

African Traditional Religion and Christianity: Ethical and Religious Values in Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ethical and religious values shared between African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity, with a focus on fostering dialogue and mutual understanding. The background of the research is rooted in the growing tension and misunderstanding between adherents of ATR and Christianity in African societies, particularly where Christianity has often viewed ATR as pagan or primitive. Yet, both religious traditions offer moral codes, community values, and spiritual insights that are vital to African identity and societal cohesion. The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge the perceived divide between ATR and Christianity by highlighting areas of ethical convergence such as respect for elders, communal living, truthfulness, hospitality, and the sacredness of life. These values form the moral foundation of African communities and are essential for peace building and moral education. The research employed a qualitative method, including interviews with religious leaders, content analysis of religious texts, and field observations in selected communities where both religions are practiced. The findings reveal significant ethical parallels and religious complementarities between ATR and Christianity, despite doctrinal differences. It was also discovered that dialogue and cooperation between both faiths can enhance moral development and inter-religious harmony. Based on these findings, the study recommends the incorporation of ATR ethical values in Christian theological education, the promotion of interfaith dialogues at the community level, and the re-evaluation of missionary narratives that demonize ATR. Such initiatives would promote cultural respect, religious tolerance, and a unified moral vision for African societies.

Keywords: African Traditional Religion, Christianity, Ethics, Interfaith Dialogue, African Values

INTRODUCTION

Religion plays a central role in shaping the ethical and moral framework of African societies. Both African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity have profoundly influenced the worldview, values, and behavior of people across the continent. While ATR is indigenous, orally transmitted, and deeply rooted in the culture and ancestry of African peoples, Christianity was introduced through missionary activities, colonialism, and modern evangelism. Despite their differences, both religious systems share important ethical principles that guide human conduct, promote peace, and emphasize communal living (Kanu, 2015; Gbenda, 2006).

As societies evolve under the pressures of globalization, urbanization, and modernization, many traditional values once upheld by both ATR and Christianity are being challenged. Issues such as materialism, moral relativism, and weakened communal structures have led to a decline in ethical standards (Onyinyechi, 2019). Yet, both religions still possess the capacity to offer moral direction and spiritual identity in the midst of social change. The purpose of this study is to explore the ethical and religious values embedded in both ATR and Christianity, examine their points of convergence and divergence, and assess their relevance in addressing ethical decay in contemporary African society. Through comparative analysis and scholarly reflection, this paper aims to show how dialogue between these two belief systems can contribute to moral renewal and peaceful coexistence (Kanu, 2018; Murove, 2009).

General Views of African Traditional Religion (ATR)

African Traditional Religion (ATR) refers to the indigenous spiritual and ethical systems that have been practiced by African peoples for centuries. These systems are unwritten yet deeply rooted in oral traditions, rituals, and communal values. While ATR varies across different ethnic groups, it shares common features such as belief in a Supreme Being, the veneration of ancestors, the use of spiritual intermediaries (such as divinities and spirits), and the importance of rituals and taboos (MacGaffey, 2023). ATR is holistic, blending the spiritual with the social and moral dimensions of life. It emphasizes community over individuality, and ethics are derived not just from divine command but also from societal customs and ancestral wisdom. Religion is not seen as separate from daily life; it governs conduct, conflict resolution, marriage, leadership, and environmental stewardship. To boot more, the community is the most important part of individual life. This community is made up of people who remember and share the same traditions. To the adherents, separation from community is worse than death, and this creates sense of security and orderliness in the community (Neusner, 2002).

From the view of Idowu (2013) and Awolalu (2012), African Traditional Religion include belief in a number of higher and lower gods, sometimes including a supreme creator or force and a pantheon of other gods and deities, the belief in spirits, veneration of the dead/ancestors, use of magic and traditional African medicine, as well as respect or veneration of nature and sacred locations, closeness to the spirit world. In addition, African Traditional Religion refers to the indigenous or autonomous religions of the African people, not stagnant but highly dynamic and constantly reacting to various shifting influences such as old age, modernity, and technological advances. Olupona (2003) opines that African indigenous religions provide strong linkages between the life of humans and the world of the ancestors, together with the spirit world. This helps humans to maintain constant and symbiotic relations with their ancestors who are understood to be intimately concerned and involved in their descendants' everyday affairs. Mbiti (1969) asserts that African Traditional Religion does not place humans above nature, rather considers mankind as part of nature without any special rank assigned by God

Core Elements of ATR include:

Belief in a Supreme Being: Known by various names, the Supreme Being is the creator and sustainer of the universe, although not always worshipped directly (Gbenda, 2006). In African Traditional Religion, Supreme Being is associated with God, and God is essentially a spirit and is recognized as such in all African tribes. He is invisible and infinite and cannot be comprehended by the finite man. This is why the Africans do not use any image to represent Him. African Traditional Religion holds that the Supreme Being is the owner of heaven and earth, and governs with a great deal of devolution of powers in which the inferior powers or lesser god can not withstand.

