

Towards a New Conception of Religion in the Caribbean

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Introduction

Religion as a human institution is one of the parameters that could be used to measure human development. The European religions as exemplified in Judaism and Christianity have impacted negatively on the Caribbean people. Such religions have been responsible for such ills as loss of identity, inequality and oppression. The reason for the negative impact might not be unconnected with the origin and nature of these alien religions. Historically, European religions have been situated within certain assumptions that are not conducive to human flourishing on earth. It is not surprising then that these religions have been used by their practitioners as weapons of oppression, and inequality against subjugated peoples in Africa and the Caribbean. In order to correct these ills, the paper suggests that the Caribbean people should look inwards and revisit the religions which have been bequeathed unto us by our ancestors. That is because the traditional religions are modelled along the culture of the people and consequently, the identity of the people is more worthy to be and this might further open up our social system to witness human development in all its ramifications.

The Definitional Problem of Religion

It is interesting that that when the word religion is mentioned to the Caribbean youth, he reacts animatedly, because he is dissatisfied with the Euro-centric religions, and at the same time, he displays indifference to Rastafarianism and other forms of retained African traditional religions. One can only assume why this situation exists especially, where the implications for identity are at stake. Could a definition of religion help to reconcile this problem for him? If that is possible then, maybe, it could also help to resolve other issues that the region has experienced subsequent to the colonial era.

Given that Caribbean societies are deeply influenced by the European religious model; It means that, the search for an objective definition of religion has been hi-jacked; if non-European regions are not treated equally in this search. Against this background, one could conclude that, the result(s) would have already been determined. Nonetheless, John Hick (2001: 195) has suggested that, any definition of religion should embrace its “salvific” goal to redeem man from his sins. He concludes in observing that, “The great world religions then, I suggest, constitute different ways of conceiving, and therefore different ways of experiencing, and therefore different ways of responding in life to the ultimate eternal and ineffable reality; . . . they are more or less equally authentic” (Hick 2001: 201). Authenticity can be interpreted as man’s

expression of gratitude to his Creator. It follows therefore, that whether or not all religions are deserving of respect, neither the Euro-centric conception of Christianity, nor the African conception of Christianity can be justified, if one assumes a superior status while subjugating the other to an inferior one.

It is along this line of reasoning that we have to ask ourselves if there is an all-compassing definition of religion to be perceived. Some people have argued that, “religion is as hard to define as art” (Kung 1986: xv). Everyone, it is said knows what religion is until he is asked to explain it. Hans Kung viewed the search for a definition of religion as problematic, at the same time; it is arguably a profound one. He interestingly argued that,

“ Religion is a believing view of life, approach to life, a way of life, and therefore a fundamental pattern embracing the individual and society, man and the world, through which a person . . . sees and experiences, thinks and feels, acts and suffers, everything. It is a transcendently grounded and immanently operative system of coordinates, by which man orients himself intellectually, emotionally, and existentially” (Kung 1986: xvi).

At the same time, James Thrower, being influenced by Robin Horton, examined religion on two fronts. On the one hand he stated that “religion is seen as a genuine response to a transcendent ‘Other’ and those who do not and who seek, therefore, to explain religion as a wholly human construct” (Thrower 1999: 202). This position is surprising, because Thrower is attempting to account for competing perspectives on religion without making clear his stance. This approach at a definition does not promote understanding on the topic in the way that informs our discussion.

The elements or characteristics of religion are intrinsically important as the need for a definition. But this does not take us closer to a satisfactory definition of the concept. Christopher Dawson argued that, “all religion is based on the recognition of a superhuman Reality of which man is somehow conscious and towards which he must in some way orientate his life. The existence of the tremendous transcendent reality that we name God is the foundation of all religion in all ages and among all peoples” (Dawson 1949: 25). This definition could be construed as a functionalist approach to religion because; it identifies religion as a social and organizing phenomenon in various human societies. Additionally, it recognizes that societies vary and it is consequent upon how their institutions are designed

One question that always commands serious thinking is whether there is a world religion, or a true religion. Is it possible to have a true religion? None of our tentative definitions has suggested that there is. Marx opined that religion is the opium of the masses. This could

actually mean that religions on the whole are sources of comfort to the oppressed and exploited. In light of this Marx did not appear to hold up one religion over the other.

