

# Humanistic Orientation of Religion and the Problem of Religious Violence: Biblical and African Perspectives

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The contemporary society, despite its great achievements in the area of human development, remains increasingly menaced by the syndrome of religious intolerance and religious violence. Many theories may continue to be propounded for this syndrome, but all of them gravitate around the fact of human abuse of religion expressed in the perversion of the real purpose of religion. This essay argues that one of the fundamental causes of religious violence is the misguided religious consciousness that makes it difficult for people to reason properly on the common challenges of our common humanity. Incidentally, both the biblical and African approaches to religion can each be interpreted as having a basic humanistic orientation. This becomes a challenge to African theology as it faces the prevailing religious consciousness on the continent in search of genuine humanism and authentic African development.

*Keywords:* religion, humanism, peace, kingdom, love, human promotion

## Introduction

Religion, as most theorists affirm, gives sense to human existence and cohesiveness to groups in the society.<sup>1</sup> According to this prevailing line of thought, life without religion is less meaningful as it lacks a clear coherence. This theoretical interpretation gives premium to the radically humanistic orientation of religion. The phrase “humanistic orientation” is used here in the sense that human welfare is the primary concern of all religions in their original forms. It is good to note the fact that humanism is a concept with many connotations as it is often associated with a secularist philosophy that denies the place of the supernatural in human affairs. This kind of secularist philosophy is associated with the following brand of humanist manifesto: “Humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves” (Kurtz, 1973, p. 16, as cited in Franklin & Shaw, 1991, p. 5). Secular humanism took its impetus from the Renaissance humanism of the 15th century which was characterized by its emphasis on the dignity of the human person, the worth of his individuality, reason, freedom, and immense potentials (Franklin & Shaw, 1991). Secular humanism later came to exalt the human reason to the level that religion was either completely rejected or relegated to the background. In some situations, religion with its elaborate system of engagement with the supernatural was accused of being inimical to human progress. Many modern secular humanists tend to follow this anti-religious

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<sup>1</sup> Many theories abound here, the most prominent being the functionalist theories with classical represented by Emile Durkheim (1961).

approach. One, however, cannot deny the fact that, sometimes, religion is used as the ground for the devaluation of human life and other forms of cosmic existence. One would have expected that a society or nation with people very much committed to religious beliefs would be a society or nation having great respect for human life in all its existential ramifications. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Religion is often used as a point of reference for many scandalous and horrendous acts and crimes against humanity. This is a historical fact. Most of the great wars of history have been fought on the basis of religion, and uncountable lives have been lost because religion has been made to devalue such lives. Almost all major religions are guilty of this syndrome.

All these, however, do not vitiate the value of religion as a humanistic system but say much about the erroneous approaches to religion. Contrary to the anti-religious views of some currents of humanism, the present essay argues that the engagement with the supernatural in the world religions has its basic orientation in the enhancing of human life. While all religious practices are normally directed to God or the divine beings, the driving motive is usually the welfare of human beings and their world. The essay elaborates the radically humanistic orientations of both the biblical and African approaches to religion. Attention is, thus, drawn to the humanistic challenges in the prevalent religious traditions which if properly followed can become motivating forces for peace and harmonious coexistence in our often religiously polarized society.

### **The Problem of Religious Violence in Africa**

Africa is a multi-religious continent, and within each religion, be it Christianity, Islam, or traditional religion, different forms of belief systems abound. This in itself is a cultural wealth but, at the same time, the diversity offers a fertile ground for continuous conflict. This is well exemplified in the incessant religious conflicts in some parts of Africa. A clear example is Nigeria which is not only Africa's most populous nation but also the most complex in terms of cultural and religious diversities. The challenge really is not the complete abolition of the differences or diversities in the belief systems but the management of the diversities in such a way that they do not lead to violent conflicts.

On this point, one recalls the words of the Vatican II Document on Interreligious dialogue:

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values. (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965, p. 3)

Here one sees the stress on the humanistic values of peace, liberty, social justice, and morality as unifying forces. This Vatican II Document, *Nostra Aetate*, was promulgated in 1965 but, these long years, notwithstanding, the relations between Christians and Muslims are still littered with many challenges. Although there have been recorded positive developments during these years, many difficulties still abound in trying to convince many adherents of the different religions that the common promotion of humanity is a unifying factor. What makes every religion thrive is that it promises a good life for its adherents, but when the religious belief becomes a ground for dehumanized life for those outside the belief system, the inevitable consequence is violence.

