

## **IMPLICATIONS OF MORAL RELATIVISM ON AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY**

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### **Abstract**

*Authenticity, originality, and responsible personhood of African Christians have been clamored for by Christian scholars over the years. One of the many areas that are given attention is African Christianity in relation to moral ethics. The moral value system of the Africans had guided the people towards peaceful co-existence in the politico-social and religious settings even before the advent of other religions in Africa. Christianity was introduced to Africans by Western missionaries and it was done in their culture. Western world has developed ethical systems, a development in their culture, among which is the theory of moral relativism. This ethical system is conflictual with the African culture and morality. Moral collapse is the inevitable outcome of addiction to the fallacy that the good is relative to the person, despite moral relativism being accepted in social practice today in society and even in the Church. This fallacy is what is creating the alarming collapse of both public righteousness and private morality in Nigerian culture. This paper is an investigation of the features of the philosophy “moral relativism” which is conflictual with African Christian ethical values. If the Christian moral ethical system is considered in the African context, it will brood over moral relativism because moral ethics in African Christianity is normative and absolute. The relevance of African Christian ethics is a strong belief that ethics and morality are God’s initiative and not man’s. Actions can be judged right or wrong as they conform to, or contradict God’s revelation. The method to be employed is historical and analytical; this is because the issue of morality will be analyzed in Western and African contexts.*

**Keywords:** Moral, Christianity, Relativism, African.

### **Introduction**

African Christianity is plagued with challenges. Most of these challenges come from the quest of how relevant is Christianity to an African. This usually needs

a response that is appropriate and relevant to African problems. The birth of these similar questions arises from the view that Christianity is a Western religion.

One aspect of this challenge, is the question of what action, conduct, or pattern of behavior is morally right, or wrong, good or bad, recommendable or reprehensible and what measure can we, if at all there are such objectives (right and wrong actions)? In the Western world, there are developed ethical systems among which is the theory of moral relativism.

The ethical system of moral relativism seems at every level conflictual with the African culture and morality. Thus, this paper, argues that African culture provides the fertile soil for African Christian ethics. It argues that ethics in African Christianity is normative, and absolute rather than relativist and or autonomous and therefore, an adequate ethical system. The aim is to proffer some suggestions that African Christian ethics should be counter-cultural. In other words, it should be and do what “ought” to and not what it “is”.

### **The Problem of Conflicting Ethical Standards**

What measure can human morality be judged? This question for many centuries would continue to occupy and consume the energies of ethicists or better say, moralists. The problem of conflicting ethical standards has generated a lot of ethical theories. Early moralist philosophers saw virtue and reason as a basic norm to discern moral values. [1] These philosophers understand the duo of sound reason and virtue as universal instruments to ascertain moral objectives. With the emergence of Immanuel Kant (spurred by David Hume), things have never remained the same in Theology, Philosophy, and Ethics. Considered to be the father of critical Philosophy, Kant was critical of anything within the reach of human reason. Thus, his approach to moral theory and ethics as a discipline is enormous. Kant thought that “reason was an imperfect tool for apprehending God; he indicated that it could

[1] A. M. Robins, ‘Morality’ in *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* ed. by Campbell Campbell Jack (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2006):453

be useful for apprehending modes of human behavior. In other words, ethical or moral choices must be rational.

Grounded under this dilemma, there come several ethical theories, one of which is the moral-relativism to which we now turn.

### **Conceptual Clarification of the Term Moral Relativism**

Before giving a conceptual clarification on the concept of “moral relativism”, it would be necessary to define the terms ethics and morality. The terms ethics and morality are in most cases used interchangeably. Words like ‘ethics’, ‘morals’, and ‘morality’ are often used synonymously. The same is true of ethical’ and ‘moral’.[1] However, the terms can be used differently, Ethics can be viewed as theoretical while ‘morality’ is practical. Thus, ethics is taken to be “the branch of philosophy that reflects on such issues as the source of moral norms for governing

action in the moral matter”.<sup>[2]</sup> In other words, ethics involves reflection on what factors make actions good or bad, right or wrong both for individuals and for social groups.<sup>[3]</sup> Morality on the other hand, according to Kunhiyop “refers to actual human conduct viewed about right and wrong, good and evil”.<sup>[4]</sup> However, most scholars adopt the same usage of the terms. This approach will be adopted throughout this paper. Ethics, morals, and morality would be used interchangeably in this work.