Role of Ancestors: Ancestors are believed to act as mediators between the living and the spiritual world, reinforcing moral behavior through blessings or punishment. From the view of Agada (2022), ancestors are regarded as the custodians of family and communal morality and a force of social stability and harmony. They are powerful enough to intervene in the natural course of things and punish or reward the living as is necessary. According to Pa Opatola Awogbemi, ancestors stands as the mediators/intercessors who make prayer of a believer successful, they give them power to pray to God, they are the keepers of spiritual and historical knowledge, responsible for educating younger generations, and serving as protective spirits, sources of wisdom, guidance, and communicators with the divine. Ancestors are approached as spirits in cognizance of the fact that they are no longer mortals. It has to be noted that the cult of the ancestors in African religion is a means of communion and communication between those who are living and those who have departed the land of the living. The belief in the continued existence of the departed souls is symbolized by various cults such as the Egungun (masquerade), Oro, Mmo, Ayaka, and the requirement for those that will join the ancestors based on the fact that, the person must lived to old age; have children while on earth; died natural death; and lived life that are worthy of emulation (Kyle & Kathryn, 2021).

Spiritual Forces and Divinities: Nature spirits and local gods serve specific functions, and people often consult them through priests or diviners (Kanu, 2015). It must be noted that the existence of divinities is not

common to the whole of Africa. Idowu (1973) asserts that West Africa may be said to be home of divinities. Within West Africa, there are different shades of pantheon from the crowded to the thinly populated ones and to the ones with doubtful existence. In addition, in African theology, the divinities were brought into being as a result of things in regard to the divine ordering of the world. The critical example is the issue of Orisanla also Obatala in Yoruba pantheon is thought of as partaking in the nature of Olodumare (God). Ile (Land) is usually referred to as the son of Olodumare or his deputy. This also goes with Olokun in Edo and all Akan divinities that are regarded as Onyeme's sons. This is what qualifies them to be called divinities (Ushe, 2017). The divinities have their derivatives from God. They have no independent existence of their own. They are only in existence due to the being of God. They are nothing apart from God. Each divinity has its own local name in the local language of the people, and they were brought into being as functionaries in the theocratic government of the universe. They are like ministers with their own department to look after and thus act as intermediaries between human beings and God with reference to their particular portfolio (Ekeke & Ekeopara, 2010). Sibani and Ofure (2020) is of the opinion that, there are divinities who are part of the original order of things, called primordial divinities. Some are conceptualization of prominent attributes of God as discerned especially through the natural phenomenon, and those who are deified ancestors and heroes. The deification usually comes because they have exhibited in their lifetime the attributes of the deities.

Moral Order: Ethics in ATR are transmitted through proverbs, customs, taboos, and festivals, often upheld by elders and traditional institutions. Ethics and morality in ATR is a holistic one that recapitulate the spiritual life that considers very importantly the relationship between man and the spiritual beings; man, and the fellow man, the community and material development (Anayo, 2020). The moral order in African societies is embedded in the ideas and beliefs about what is right or wrong, what is a good or bad character; it is also embedded in the conceptions of satisfactory social relations and attitudes held by the members of the society; it is surrounded, furthermore, in the forms and patterns of behaviour that are considered by the members of the society to bring about social harmony and cooperative living, justice, and fairness. The ideas and beliefs about moral conduct are articulated, analyzed, and interpreted by the moral thinkers of the society (Amadi, 2005). In a nutshell, what is applicable in a particular culture/ethnics might not be applicable or welcome in another environment, but the major fact remain that was established to uphold peace, unity, harmony, equity, love, and relationship between individual. On this, ATR continues to influence African moral reasoning and cultural identity, even among adherents of Christianity and Islam. In many communities, traditional beliefs are blended with other religions, creating dynamic forms of religious expression and ethics.

