the determinants of morality are *the act itself*, *the motive* and *the circumstances*. By '*the act itself*', Fagothey (1959) argues that it is simply what the agent wills, considering it not in the physical but in the moral codes. In reference to what he means by '*the motive*', he posits that the motive or intention is what the agent personally wishes to achieve by the act over and above what the act naturally tend to. Finally, by what he refers to as '*the circumstances*', he points out to the fact that the circumstances are the accidental surroundings of the act.¹⁵

Morality for me however, is the hermeneutics of human act and its quality that can be judged right or wrong in the light of a standardised set of codes.

Who is a Ghanaian?

A Ghanaian generally refers to a person who has his/her origin from Ghana. By origin, I mean the place (nation Ghana) where that person can trace his/her ancestry and the rights of that person being backed by the constitution of Ghana. However, the *Citizenship Act, 2000 (Act 591)* of the Republic of Ghana clearly defines a Ghanaian: A person born before 6th March, 1957 is a citizen of Ghana by birth if— (a) He/She was born in Ghana and at least one of his/her parents or grandparents was born in Ghana; or (b) He/She was born outside Ghana and one of his/her parents was born in Ghana.¹⁶

Society: The Determinant of Morality

As I have already established, many scholars have argued that the society and the peoples' traditions determine a group's morality. From the Ghanaian context, Gyekye (1995) and Wiredu (1992) are some of the prominent scholars who have argued from such stance. Here, I will present and review their arguments.

Gyekye (1995) does not deny the role religion plays in shaping the morality of the Akan people of Ghana however, for him, morality is not determined by religion rather society itself. By this assertion he explains that in Akan moral system (or African moral system generally), good or moral value is determined in terms of its consequences for humankind and human society. One can understand Gyekye (1995) to mean that African morality originates from the considerations of human welfare and interests, not from divine pronouncements. He adds that actions that promote human welfare or interest are good, while those that detract from human welfare are bad.¹⁷

I am of the view however, that if Gyekye should argue from such a stance, it implies therefore that, he is referring to a 'religion-free-society'¹⁸, which I know there is no such society in Ghana. The question however is, is the Ghanaian and the Akan world view of such an orientation where according to Gyekye (1995) "good or moral value is determined in terms of its consequences for humankind and human society"? From the submission of

¹⁵ Fagothey, A. S. J. (1959), pp. 145-150.

¹⁶ Parliament of the Republic of Ghana. (5th January, 2001). *Citizenship Act, 2000 (Act 591)*. Ghana: National Legislative Bodies, Retrieved on 19th July, 2013 from <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3eda135a2.html>

¹⁷ Gyekye, K. (1995). *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme*, (rev. ed.). Philadelphia: Temple University Press

¹⁸ By the term 'religion-free-society' I mean a kind of society where all moral judgements are based on what the society thinks to be right or wrong without referring to any Ultimate Being.

Gyekye, I observe that he seems to forget that religion permeates in every aspect (including the food they eat, the dress they put on, their speeches, the governance etc.) of Ghanaians, which the Akan he refers to is of no exemption.

Wiredu (1992) who seems to argue in the line of Gyekye (1995) affirms that, although the fear of punishment from the deities may focus people's mind on the path of virtue 'it is not this that creates the sense of moral obligation'. The fear of arrest can deter a robber but if the robber has a sense of morality in the first place, he would not conceive of the idea of robbing.¹⁹ By referring to Wiredu's quotation, which is "if the robber has a sense of morality in the first place..." the question I ask myself is where comes from that "sense of morality" Wiredu is referring to? Is that sense of morality emanating from a king, queen mother, society, traditions or from what the robber believes in, in this case his religion?

Religion: The Determinant of Morality

"Africans are in the natural sense of the word truly and deeply religious of whom it can be said that they eat religiously, drink religiously, bathe religiously, dress religiously and sin religiously".²⁰

A number of scholars have maintained that Africans are "notoriously"²¹, "incurably"²² and even "in all things"²³ religious people. The scholars add that religion so deeply permeates all the spheres of their (Africans) lives that it cannot be distinguished from non-religious aspects of life. For this reason, in the African traditional life, there are no atheists and that the African cultural heritage is intensely and pervasively religious. This attribution of religiosity to the African peoples, though a general one, may be said to be true of Ghanaians. Thus, Opoku (1974) observed:

"The phenomenon of religion is so pervasive in the life of the Akan, and so inextricably bound up with their culture, that it is not easy to isolate what purely religious from other aspects of life. It may be said without fear of exaggeration that life in the Akan world is religion and religion is life".²⁴

One can infer from Opoku (1974) that he uses the Akan as a springboard to look at the source of morality. However, since the greater population of Ghana is made up of the Akan^{25,26,27} it logically follows that Ghanaian morality is religiously determined. In his other works, thus writing on Akan morality, Opoku (1978) writes:

¹⁹ Wiredu, K. (1992). "The moral foundations of an African culture". In P. H. Coetzee & A. P. J. Roux (Eds.), *African philosophy reader* (p. 306). London and New York: Routledge.

²⁰ Leonard, A. G. (1966). *The lower Niger and its peoples*. London: Frank Cass.

²¹ Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy*, (2nd rev. ed.). Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, p. 1.

²² Parrinder, E. G. (1969). *Religion in Africa*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 28–29.

²³ Idowu, Bolaji E. (1962). *Olodumare: God in Yoruba belief*, London: Longmans Group Ltd, p. 146.

²⁴ Opoku, K. A. (1974). "Aspects of Akan worship". In C. Eric Lincoln (Ed.), *The black experience in religion* (p. 286). New York: Doubleday.

²⁵ Appiah-Sekyere, P. & Awuah-Nyamekye, S. (2012). Teenage pregnancy in the life and thought of the Akan: Moral perspectives. *Sociology Study*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 129.

²⁶ The Akan. See http://www.indexmundi.com/ghana/demographics_profile.html, Retrieved on 31st May, 2013.

²⁷ 2010 Population Census statistics. See <http://www.niica.on.ca/ghana/people.aspx>, Retrieved on 31st May, 2013.

“Generally, morality originates from religious considerations, and so pervasive is religion in African culture that the two cannot be separated from each other ... Thus, morality flows out of religion, and through this the conduct of individuals is regulated; and any break of the moral code is regarded as evil and punishable... And this system has one desirable ideal- social harmony and peace for the good of man and society”.²⁸

Opoku (1978) further explains his stance by citing a Ghanaian Akan proverb to establish his point that morality flows from religion and for that matter God. *Onyame mpe bone*, which literary means God is against sin or evil.²⁹

According to Opoku (1978), this proverb is a clear indication that morality flows from God, and that the nature of God demands an appropriate response from His creatures. Adding to Opoku (1978), Harris and Sawyerr (1968) also refer to the Mende myth that explains the origin of sacrifice of fowls, performed when someone has offended another to illustrate God’s attitude towards morality.³⁰ For Mbiti (1969), morality flows from religion. By this assertion, he argues that one should view morality as an authoritative code of conduct directly sanctioned by superhuman being (god, deities and even ancestors). The moral code that Mbiti (1969) refers to is therefore not autonomous, but its autonomy is derived from the creator god. Any breach of the moral code would accordingly be an offence against god and his instruction. Mbiti (1969) points out that there is in existence and operation numerous taboos and prohibitions in African societies which Ghana is of no exemption. These taboos and prohibitions, which have their source from religion according to Mbiti, are instituted to shape the moral lives of the people belonging to that society. Taboos and prohibitions such as, stealing, pre-marital sex, murder, incest, having sexual intercourse in the bush, adultery and suicide were viewed with serious concerns and offenders were seriously punished not by man as such, but predominantly by the gods and the ancestral spirits. By this, the divine (gods and ancestors) inflict drought, infertility and sicknesses on the life of the offender and the entire society. Hence, the fear of the punishment by the gods kept every native African in check and all strived to live good moral lives.³¹

Magesa (1997) who shares Mbiti’s view above argues, “morality originates with God and flows into the ancestors. God is the giver of life and the power behind everything. The way of human life, (i.e. tradition) originates from God. Tradition contains the moral code and prescriptions for an ethical life”.³² Idowu (1962) joins the above debate by sharing similar views with Mbiti (1969) and Magesa (1997).

What Determines the Morality of Ghanaians: Religion or Society and Traditions?

²⁸ Opoku, K. A. (1978). *West African traditional religion*. Singapore: FEP International Private Ltd., p. 152.

²⁹ Opoku, K. A. (1978), p. 153.