Moral relativism is the combination of two different terms. Relativism is the view that there are no absolute truths, norms, or morals. Subjects such as God, truth, and morals are only

[1] John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, (Illinois: A Division of Goodnews Publishers, 1993): 17

[2] Paul L. Nehmam, *Ethics in a Christian Context* ( New York: Harper & Row, 1963): 25

[3] Norman Shields, *Christian Ethics* (Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks, 2004): 9

[4] Samuel N. Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Nairobi: Word Alive Publishers, 2008): 4 relative to an individual or in a broader sense to each particular culture. In other words, what  $x$  may consider being true, may not be for  $y$ . While morality on the other hand as noted above involves those codes of conduct, actions, and behaviors that are good or bad, right or wrong. It is interesting to note that, the subject of morality occupies a significant seat in the history of human existence. Each human society is governed by certain moral norms and standards. It dictates those actions that are morally acceptable and detestable in any given society. Morality as a matter of behavior, action, and pursuit of good and right living<sup>[1]</sup> is subjected to critical contemplations on what constitutes the rightness or wrongness, goodness or badness of action, behavior, and values of an individual or a society. Every society, organization, and individuals pose certain moral choices that seem to define them. The situation is that moral values, norms, and objectives seem to be relative. According to Lena Dominic “relativism may be defined as the position that moral judgments are true or false relative to either cultural or individual standards and not to be objective or universal standards.<sup>[2]</sup> Perhaps, the propositions below best explain the subject at hand, where P stands for the propositions.

P1 Y holds that smoking is morally wrong for X but morally good for Y

P2 Y holds that abortion is morally wrong while X holds the contrary

P3 X and Y have different moral values based on their context and culture.

P4 Therefore, what is morally wrong for X does not hold to be so for Y. Y has distinctive moral values that depend on his personal choice, and cultural content and vice versa.

This follows that, actions that one culture considers morally acceptable another culture can hold to be morally reprehensible. The bone of contention is that there are no universal

[1] A. M. Robins, "Morality", in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics* ed. by Campbell Jack (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 2006): 453

[2] Lena Dominic's "*Moral Relativism and its Effects*" online source available from [http://sevenpillarsinstitute.org/moral\\_relativism\\_and\\_its\\_effects/](http://sevenpillarsinstitute.org/moral_relativism_and_its_effects/)

norms at which human conduct can be measured. The thesis, is that "moral beliefs are influenced by conventions, and these vary greatly between societies".[1] Hence, Freeman, et give a vivid description that a perspective on the range of our values and beliefs is known as moral relativism and it is the theory that assertions about what is right and wrong are relative to individual, societal, and cultural bounds. As a result, moral judgments cannot be made outside of these limitations. [2] There are two types of relativism[3]

### **African Christianity**

African Christianity can be best described in the terms of African quest for self-identity. Beginning in the early sixties African scholars wrote and defended a version of Christianity that is distinctively African. The reason for this is simple, to purge African Christians from Western influences. The assumption is that the Western missionaries brought not a gospel that is naked. Christianity as imported to Africans by the Westerners is filled with Western culture. This makes it more or less nonrelevant to the Africans thereby making Christianity a Western religion. Spurred by this background, theologians from the African continent were not hesitant to repudiate the Western view of the Africans. For them, Christianity must not only promise the Africans God's salvation of man from sin but also how it relates and identifies with them in times of trouble most especially from evil spirits.

Perhaps the publication of the African Bible Commentary (ABC)[4] is the climax of the quest for a Christianity that is distinctively African. According to Kwame Bediako, "the

[1] Ibid.