The Foundation and Origin of Christianity

Christianity is a monotheistic religion based on the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is believed to be the Son of God and the Savior of humanity. Its origin dates back to the 1st century CE in the region of Palestine, a Roman province at the time. Christianity emerged from within Judaism, and its earliest followers were Jewish disciples who believed Jesus fulfilled the Messianic prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures (Omoregbe, 2005). The foundational texts of Christianity are the Holy Bible, especially the New Testament, which contains the Gospels, letters (epistles), and apocalyptic writings. The core of Christian doctrine includes belief in the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), salvation through faith in Christ, love of neighbor, and moral living according to the teachings of Jesus (Onyinyechi, 2019). Christianity spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire due to the missionary efforts of apostles like Paul, and later through European colonization and missionary movements, it was introduced to Africa, where it now thrives as one of the dominant religions. In Africa, the encounter between Christianity and traditional religions has produced both tension and dialogue. Early missionaries often condemned African traditional beliefs as pagan or idolatrous. However, contemporary African theologians emphasize the need for inculturation, the adaptation of Christianity to African cultural contexts without compromising the gospel message (Kanu, 2018). Christianity in Africa today reflects a diverse and vibrant faith, incorporating both Western and indigenous expressions, while remaining rooted in its biblical and apostolic foundations.

The Ethical and Religious Values in Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR)

Both Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) promote systems of ethics that emphasize communal well-being, justice, and the dignity of human life. Despite their doctrinal differences, they share core values

that guide human behavior and community relationships.

Ethical Values in African Traditional Religion

ATR's ethical system is rooted in communal living, respect for elders, justice, truthfulness, hospitality, and sanctity of life. Morality is considered sacred, and wrongdoing is often believed to bring consequences not just from the community but also from spiritual forces such as ancestors or deities (Kanu, 2015). Morality is taught through oral traditions, including proverbs, folktales, and taboos. A central value is ubuntu (a person is a person through others), which emphasizes solidarity and mutual responsibility (Murove, 2009). The major central ethical values in African Traditional Religion is Iwa (character). In African ethics, character maintains the quality of the individual moral life. Good character is the essence of the African moral system, the linchpin of the moral wheel. The justification for a character-based ethics is not far to seek. What society can do regarding moral conduct, is to impart moral knowledge to its members, making them aware of the moral values and principles of that society (Amadi, 2005). In general, society satisfactorily fulfills this duty of imparting moral knowledge to its members through moral education of various forms, including, as in African societies, telling morally-freighted proverbs and story to its younger members. Having moral knowledge as a human being made aware of the moral principles and rules of the society is one thing, being able to lead a life consonant with the moral principles is quite another, but good character stands as individual guard (Anayo, 2020).

Ethical Values in Christianity

Christian ethics is grounded in the teachings of Jesus Christ, especially the commandment to “love God and love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37–40, New International Version). Key values include forgiveness, compassion, truth, justice, humility, and holiness. The Ten Commandments and Sermon on the Mount form the ethical foundation for Christian life (Onyinyechi, 2019). Christian ethics focuses not only on community well-being but also on the inner transformation of the believer through grace and the Holy Spirit. A person's highest ethical duty is to love God with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength. The second highest ethical duty is to love neighbour as yourself. For a Christian, fulfilling these moral obligations takes place in obedience to the law of Christ and submission to the teachings of God's Word. The ultimate goal is to glorify God in everything that is said, done, thought, and felt. Other broad ethical goals include being a blessing to others and growing as a virtuous person.

Points of Convergence

Respect for life: Both traditions uphold the sacredness of life and condemn murder, theft, and dishonesty. The adherent in each religion see all humans as having dignity just because they are human, believe that respect for life requires that we do not intentionally kill another human being or help them to kill themselves, which means that euthanasia and assisted suicide must remain legally prohibited (Ojieabu & Yerokun, 2025). Human life at all stages, from conception to natural death, has inherent dignity and deserves protection and respect. Respecting life means more than providing for the physical needs of people, but understanding that dignity is inherent to each one. Respect for life is the recognition and appreciation of the inherent value of all living things.

Community and relationships: Ethical decisions are made in light of their impact on others. It well understood among the adherent of each religion that community relations are a business practice involving the development of mutually beneficial community partnerships within the areas in which a business operates. Community relation is considered a two-way benefit to its society. It positions businesses as civically and ethically responsible in their local communities. From the view of Morton and Bergbauer (2015), community and relation is a particular state of affairs in an area where potentially conflicting ethnic, religious, cultural, political, or linguistic groups live together, in order to build and maintain positive relationship.