James Preus responded to the question of there being a true religion from the perspective of origin. Accordingly, “the story of the oracle of Apollo: when he was asked what was the best religion from the countless variety of religions, he replied in one word: “the oldest” [antiquissima]. When doubt was expressed about what might be the oldest, he replied: “the best” [optima]”. He continues, “thus, the oldest and best religion is that with which Adam was endowed by his Creator” (Preus 1996: 11-12). This story can be compared with John Bewaji’s paper entitled: *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief and the Theistic Problem of Evil*. To simply rationalize the comparison then, it means that there is an Adam story in African religion as well.

There are several positions that Preus found in Bodin’s work that accorded with Rousseau’s description of religion:

- (a) . . . is the undisputed assumption that God is its author, source, origin, and cause.
- (b) . . . humans are naturally endowed with sufficient resources to achieve salvation.
- (c) . . . innate religion-are all of human creation. (Preus 1996: 14).

Description of Euro-centric religious ethic

Stephen Brett (1994) pointed out in his book, *Slavery and the Catholic Tradition* that, Saint Thomas Aquinas “made it plain that servitude of any sort is repugnant to the plan of God and human wisdom.” He continued by saying, “The link between evangelization and slavery tormented their sense of right and wrong but they could not find the tools to disentangle the practice of slavery from the tradition of law” (Bret 1994: ix). Given Bret’s position then, we can begin to see how European religions were able to affect the culture, ethos and psyche of the Caribbean people. Let us look at one avenue for the Euro-centric religious ethic before addressing its negative effects.

Kant thought that “immortality” was one of three complicated issues (Lucas 1970: 1). This is relevant to the concept of religion which forms the basis of religion for human societies. Does a lack of understanding of him contribute to our misuse of religion? Jean-Jacque Rousseau (1968) will help us to understand this, because as an influential eighteen century philosopher, he has contributed to a better understanding of the place of religion in the European society.

According to Rousseau (1968) “Religion, considered in connexion with societies, whether general or particular, can be divided into two categories, the religion of the man and the

religion of the citizen.” He described the religion of the man as being without a shrine and physical appearances; it is one that he experiences from internal conditioning. On the other hand, the religion of the citizen is “established in a single country; it gives that country its Gods and its special tutelary deities; it has its dogmas, its rituals, its external forms of worship laid down by law; and to the nation which practices this religion, everything outside is infidel, alien barbarous; and extends its alters. Such were the religions of all the early peoples; and we might give it the name of civil or positive divine law” (Rousseau 1968: 181). This is a precise description that has traditionally characterized the religions of all people, but more so, if is the framework from which Europe used to manipulated its religious principles when applying them to non-European societies. This attitude towards religion exposes the superior complex that defined for the Europeans, the dicotomy that exists between perceived barbarians and themselves.

What is being underscored here is the Roussean theoretical concept of religion. Rousseau’s concept was interpreted and observed within Europe, which meant that non-European societies were not apart of this ‘contract’ because they were considered as ‘infidels and barbarous.’ It unclear where the departure from St Thomas Aquinas’ teaching took place, and when Rousseau’s theory became the norm.

Rousseau alluded to a third religion which he considered contradictory in nature, and then went on to point out that religions in all forms have defects. Our objective is to ground our understanding into the important concept of religion based on the European model. Here he went on to describe some of the features of the religion of the citizen. “The second kind of religion is good in that it joins divine worship to a love of the law, and that in making the homeland the object of the citizens’ adoration, it teaches them that the service of the state is the service of the tutelary God. This is a kind of theocracy, in which there can be no pontiff other than the prince, and no priests except the magistrates. Then to die for one’s country is to become a martyr, to break the law to be impious, and to subject a guilty man to public execution is to hand him over to the wrath of God: *sacer esto*” (Rousseau 1968: 181). In Rousseau’s view, this kind of religion is bad, because he finds that it is based on lies. This can be referred to as a negative feature in religion.

At the same time, he believes that religion play an important role in enforcing morals and the duties that are essential to hold societies together. “Christianity is a wholly spiritual religion, concerned solely with the things of heaven; the Christian’s homeland is not of this world” (Rousseau 1968: 84). “Christianity preaches only servitude and submission. Its spirit is too favourable to tyranny for tyranny not to take advantage of it. True Christians are made to be slaves; they know it and they hardly care; this short life has too little value in their eyes”

(Rousseau 1968: 183). If some positions taken by Rousseau are unclear, it not the case that his message is for his European audience.