In the face of the recent terrorist kidnappings and killings in Nigeria, there has been a flurry of debates on what the motivations could be. Although the perpetrators of most of these killings claim to be members of a given religious group, there are people who still argue that the perpetrators are political agents and not merely

religious enthusiasts. The presumption is that what is going on is not a religious warfare but a political battle. The strange thing about this particular religious violence is that it is difficult to identify any interreligious dispute that could have triggered it. As a matter of fact, the official Muslim leaders in the country appear as outraged by the violence as their Christian counterparts. Although one may never know what the majority of Nigerian Muslims, whose voices are usually never heard, think of the violence, the official situation is that both Christians and most Muslims are equal victims of the violence. This makes it difficult for interpreters to agree on the genre of the violence. One, however, does not forget the fact that the violence has largely been directed against the hapless citizens and the security agents that could protect them.

Some also argue that the crisis is not caused by religious fanaticism but by poverty, that is, a reaction to a state of misery or impoverishment. Some others contend that the violence is caused by lack of formal education, the presumption being that the main architects of the violence are not formally educated. It is difficult, however, to reconcile this with the sophistication in the attacks, seen both in the use of modern media and modern technology, all fruits and ingredients of formal education. There are even some who argue that the violence is engineered by foreign imperialists who take delight in destabilizing potential African great nations. This is, of course, one of those so-called conspiracy theories that are sometimes more ideological than real.

In all these rationalizations and simplifications of the crisis, the effort seems to be that of absolving religion of any blame. Sometimes, such positions emanate from a basic philosophical or ideological conviction that religious beliefs are not potent enough to act as motives for human action. Most secularist thinkers do not like to attribute to religion the privilege of being the motivating factor for human action.<sup>2</sup> The presumption is that any religious crisis must have some underlying socio-economic or materialist-political explanation. But contrary to these viewpoints, experience shows that many people in traditionally religious societies act and behave mostly on the basis of their religious beliefs and not only on the basis of imagined socio-political ideologies. John S. Mbiti (1969) underscored this point while speaking with reference to traditional religiosity in Africa: "What people do is motivated by what they believe, and what they believe springs from what they do and experience. So then, belief and action in African traditional society cannot be separated: they belong to a single whole" (p. 4). What Mbiti is saying in clear terms is that religious beliefs play a powerful role in the way Africans act and behave. This is a fact whether they act as traditional worshippers, as Muslims or as Christians. Considering this fact, one sees why religious beliefs should regularly be subjected to reason to curb them of their potentials for violence. This is one of the roles of the philosophical and theological approaches to religion.

In a nation, like Nigeria, where most religious beliefs are not theologically scrutinized from time to time, the consequence is that the riot of belief systems will continually translate into riots of violence. There is the much-acclaimed African notoriety for being very religious, a characteristic typically Nigerian. This basic religious disposition often makes abstract thinking about religious ideas uninteresting to most people. Once an idea is clothed with the hallowed garb of a religion, the African and, particularly Nigerian, practitioners of that particular religion tend to accept the idea without further questioning. This makes the continent a dumping

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<sup>2</sup> This mode of thinking can be traced back to many influential nineteenth century scholars whose schools of thought underlie many modern secularist ideas. One thinks, for instance, of the influence of the sociological ideas of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) who preferred positivist to metaphysical explanations of all things. There are also the continuing influences of such thinkers as Karl Marx (1818-1883) who identified economic forces as the motivating factor for most human actions, and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who attributed most human actions to the sex impulse.

ground for all sorts of religious ideas. It does not matter whether such ideas are inimical to human life and human cohabitation.

Many contingent factors may be articulated in the explanation for religious violence, but almost all of them gravitate around the human abuse of religion expressed in the perversion of the real purpose of religion. It is the conviction of this writer that one of the fundamental causes of religious violence is the misguided religious consciousness that makes it difficult for people to reason properly on the common challenges of our common humanity. It can be a misguided understanding of salvation or a misplaced emphasis on supernatural or preternatural ideas or fantasies.<sup>3</sup> When human promotion is not the paramount commitment, human life becomes devalued on the altar of religious beliefs. Thus, instead of religion being used to promote human life, human life becomes manipulated to promote conventional religious beliefs and ideologies. According to Bernard Lonergan (1990),

Unless religion is totally directed to what is good, to genuine love of one's neighbor and to a self-denial that is subordinated to a fuller goodness in oneself, then the cult of a God that is terrifying can slip over into the demonic, into an exultant destructiveness of oneself and of others. (p. 111)

Thus, one can say that the locus of religious violence is the human heart and mind which is often not properly oriented towards the correct ends of religion.