³⁰ Harris, W. T. & Sawyerr, H. (1968). *The springs of Mende belief and conduct*. Freetown: Sierra Leone University Press.

³¹ Mbiti, J. S. (1977). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

³² Magesa, L. (2002). *African religion: The moral traditions of abundant life*. New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, p. 35.

In the first place, for Gyekye (1995) and Wiredu (1992) to have argued that the morality of the Akan is determined by society, I do not side with them. This is partly because strictly speaking, in every traditional society across the length and breadth of Ghana, which the Akan is of no exception, religion forms the foundations of their ethics. The traditions and laws are religious based. In the same vein, every member (whether a Christian, Muslim or whatever religion one belongs to) is obliged to adhere to the decrees given to the society by the gods or spirit beings. Secondly, I must establish that the influences that religion exerts on the lives of people in almost every society, which the Ghanaian society is of no exception is immense. In Ghana, religion influences customs, beliefs, politics, food, proverbs, dance, print, writings, paintings, symbols and many others.³³

I must add that almost every Ghanaian belongs to one religion or the other.³⁴ These religions as we are aware have codes and modes of conducts that have their source from their respective Supreme Beings. These codes and modes of conducts are enshrined in their holy books. For example, the *Holy Bible* for Christians and the *Qur'an, Hadith, Sunnah and Fiqh* etc. for the Muslims. However, with reference to African traditional religion, such codes and modes of conducts according to Mbiti (1989) “are written not on paper but in people’s hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings”.³⁵ These codes and modes of conduct are been instituted and taught to enable people to become morally upright and conscious of the demands their Supreme Being.

Let us consider the Ghanaian rhyme and proverbs below, which explains the fact that Ghanaian morality is religiously determined. The rhyme below shows how Ghanaians are conscious about God or *Onyame* and his demands.

Onyame wɔhɔ, God is exists

Onyame wɔhɔ, God is exists

Onyame wɔ mbea nyinaa, God is everywhere

Woye bɔne a ɔbehu, ɔbete, ɔbetwerɛ, If you sin, He will see, He will hear, He will write

Woye bɔne ɔrenhyira wo, If you sin, He will not bless you.

Proverbs

Onyame mpe bɔne, this means, God hates sin.

This proverb points out God’s displeasure for sin. The proverb admonishes every Ghanaian to eschew from the act of sin and to do no harm to other human beings. This proverb however, partly explains why in most cases, a disgruntled Ghanaian who has every cause to harm his adversary would not, because he/she knows that God or *Onyame* hates sin.

Onyame hyira onipa papa, this means, God blesses a person with good deeds.

³³ Pobee, J. S. (1991). *Religion and politics in Ghana*. Accra: Asempa Publishers.

³⁴ Ghana Statistical Service (May, 2012). *2010 Population & housing census: Summary report of results*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service. Retrieved on 21st August, 2013, from http://www.statsghana.gov.gh/pop_stats.html

³⁵ Mbiti, J. S. (1989). *African religions and philosophy*. (2nd rev. ed.). London: Heinemann Educational Books, p. 3.

The proverb above points out the need for people to put up good deeds to enable them to earn God's blessings. This proverb partly explains the reason why Ghanaians are described as good people, hospitable, kind and loving people in the world.

CONCLUSION

I am of the view that the morality of Ghanaians is religiously determined. This is because, as I have already explained elsewhere in this paper, religion permeates every aspect of the Ghanaians. Religion therefore puts a check on the way Ghanaians think, behave, talk, react to day-to-day life issues and how they must relate to their fellow humans. In almost every Ghanaian traditional society, a person would not want to go and fish in a river or farm on a particular day because that person does not want to break and incur the curses of the gods but not the society and traditions. The rules or codes that Ghanaian traditional societies enact to check the morality of humans have their imports from the Supreme Being (*Onyame*), lesser gods and spirit beings.

It is the gods that will demand of society what society must and must not do to incur the blessings or invoke the curses of the gods respectively. The reason for which Ghanaian Christians and Muslims would want to put up good deeds and eschew from bad deeds is not that society or the traditions said so, rather it is because their religion (God or Allah) said so. I must establish however, that it is religion that determines the morality of Ghanaians wherever they go to. This is because their religion is in their mind and heart but not the society or traditions. Therefore, it would be incorrect for one to give an impression that it is society and the traditions of Ghanaians that determine their morality.

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