Rousseau believed that the doctrine of religion should “be simple and few in number, expressed precisely and without explanations or commentaries. The existence of an omnipotent, intelligent, benevolent divinity that foresees and provides; the life to come; the happiness of the just; the punishment of sinners; the sanctity of the social contract and the law – these are the positive dogmas” (Rousseau 1968: 186). On the other hand, he suggested that there are negative dogmas of religion, but highlighted “intolerance” as the chief among them. “I would limit them to a single one: no intolerance. Intolerance is something which belongs to the religions we have rejected” (Rousseau 1968: 186).

“Now that there is not, and can no longer be, an exclusive national religion, all religions which themselves tolerate others must be tolerated, provided only that their dogmas contain nothing contrary to the duties of the citizen” (Rousseau 1968: 187). Two points can be made here. For Rousseau, tolerance here means Europeans should exercise this virtue towards other religions in Europe, not to those outside. This understanding has shaped European religious attitudes to African and Caribbean religion in that, the principles that governed the religious ethic in their societies were applied equally to the Caribbean. This has led to some of the ills buffeting the region. Therefore, a new attitude towards understanding religion in the Caribbean may be necessary to correct this anomaly.

Ivan van Sertima, John Mbiti & African religious ethic . . .

What is necessary to bear in mind while looking at the African religious ethic are, there is incontrovertible evidence that the principles, characteristics, definition and religious ethic embraced by the European religious model could be found in other non-European societies, such as Africa and the Caribbean. At the same time, many scholars have argued that the “civilizing mission” undertaken by Europe was based on their religious principles which they subverted for economic purposes. Consequently, that the foundation on which African and Caribbean religions were racialised, because they were considered barbaric and alien. This point is supported in Waibinte Wariboko’s well reasoned book, “Race . . . engendered the civilizing mission as an instrument for achieving its objectives in the African continent; and in a mutually reinforcing manner, they worked in unison to vilify “blackness” and African personhood in order to valorize whiteness” (Wariboko 2011: x).

In concert with Waibinte’s position, Ivrgen Osterhammel stridently asserts, “colonial regimes and missionaries acted to undermine native cults and religious convictions with differing

degrees of zeal. The natives, in turn, proved resistant to quite varied degrees” (Osterhammel 2005: 97-99).

Now, the position expressed by Rousseau about ‘tolerance’ of religion has been contradicted by Ivan Van Serrima (1992). No tolerance was shown to New World religions by the Europeans. The scarcity of written records in the Caribbean result in part through the actions of Europeans. Ivan Van Sertima noted that, “It was a shattered world and that is one of the things I want to make clear from the beginning. You cannot study America and you cannot study Africa the way you study Europe. Europe has, in spite of its many wars, what I would like to call “an archival continuity.” Africa does not. America does not. There were three systematic and deliberate destructions of documents in this country. Bishop de Landa in the Yucatan said, “Burn them all. They are works of the Devil.” That is why it has become necessary to adopt what some people like to call an “ahistorical” method. It is, in fact, the only possible historical method for dealing with such shattered worlds” (van Sertima 1992: 32). The point being made here is that, the history of the Caribbean was socio-historically recreated and recorded accordingly by Europeans. This led to the belief that it was only Europe alone which had religion, and the Caribbean did not.

James H. Breasted (1972) has given pliant support to Sertima’s argument, albeit from an African perspective, in that, historically it has been documented that, Africans have travelled to the Americas long before the Europeans came. This demonstrated that there was exchange of philosophy between the Caribbean and Africa. In speaking about the philosophy and religion of Africa he noted that, “Life not only touches religion at every point, but life, thought, and religion are inextricably interfused in an intricate complex of impressions from without and forces from within” (Breasted 1972: 4). The belief among Africans did not only support the view that a God existed, but that he was one. “Actually, Akan religious doctrine knows only one God” (Danquah 1968; viii).

John Mbiti highlighted some of important underlining principles of the African religious ethic which contrast to Euro-centric ones. He explains them as follows:

“Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it”. (Mbiti 1967: 1).

“Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament” (Mbiti 1967: 2).

Mbiti arguments were clearly a point of departure from that of Rousseau's, in that the religious ethic that Africans embraced was not easily manipulated because each individual was constrained by their principles. The concept of bias, and the superior notions of self in relation to others was encouraged.