Sanctions for wrong: Both systems provide spiritual or social consequences for immoral behaviour. Ifaleke expatiates that, in the Yoruba legal culture, Social crimes or immoral acts attract corporal punishment such as flogging, whipping, tying, putting in the stocks or yoke, and lacerating wound. Punishment in various forms

would be given out for number, robbery, rape, adultery, lying, and stealing cruelty. Africans believe that God has ordained a moral order for humans, through which they came to understand what is good and what is evil. In addition, from the biblical point of view, the term sanction refers to the authoritative approval or disapproval of certain actions, behaviour, and practices. Christian sanction applied with love, grace, and mercy that leads toward obedience and wisdom (Onyinyechi, 2019).

Role of spirituality: Both see ethics as divinely ordained, not merely social constructs. Ifamakinde asserts that, Traditional African religions believe that ancestors maintain a spiritual connection with their living relatives. Most ancestral spirits are generally good and kind. Negative actions taken by ancestral spirits are to cause minor illnesses to warn people that they have gotten onto the wrong path. It has to be noted that rituals and practices hold a central place in African Traditional Religion, it play a significant role in connecting adherents with the spiritual realm. From Christianity perspective, spirituality is an essential aspect of Christian faith because it provides individuals with a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. It is a consciousness of fellowship with the spirit of Christ, uninterrupted by carnality and sin. Biblical spirituality is taking the knowledge, facts, wisdom, and doctrine one knows and putting it into practice in the daily life (Pretorius, 2008).

Points of Divergence

Sources of authority: ATR relies on oral tradition and ancestral authority, while Christianity bases ethics on the Bible and divine revelation. In ATR, according to Ifagbemileke, traditional authorities are leaders that draw legitimacy from tradition, custom, ancestry, and/or indigeneity. In addition, it also attracted with belief in spirits, higher and low gods, sometimes including a supreme being, as well as the veneration of the dead, and use of magic. Moreover, Christians believe that ultimate authority is in God. The Bible is considered to be the most important source of authority for Christians because it contains the teachings of God and Jesus.

Salvation and accountability: Christianity emphasizes salvation through Christ and judgment by God, while ATR focuses on harmony with ancestors and communal approval (Gbenda, 2006). Ahortor (2016) elucidates that, salvation among Africans in general can be said to have been greatly influenced by the ethical value systems of indigenous African societies from the perspective of their conceptualization of evil. Meanwhile, Freligh (1994) asserts salvation and accountability from Christianity stand point as something represents all that was purchased at Calvary. He continues to say that it covers every phase of our needs and reaches from eternity to eternity. He explains that there present and future aspects to salvation; it is not only about going to heaven, but also about life today in the now. Salvation in Christianity seems to be expressed by means of several processes that take place from moment a person becomes a Christian. This idea is represented by Horne (1991), when he says, the salvation planned, executed, and applied by the Triune God is manifold in nature. He says it is comprehended in a series of biblical concepts: election, calling, regeneration, conversion, justification, adoption, sanctification and glorification. Brand (2002) states that salvation can be the equivalent of reconciliation or sanctification or liberation.

In practice, many Africans navigate both systems simultaneously, creating a blended moral worldview that draws on the strengths of each.

Molestation of Ethical and Religious Values in Contemporary Society

In today's African societies, both Christian and African Traditional Religious ethical values are under increasing threat due to modernization, globalization, urbanization, materialism, and the weakening of traditional institutions. These factors have contributed to a noticeable erosion of moral standards once upheld by both religious systems.

1. Moral Decay and Materialism: A major challenge facing ethical values in both ATR and Christianity is the rise of materialism and individualism. The traditional African emphasis on community, honesty, and self-control is being replaced by a pursuit of wealth, status, and personal gain at all costs (Murove, 2009). This trend is evident in political corruption, internet fraud (popularly called "Yahoo Yahoo" in Nigeria), and economic crimes. Even within Christian circles, the rise of prosperity gospel teachings has sometimes shifted

focus from ethical living to material success, leading some believers to compromise moral integrity in pursuit of wealth (Okoro, 2019). Akah & Uzoh asserts that, this situation has brought about rise in assassination, kidnapping, and robbery among others. All malefactor excessive desire for wealth as a common phenomenon nowadays is because of our society's warped and twisted values.

2. Weakening of Traditional Structures: Traditional institutions such as elders, family heads, and shrines, which once enforced moral order in ATR, are now losing their influence due to urban migration and Western education. As a result, young people often grow up detached from communal values, leading to moral confusion and identity crisis (Kanu, 2015). It is no longer news that, belief that the ancestors played in maintenance of morality in the community is going down every day. It is true that colonialism altered the belief and values of the Africans significantly, just as its structure was almost completely eroded. Igboin (2011) posits that, it is not practically possible to have a total return to the past, but there are certain cultural values that consistently define the African personality, history and belief that cannot be jettisoned without consequences, that need to put into consideration if anything will be renew.