[2] R. Edward Freeman, Patricia H. Werhane and Andrew Wicks, *Moral Relativism*, available at *SSRN Electronic Journal* · June 2009 DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.1417204

[3] Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Kousser, *Relativism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998): 12

[4] This commentary is by African scholars across the continent. The authors however were representatives of major denominations in the continent. The book aims to provide African Christians with a book that best explains the Scriptures for them and to correct the misapplication of the gospel in the African context.

African Bible Commentary attempts to relate the Scriptures and African cultures and in so doing to seek ways in the gospel may be seen to be relevant to African cultures''[1]. The commentary did not only interpret the Biblical message for the Africans but also discussed various issues that border and concern African Christianity. It is worth of note that, most of these issues raised in the articles have little or no relevance for the non-African Christian. The quest, however, is of a long-standing history.

The diversity of the Christian community in Africa and of its theological practitioners has produced numerous divergent approaches to African theology[2]. It is given this that various notable universities' departments of Religious Studies across Africa sought to establish colorations between Christianity and African cultures. The fruit of this is an appreciation of African traditional beliefs as in many instances compatible with the biblical revelation. Guided by this, African Christianity struggles to sieve itself off of Western religious influence. The self-imposition of the Western view of religion, politics, economics, ethics, and values by the colonialists and early missionaries has been seen and meant to be for the Africans as a deprivation of self-identity. Kato, an evangelical theologian examined the works of John Mbiti of Kenya and Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria whose position for African Christianity favoured syncretistic practices. Kato aims to highlight those parts of these sources that either overtly or subtly support a syncretistic evaluation of the value of traditional African religions for Christian faith and practice in Africa. For Kato, he appealed that African Christians be Christian Africans. He wished for a "really African and

[1]Kwame Bediako, "Scriptures as the Interpreter of Culture and Tradition" in *African Bible Commentary* ed by Tokumbo Adeyemo (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006):3

[2]W. P. Bowers, "African Theology" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Erdmans, 1988):29

authentically biblical" form of Christianity. [1] At the same time, Kato conducts a thorough biblical criticism of these components. Tienou rightly observed that "Christianity in its various manifestations does not stand or fall with western culture...so Christianity can wear a multi-colored cultural garb." [2] Thus, church leaders and theologians from Africa have virtually at all levels discussed theological themes and sensitively contextualize them to be distinctively African. The sensitive illustration and application of biblical truth in African faces made Christianity a relevant religion for the Africans. He sees meaning in his new religion (Christianity) and thereby enriches his religious life.

The need for Christianity that is distinctively African arises from the problems that confront the modern man as O'Donovan would say "There is a great need in modern Africa for biblical Christianity... the church (African church) urgently

needs to take a biblical position on such issues as tribalism, poverty, injustice, sexual immorality, abortion... and other matters related to modernity and urban life African.’[3]

### **The Distinctive of African Christian Morality**

Culture and religion are inseparable for the Africans. [4] Thus, it would be natural for the Africans to understand Christian morality in the light of their cultural background. As such the distinctiveness of African Christians's morality can be demonstrated in Africans' view of issues bordering the African society. This includes the communal ethic presentation, the concepts of good and evil, man's moral duties, obligations, and rights in his society among others. These fundamental facts underline African Christian morality.

[1]Paul Bowers, “Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato’s Legacy A Review of Byang H. Kato, Theological Pitfalls in Africa” *Themelios* 5.3 (May 1980) pages 33-34

[2]TiteTienou, *The Theological Task of the Church in Africa: Theological Perspectives in Africa* (Achimota: Africa Christian Press, 1990):23

[3]Wilbur O’Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa* (Bukuru: African Christian Textbooks, 1988):249

[4] John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heineman, 1969): 272-74

Given the above preamble, African Christian Ethics cannot be divorced from African traditional beliefs. Its distinctiveness lies in her (African Christian Ethics) integration of biblical ethics and African Culture. This, however, is a move away from the Western ethical systems. Instead of emphasizing human self-autonomy like Western ethics, the central themes in African Christian ethics are God, Community, and Spirituality. What this means is that the African ethical system (in its traditional sense) provides fertile soil for African Christian morality. Already before the advent of Christianity in Africa, Africans have their moral values, duties, objectives, and rights.