### **Peace Through Commitment to the Humanistic Orientation of Religion**

The greatest challenge to religious harmony in any pluralistic society is not only tolerance but the genuine knowledge of the very ends of religion. Religion has its origin in the human quest to make life livable and harmonious. This is very evident in the biblical texts of both the Old and New Testaments.

#### **Old Testament Humanism**

The Old Testament presents the human being as the crown of creation being created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). This dignity is further seen in the fact that God entrusts to humanity the continuing act of creation or recreation (1:28), given the gift of human reason and the fact that only human beings are capable of entering into rational relationship with God. The psalmist sums it up in Ps 8:5-8:

And you have made him little less than a god, and with glory and honour you have crowned him, made him rule over the works of your hands, all you have set under his feet, sheep and cattle, all of them, and even the beasts of the field, birds in the sky, fish in the sea, when he makes his way across the ocean.

While operating on the larger scale of all humanity, the Old Testament is also largely the story of how God sets out to rescue and rehabilitate a hopelessly oppressed people, giving them freedom and settling them in a homeland where they could live out their full humanity. One surprising thing about religion in the Old Testament is that it does not present itself as an other-worldly engagement but a commitment to human promotion using otherworldly forces. This dimension of the Old Testament humanism is most expressed in the

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<sup>3</sup> Frankfurter (2007, pp. 114-128) speaks of sectarian rage and vengeance fantasies as factors that often explain the dynamics of religious violence. According to Frankfurter (2007), "real religious violence emerges from a complex of social dynamics: first of all, group convictions in the necessity and holiness of the acts; second, the presence of one who can shape those convictions, some leader, who is granted clairvoyant authority over the interpretation of the times, the sacred texts, and the definition of meaningful action; third, an enclave environment that encourages a polarized worldview of group sanctity and worldly evil and that fosters mutual convictions in the divine necessity of violent acts; and fourthly, an overall mobilizing vision that can be justly called millennialist in Norman Cohn's sense, bringing a transcendent order into terrestrial reality" (pp. 114-115).

wisdom literature and the psalms. The God that one encounters in the Old Testament is a God always concerned about human welfare. He is a Compassionate and covenant-keeping God who commits himself to the care of a people in their weakness. Because of this, the poor and oppressed see this God as their only source of life and consolation in a world mired in oppression and misery.

### **New Testament and Christian Humanism**

The humanism of the Old Testament was a bit beclouded by the exaggerated ritualism of the Jewish religion of the New Testament period. In reaction to this, the New Testament writers present Jesus as putting the emphasis back on human welfare, positing it as the fundamental reason for the God-human relationship in history. Human life is so precious to God that the Son of God came to share the human nature to make human life more meaningful and more abundant (cf. John 10:10). This is the basic message of Christianity. In fact, the best way to understand how Jesus understands religion is to examine the way he reinterprets the major aspects of the Jewish religion of his time, like the law, the Sabbath, purity laws, prayer, and almsgiving.

**Reinterpretation of the Torah (Law).** The love of humanity is so central to the ministry of Jesus that he interpreted the whole body of Jewish laws as summed up in the love of God and love of neighbor. The radical point here is that Jesus likened the love of God to the love of neighbour (Mark 10:28-30; Matt 22:37-40) such that none can be genuinely practiced without the other.

**Reinterpretation of the Sabbath.** With regard to the Sabbath, Jesus makes it clear that the Sabbath is made for the good of human beings and not human beings for the Sabbath and that the Son of Man is not the slave but the master of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27-28; Matt 12:8). In other words, in the keeping of the Sabbath regulations, the primary question must be whether they are for the welfare of the human person or inimical to him. It does not matter whether the article of the religious law stipulates it. This was a radical humanistic stance of Jesus, a revolutionary reinterpretation of the Sabbath observance, hinged on the principle that God prefers mercy to sacrifice (Matt 12:7).