Benjamin Ray 1999, following in Mbiti's tradition stated that, "As missionary-educated Africans, Mbiti and Idowu set out to refute missionary claims about the inferiority of African religions. As African Christians, they viewed the traditional religions as the suitable foundation upon which Christianity in Africa was built. Their central claim . . . was that Africans had known God before the missionaries came" (Ray 1999: xi). Likewise, both European and African historians have attested to the fact that African societies were deeply religious. Sauneron explained that, "The fact that religion was the most essential component of pharaonic civilization has been known to the West since Herodotus, and in addition to the accounts of classical authors, we also have the testimony of temple beliefs, tombs paintings, and inscriptions on statues from Egypt itself" (Sauneron 2000: vii).

Towards a new attitude/conception of Caribbean religion

Two attending issues which reinforce the need for a new Caribbean religious conception can be found in Shirley Gordon's work (Gordon 1996: 56). The issue highlighted the fact that little attention was paid to the welfare of the slaves. She observed that, the missionaries who were sent to the Caribbean were instructed to preach repentance to the heathen slaves from Africa, in the hope that they may obtain the Christian salvation. Their mission was to be exclusively evangelical. Additionally, she argued, "the missionaries were only slowly aware of the constraints on their work, and they often resisted what could have been local support in the early years by failing to recognize the social aspirations of a variety of people" (Gordon 1996: 57).

At the same time, the numerous revolts that were carried by the slaves were indicative of an underlining search of a new religious ethic. Barry Chevannes stated that, "Jamaica has been credited with one of the highest rates of slave revolts and conspiracies in the history of any slave society." "The most central institution to the tradition of resistance in Jamaica has been religion. . . . Whether resistance through the use of force, or resistance through the creation of alternative institutions, religion was the main driving force among the Jamaican peasants" (Chevannes 1998: 1).

Several observations can be made from our discussion so far. The tentative definitions of religion embraced all religions in theory, but the indifference shown to non-European religions was influenced by Rousseau's social contract. How they were applied in other regions of the world belied the reasoned conclusions that were established by religious thinkers such as St. Thomas Aquinas.

The underlining basis for a new conception of Caribbean religion, suggests that mere theory alone is not sufficient to achieve the religious aspirations sought by any society. It is the practical application of established principles that is necessary. The turbulent historical past from which the region has emerged continue to aspire towards evolution, change, freedom, independence and harmony. These elements were and, still are inimical of the region's aspirations and yet, they were engendered by the traditional euro-centric religious ethic in the region.

The failure of the euro-centric religious model has demonstrated its inability to embrace the Caribbean personality either because of race, or its inability to disentangle the practice of economic domination from the tradition of law raises two relevant question: How do the functions of religion assert and transform themselves in reconciling the insidious legacies of slavery in order to take cognizance of the existential challenges that are threatening the region? Can a religion emanate from the ashes of slavery and the ambers of colonialism to restore for a people their faith and identity after years of living in the shadows of a tormented past?

The new attitude towards Caribbean religion could be enhanced by observing features of Indo-Asian religion. In T. M. P. Mahadevan (1961: 79) article entitled: *Religion in India*, he argues that an objective of Indian society is the task of blending the mystical and the natural together to derive a semblance of harmony. The focusing on one, to the detriment of the other is not emphasized in its religious discourse. He went on and looked at this aspect of Mahatma Ghandi's religious ethic . . .

"I should like to see all men, not only in India but in the world, belonging to different faiths, become better people by contact with one another and, if that happens, the world will be a much better place to live in than it is today . . . I do not expect the India of my dream to develop one religion, i.e. to be wholly Hindu or wholly Christian or wholly Mussalman, but I want it to be wholly tolerant with its religions working side by side with one another " Mahadevan (1961: 79-80).

At the same time, revisiting the ancient African religious ethic could also inform attitudes, in carving out a new religious ethic for the Caribbean. What needs to be done is an analysis of the principles, and how they can positively affect the current state of the practice of religion in the region, and apply those principles to improve them. For example, Sawyers (1976) pointed out that, the missionaries impacted the psyche of the people to the point that they were confused about their identity. He asserted that, "Present day Christianity in Sierra Leone is suffering from lack of conviction. It is not a case of disbelief in the existence of God, but of a power which cripples the ordering of the daily life of the people. It is not lack of faith, but it is faith in the wrong person or thing . . ." While Sierra Leone and the Caribbean experience with the Europeans differ, at the same time, both regions suffered from Christianity as a tool in service of the saying, the "white man's religion." Harry Sawyer (1976:) reinforced this point when he explained that, "we are all agreed that the Christianity we practise does not sufficiently pierce the outer-coat of our spiritual life to make itself part of our whole life" (1975, 27).

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