For the Africans, God is the origination of all morality. Accordingly, Idowu has the following to note: “Our own (Africans) view is that morality is the fruit of religion and that, to begin with, it was dependent upon it. Man’s concept of the deity has everything to do with what is taken to be the norm of morality. God made man, and it is he who implants in him the sense of right and wrong”[1] Kunhiyop agrees “most Africans are happy to acknowledge that moral principles come from GOD”. [2] Mbiti also expresses a similar opinion “God gave the moral order to people so that they might live happily and in harmony with one another”. [3] African

Christians have understood that morals, as revealed in the bible, are code of conducts given and sanctioned by God to govern the moral affairs of individuals and the society as well. But one thing to note here is that, are Africans non-free moral agents? Of course, Africans are free moral agents however, not self-autonomous in their moral choices<sup>[4]</sup> as taught by Westerners. For African Christians, self-autonomy is largely dependent on the

[1]Idowu, p.

[2]Kunhiyop, p.66

[3]John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1977): 23

[4]Helen A. Labeodan, ‘‘The problem of Evil, Freewill, Causality, Responsibility and the Yoruba concept of Ori: A Synthesis’’ in *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* XLIII:2:9 (December 2006):60

provision of moral codes by God. This is in agreement with general Christian ethics. For Christian ethics as a whole ‘‘the basis of human responsibility is divine revelation’’.<sup>[1]</sup>

At this level, it suffices to say that, African ethics and Christian ethics in their relation to God are hard to be distinguished. The only noticeable distinction is that the African religion has little or no theology of grace. Grace in Christian ethics is God’s gift to enable man to fulfill his moral obligations. What man needs is ‘‘a clear knowledge that he is made for his maker and that his supreme duty is to dedicate his life to him’’<sup>[2]</sup> through grace.

It is this notion that serves as the basis for African ethics. God is the creator of everything, therefore, he gives rules and regulations that determine and check the moral duties of individuals in a community. For the Africans, morality is communal. Everything is to be done in the favour of the community. According to P. J. Nel, the ‘‘moral imperative and contract is to be in harmony with the community and assures its continuance. <sup>[3]</sup> This communal ethics has been long recognized by John V. Taylor, ‘‘Every man is born into a community. He is a member of a family and he grows up inheriting certain family characteristics, certain property, and certain obligations, he learns certain family traditions, certain patterns of behaviors, and certain points of pride. <sup>[4]</sup> The point here is that he was born into certain communities and must identify with the communal norms to make relevance. The fact is that morality i.e. African Christianity is intrinsically oriented toward communal well-being. This explains the nature of African anthropology ‘‘... no one exists in isolation. One becomes a human being only in a fellowship with the life of others.’’<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, for the African Church, the entire redeemed community must talk and deliberate about issues affecting their lives. <sup>[6]</sup>

For them, morality is not autonomous as pointed above neither relativistic. These communal moralities are not simply a quest for definition and identity but also aimed at imposing Christian morals and their meaning and order on the people. The ultimate goal for this is to correct relationships, enhance the standard of living, and determine the moral norms of the community. It concerns about the well-being of the individual as well as others. One's actions can cause harm to the entire community. This view is more reflected in African traditional religion where the well-being of the community is the well-being of the individual. [7] The import of this is the Golden Rule "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:11)

It is pertinent to note that, one can argue that following the above assertions, the ethical system of African Christianity can be said to be normative, and absolute. God is the giver of the moral norms and the Church is the agent of preservation and execution of those laws. Like the traditional African community where laws are believed to originate from God and the elders of the community as police and custodians of those laws, the African Church sees the entire basis for human actions as oriented in this. As such, divine revelation is normative and absolute. One cannot just see an action as morally acceptable for him and yet wrong to another. The community of the redeemed commends and condemns actions that are acceptable or reprehensible. The basis for his moral absoluteness is the biblical texts such as John 14:6, Matt. 22:36-40, grounded on this absoluteness and normativeness, African Christian morality envisions rewards and punishments for the good or evil action done.