**Reinterpretation of purity laws.** Jesus takes a negative disposition towards some of the ritual laws of purity prevalent in his time and teaches that such laws are not supposed to make life difficult for the human person. Rather, it is from the human person that the pure and impure things emanate. This is the point of Mark 7:1-23 where Jesus stresses the moral motivations of the divine law against the ritual externalism of the contemporary Jewish laws of purity as practiced by the Pharisees. Jesus makes it clear, "Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile" (Mark 7:15). What matters is the purity of one's heart.

**Reinterpretation of prayer.** In the case of prayer, Jesus surprises his disciples by teaching them the *Our Father* as the model of all prayer. The surprise element here is that the petitions of the *Our Father* are humanistic and this-world oriented. A cursory look at the Prayer in Matt 6:9-13 buttresses this fact:

V. 9: *Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name*—God's identity as Father is common to Israel's traditional prayer. This Fatherhood is very much felt in moments of difficulty. The particular stress here is that even though God's abode is in heaven he is still very near to humanity as Father.

V. 10: *Your kingdom come*—The prayer is that God's reign, usually regarded as a heavenly reality, should be made manifest in the human world. The kingdom of God/Heaven is a common expression in the synoptic gospels, occurring 38 times in Matthew, 14 times in Mark and 32 times in Luke (Duling, 1992). It is at the very centre of the teaching of Jesus, and in all these gospels, the kingdom is almost identified as the reign of God

now present in the person and teaching of Jesus. It is a favorite theme in Matthew, and the gospel is presented as the good news of the kingdom that has now come in and through Jesus. In concrete terms, the kingdom is the reign of justice, righteousness, truth, love, and peace. The whole prayer of *Our Father* can be read from this perspective of the coming of the divine kingdom into the human realm. The prayer is a way of bringing the heavenly order down on earth. It summarizes the whole ministry of Jesus.

*Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*—The first sign of the actualization of the kingdom is the doing of God's will on earth. Raymond E. Brown (1997) argued that the three petitions ("Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven") "are different ways of asking God to bring about the kingdom definitively" (p. 180). These three petitions in vv. 9-11, according to France (2007), should be seen as being all linked to the final words, "as in heaven so also on earth" (p. 247). According to France (2007), "In heaven [among the angels] God's name is already honored, his kingship acknowledged, and his will done, and the prayer is that this heavenly state of affairs may also be reflected on earth" (p. 247). Once again, one sees here the reference to Jesus ministry which is the doing of the will of God (Matt 26:42), and it summarizes also the lives of the disciples of Jesus in Matthew (7:21; 12:50; cf 21:31) (France, 2007).

V. 11: *Give us this day our daily bread*—This petition calls on God to satisfy all the human needs for daily nourishment. Another sign of the presence of the kingdom is what is usually called the messianic abundance.

V. 12: *And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*—This petition anchors God's forgiveness on the human act of reconciliation, showing that human unanimity is the primary concern. Forgiveness is a sign of the presence of the kingdom and it looms large in the ministry of Jesus.

V. 13: *And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one*—Here the prayer concentrates on the human need for security here on earth. According to Rudolf Schnackenburg (2002),

The petition for preservation from the tempting might of the evil one has our historical being in view. The series of petitions builds to a crescendo in its concern for the salvation of all human beings, the entire human race. (p. 67)

**Reinterpretation of almsgiving and charity.** To cap it all, Jesus goes beyond the mere practice of almsgiving but stresses the total concern for the needy person. In the same surprising fashion, he presents the final Judgment as judgment of how one has shown love to the needy fellow human being. This is the point of view of Matt 25:34-36:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

The humanistic dimension of Jesus ministry is very aptly expressed in the programmatic passage of Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

With such a liberation-oriented religious ministry, one hardly thinks of any other religious consideration that would justify the debasement of human life.

In all these, God himself is teaching that religion basically functions to uplift human life and not to debase or destroy it. If one stands on the principles of the gospel teaching of Jesus, one can hardly justify many of the

ends to which religion has been subjected in the contemporary society. These gospel principles constitute the very foundation of Christianity and they make it clear that the Christian religion is radically humanistic in orientation.

This intrinsically humanistic orientation of the original Christian teaching, however, does not imply that Christians are less guilty in the use of religion for violence. As a matter of fact, religious violence is a feature of the history of Christianity. In many Christian circles, people are still persecuted and dehumanized on the basis of what is often interpreted as inherited divine law or precepts. It may be said that one of the major roots of violence in the history of Christianity has been the misreading and misunderstanding of Sacred texts. Many biblical texts are so problematic that they easily induce to violence if not properly interpreted. According to David Frankfurter (2007), violent acts seem divinely legitimate when canonical scripture is transformed from “encouraging narrative” to a “script for action” (p. 128). A literal interpretation without consideration of the basic gospel principles of love and forgiveness can be very harmful to society.