3. Religious Hypocrisy and Intolerance: In both ATR and Christianity, there are growing instances of religious manipulation and hypocrisy. Some religious leaders exploit followers for personal gain, eroding trust and making religion seem less credible as a moral guide (Gbenda, 2006). Additionally, tensions between Christian and traditional beliefs sometimes result in religious intolerance, where mutual respect is lost. Presently, religious impropriety in Nigerian society increased everyday with attendance of commercialization of religion virtues, exploitation of the adherents, subjecting them to laziness, frustration, desperation and poverty (Yerokun, Abodunrin & Soneye 2025). This has greatly deterrents to progress and oppose the religious tenets of holiness, truthfulness and sacredness.

4. Social Media and Cultural Erosion: The influence of social media and digital technology has further contributed to the molestation of traditional values. Youths are exposed to global cultures that often promote promiscuity, disrespect, and rebellion against authority, which are contrary to the teachings of both Christianity and ATR (Onyinyechi, 2019). to add more, social media and cultural erosion has lead to erosion of local traditions, languages and identities, a phenomenon known as cultural homogenization from the past. Today, Nigerian Youths got increasing in global consumer behaviour, fashion and entertainment at the expense of their indigenous cultural practices. Moreover, challenges such as cultural appropriation, misrepresentation, and the digital divide pose significant threats to the equitable representation and preservation of diverse cultures. To navigate both the positive and negative aspect of social media, efforts and proactive policies that balance the benefits of global connectivity with the need to preserve and respect local cultures should be put in place.

The molestation of ethical and religious values today is a serious concern. While both Christianity and ATR offer strong moral frameworks, societal trends are challenging their relevance and authority. Addressing these challenges requires renewed dialogue, cultural education, and religious accountability.

CONCLUSION

The ethical and religious values upheld by African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity play a crucial role in shaping moral behaviour, communal living, and spiritual consciousness in African societies. Though they originate from different historical and theological backgrounds, both systems emphasize values such as truthfulness, respect for life, justice, compassion, and communal responsibility (Gbenda, 2006; Kanu, 2015). However, in the face of rapid social change, globalization, materialism, and technological influence, these values are being increasingly undermined. Traditional institutions that once served as custodians of morality are weakening, and even Christian ethics is sometimes distorted by religious hypocrisy and prosperity-driven ideologies (Okoro, 2019; Onyinyechi, 2019). Despite these challenges, both ATR and Christianity remain valuable moral anchors, capable of contributing positively to personal transformation and societal development. A sustained interreligious dialogue between ATR and Christianity is therefore not only possible but also necessary. Such dialogue can promote tolerance, moral renewal, and cultural integrity, ensuring that ethical values are preserved and adapted in ways that are relevant to today's African context (Murove, 2009). Ultimately, fostering mutual understanding between these two beliefs systems can contribute to peaceful coexistence, interfaith cooperation, and a morally conscious society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the ethical and religious values discussed in both African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Christianity, and the challenges facing them in contemporary African society, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Promote Interreligious Dialogue and Respect:** Faith communities, scholars, and traditional leaders should foster platforms for constructive dialogue between ATR and Christianity. This would promote mutual understanding, correct misconceptions, and help integrate shared ethical principles for the common good (Kanu, 2018).
2. **Moral and Religious Education:** Both religious and secular educational institutions should strengthen ethics and religious education, focusing on African moral values, biblical teachings, and critical engagement with contemporary issues. This will help equip the younger generation to make sound moral choices (Onyinyechi, 2019).
3. **Media and Cultural Advocacy:** Governments, NGOs, and religious institutions should use media and community outreach to promote ethical behaviour and positive cultural values. African proverbs, folktales, and biblical stories can be leveraged through films, radio, and social media to teach morals in accessible ways (Murove, 2009).
4. **Accountability among Religious Leaders:** Christian and traditional religious leaders must be examples of ethical integrity. Faith communities should hold their leaders accountable, ensuring that religious platforms are not used for exploitation or unethical gain (Okoro, 2019).
5. **Community-Based Ethical Rebuilding:** Communities should revive traditional institutions such as family councils, elders' forums, and youth mentorship programs that historically maintained moral order. These should work alongside churches and mosques to rebuild ethical consciousness in society (Gbenda, 2006).
6. **Legislative Support and Policy:** Governments should integrate traditional and religious values into policy frameworks, particularly in areas like education, justice, and family welfare, to reinforce moral behaviour at structural levels.

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