Suffice it to say that, the distinctiveness of African Christian morality as expressed above is centered on the fear of God and the love for society.

### **African Christian Ethics as Counter-Cultural and Adequate Ethical System**

Almost at all levels, African morality conflicts with moral relativism. With the high sense of morality in the Africans, morality is not relativistic but absolute and normative. The reason for this is that for the African Christian, God is the originator of all moral values.

The canon at which morality is measured is God's word as revealed in the scriptures. "African Cosmology indicates a divinely-destined creation, that deity should also be the absolute norm for the moral imperative".[8] This explains the normativeness of African Christian ethics. Whatever is morally reprehensible as taught by the scripture is however detestable. In other words, ethics, or morals in African Christianity opposes what the general public may think to be "morally right".

The counter-cultural aspect of African Christian ethics can also be seen in its emphasis on the community. The community plays an important role in African morality. Every decision and action must aim in a broader sense to promote the good of the community, as Kunyihop would say "Closely related to the holistic thinking is the idea of community which is paramount in many African societies. Whether one



sees it in terms of the clan, tribe, or nation the idea of community is still the *sine quanon* in Africa. If the community exists, then the individual exists. [9]What this means, is that Africans place much emphasis on the community than on the individual. The individual must live in conformity with the community's moral values. Ethics for the individual is not relativistic or self-autonomous but communal. This distinctive makes the African Christian ethics adequate.

When it comes to confronting general ethical systems, African Christian ethics differ markedly. Real issues confronting the community of faith are addressed within the bounds of Biblical revelation. Ethical problems such as rape, stealing, murder, and terrorism are usually handed from the Biblical point. It seeks to address the problem and questions bordering the Africans.

Also, for the African Christian, morality is in total conformity of human activity to God's will and what becomes morally acceptable in society. Morality in this sense for the Africans is not relative. Because it rejects absolute moral norms, thereby divine absolute, African Christianity considers such as irrelevant. Earlier, it has been noted that, at the center of African Christian ethics, is a God who creates, governs, and sustains his universe. This basic assumption made Christian ethics in Africa counter-cultural at all levels.

### Conclusion

Following the above, the fact that African Christians live in a pluralistic ethno-religious and secular society and he is faced with the problem of conflicting ethical standards is no longer a strange challenge. Moral relativism as related rejects and undermines any claim to moral normativeness, while on the other hand, African Christianity is grounded on the normativeness of biblical ethics. The relevance of African Christian ethics is a strong belief that ethics and morality are God's initiative and not man's. Actions can be judged right or wrong as they conform to, or contradict God's revelation. It is this understanding that makes the community of faith to be more inclined to the several good than the individual. Of course, the fortunes and misfortunes of an individual affect the entire society.

It should be recommended that African Christians, as they live in a pluralistic ethno-religious and secular society, are to live and demonstrate an exemplary life. The Redeemed Christian community will have a public witness to an unbelieving world. They are to shine as light in the surrounding darkness and to be like cities, standing out clearly on the hilltop[10]

[1]Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Ethics: Issues and Options* (London: William Clowes and Sons Limited, 1962):145

[2]P. J. Nel, "Morality and Religion in African Thought" in *Acta Theologica*:2 (2008):23

[3]John V. Taylor, *Christianity, and Politics in Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957):35

[4] B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* transl. by B. NcNeil (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003):23

[5] John A. Ojo, ‘‘African Concept of Morality’’ in *ETSI Journal* 8:4 (May 2015):63

[6] Ibid

[7] Ibid

[8] P. J. Nel, p. 43

[9] Samuel WajeKunhiyop, ‘‘Theological Education Curriculum as a Means of Addressing the Needs of the Total Man: an Examination of the Discipline Systematic Theology in *ETSI Journal* 8:2 (May 2015): 29

[10]Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics*, P. 71

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