### **Islamic Humanism**

The humanistic principles are not the preserve of Christianity. Islam presents many humanistic values (Goodman, 2003), and the religion identifies itself as a religion of peace (*salam*). It is a peace attained through total submission to the will of Allah (God) (Mvumbi, 2008). The very idea of total submission to the divine will may raise questions on the validity of attributing any form of humanism to Islam, but one notices that the original aim of this submission is the attainment of personal peace which itself is a humanistic value. This commitment to Allah’s will has also many positive implications on how a Muslim is to treat a fellow human being. The option for the poor exhibited in Islamic banking and the practice of almsgiving all speak volumes of the largely humane side of the Islamic religion. In fact, when the practical implications of Islam are taken seriously, the urge to violence becomes not only contradictory but a negation of the lofty principles of the religion.

One notes, however, the different faces of Islam just as one finds in many other religions of the world. In recent years, some forms of Islamic fundamentalism have tended to present a false image of the religion, but the adherents of moderate Islam, who are in majority, continue to profess the noble principles of love of God and love of humanity. These are issues that need to be stressed in dialogue. According to Tariq Ramadan (2005), interreligious dialogue thrives when each party is committed to the welfare of the other:

One of the best testimonies that a religious or spiritual tradition can give of itself is in acts of solidarity of its adherents with their neighbours, towards the other. To defend the dignity of the latter, to fight so that our societies do not produce indignity, to work together to support marginalized and neglected people, will certainly help us know each other better but it will above all make known the essential message that shines at the heart of our traditions: never neglect your brother in humanity and learn to love him, or at least to serve him. (p. 99)

### **Humanism in African Traditional Religion (ATR)**

The humanistic orientation of religion is most exemplified in the African Traditional Religion (ATR), which is interpreted as radically humanistic in nature. As many scholars have pointed out, the welfare of the human person is at the very centre of African religiosity, and all African religious practices are oriented towards enhancing human and earthly life (Mbiti, 1969; Ikenga-Metuh, 1985). The centrality of life in the African thought processes helps to understand the peculiar features of African humanism. While God is seen as the source of life, this life is best expressed in human life. As Bénézet Bujo (1992) pointed out, life is the

unifying force and every other thing revolves around this life which is seen as God's gift. All material and spiritual forces are employed to service this life in its tangible and human expression. Mbiti (1969) put it aptly,

To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. There is little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart from his physical life. No line is drawn between the spiritual and the physical. (pp. 4-5)

According to Mbiti (1969), "Man's acts of worship and turning to God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual or mystical" (p. 5). This radical humanistic approach to religion is among the elements that make ATR closely related to the humanistic approach to religion in the biblical Old Testament context.

### **Enthroning the Rule of Law in Africa's Multi-religious Societies**

The human instinct is often prone to irrational tendencies which lead to actions that easily compromise the lives of others and the general peace of a nation. In the face of such irrationality, preaching to people to change may not be enough. The State intervenes with the law in such a situation to protect the common good without compromising religious freedom which is a fundamental right. Thus, one of the main factors that can help to control religious excesses is the rule of law.

The purpose of the existence of a State is to protect the rights and security of individual components. Without such regulatory activity of the State, people are prone to question the continued existence of the State system. This is what is currently happening in Nigeria. In the face of mounting insecurity, people are agonizingly questioning the rationale for Nigeria's continued corporate existence as a State. Some of those who pose such questions are not necessarily unpatriotic Nigerians or people eager to destabilize the nation but people frustrated by the apparent inertia on the part of the leaders to checkmate the violence. Preaching and mere talking are not enough to stop the mayhem that is currently happening in the country in the name of religion. The State has the onerous duty to come out clearly and decisively to protect the rights, freedom, and security of every citizen and resident. Only this can restore confidence in the national entity.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has highlighted the anthropocentric nature of religion with a view to raising awareness on the anomaly of using religion as a weapon of human destruction. Most religious wars are provoked by factors that tend to demean human life for petty religious considerations. While most religions are founded on genuine humanistic principles, the actual practices of their adherents are often at variance with such principles. This explains the rise in religious violence in some parts of Africa and the world as a whole.

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