**Is African Ethics based on Religion?**

**Abstract**

*This paper considers the claim that African ethics is based on religion. In this work, we examine the relationship between ethics and religion and as such, show the nexus between religion and morality in African philosophical thought. The paper evaluates as well as deepens discourses on the moral foundation of African ethics by (i) debunking the religion foundationalism, which scholars like John Mbiti defend, and (ii) establishing that there is confusion of means-end basis in traditional religious consideration of moral foundationalism in African ethics.*

*Keywords: African ethics, Religion, Foundationalism, Morality.*

**Introduction**

According to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* “ethics is technically used by philosophers to mean a philosophical study of morality – morality is understood as a set of social rules, principles, norms that guide or are intended to guide the conduct of people in a society, and as beliefs about right and wrong conduct as well as good or bad character.[[1]](#footnote-1) This implies that morality is the basis, without which ethics is impossible. Morality is how we should live our life. Ethics is the study of how we should live our life,…[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is only appropriate to ask why being moral or why one should lives a moral life than why living an ethical life. This is simply because “why living a moral life” lies outside theoretical ethics. Importantly, ethics is to formulate the guidelines, principles or theories that help us living morally. In this regards, ethics is a reflection on morality.

The question of what is right and wrong, good and bad, evil and good is not only raised in the domain of ethics, but it is also discussed in religious parlance.

Some African philosophers believe that religion and morality are structurally interrelated. Some categories of these scholars are J.S. Mbiti, P.O. Bodunrin and Bolaji Idowu. In this purview Bolaji Idowu in his book; “*Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief”* says … morality is basically 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.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Also some western thinkers, that are both philosophers and theologians (such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham) harmonized philosophical ethics with religious ethics. If they were ask why must one live a moral life? It may be claimed that one needs to act morally simply because God commanded it. Scholars like C.S. Momoh shared the view that “what should really count in religious matter, at the end of the day, is conduct and not belief and worship.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Momoh posits that “belief and worship are means to an end which is conduct”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This work therefore engages in establishing whether African ethics is based on religion. We examine the concepts of religion and ethics, thereby showing the nexus between religion and morality in African philosophical thought. This will nonetheless lay the ground for moral foundation of African ethics. The moral foundation of African ethics is not a suggestion that religion play no roles in African ethics. As mentioned earlier that moral enquiry is not only subjected to ethics, but it is also a discourse in religion settings. In this case, this work will establish that religion is not a foundation of African ethics, but religion only play means role to affirm moral foundation of African ethics.

**Ethics and Religion**

In the introduction above there is a claim that ethics is not only discipline dealing with good or bad, evil and good, as well as right and wrong, but also we have religious perspective. In this regards, ethics and religion presuppose morality of human conduct and action. Based on this, we are free to examine ethics and religion and deepen it down to morality and religion. Also we shall take as our main focus, the claim that African ethics is infuse with religion rather than reason (ethical basis). To evaluate whether African ethics is pervade by religion or reason, one needs to discern ethics, religion and morality.

Morality has been a subject of critical debate in many intellectual spheres. In this case, morality is considered to be a guide, belief, custom or norm that moderate human behavior. Bolaji Idowu says “no one knows when the question of morality as a theoretical subject began to exercise the mind of man”.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Morality is both individual and social depending on the subject matter. It is individual, because of personal moral issues such as smoking of cigarette. Individual is free to choose what is good or bad, right or wrong without external influence or societal effect. Social morality deals with moral basic tenets that are social in nature. For example, abortion, prostitute, suicide etc. Both individual and social morality regulates and guide human behavior.

The main difference between individual and social morality is that the individual morality is a matter of principles, while social morality is a matter of rules (interpersonal relationship and societal issues). In line with this, what is good or bad and right and wrong could be individual or social in perspectives. Morality precedes ethics. Ethics is a systematic study of morality to formulate moral rules and principles that regulate man’s character.

According to Joseph Omoregbe, ethics “can be defined as the branch of philosophy which deals with the morality of human actions”.[[7]](#footnote-7) It can also be defined as the systematic study of the fundamental science of human conduct.[[8]](#footnote-8) Ethics presupposes that we already have a sense of morality, and it is the systematic study of the fundamental principles underlying our morality. Hence, morality is the foundation with which ethical structure is built on.

Ethics is a set of rules, principles and code of conduct that deals with morality. Morality is that aspect of knowledge that deals with human behavior or conduct. Having briefly give account of morality and ethics, what is religion?

Various attempts had been made by different scholars and philosophers to explicate what religion is all about. However, central and common to all religion is belief,[[9]](#footnote-9) worship of Supreme Being and constraint to particular practice of code and conduct. Religion does not just believe in God or worship of supreme being, but also, ritual, ancestral worship (God of Abram, Sango, Oya, Ogun etc.), present of supreme being (power above all), and social aspect such as celebration of their leaders’ birth or festive period. For example, Moulid Nabbiyy (for the muslims), Osun festival (African traditional religion), charismas (for the Christians), etc; it is spiritual and exploitative (a more radical sense).

Religion according to C.S. Momoh, is the institutionalized exploitation of the Divine by men and communities for their material, political, socio-economic, cultural and spiritual gratification and upliftment and the Divine exploitation of men and communities for the realization of His injunctions, will and wishes”.[[10]](#footnote-10) This definition shows that religion is exploitative, cultural, spiritual, and affect both material, political and socio-economic life of people.

Religion in Islamic view is the total submission of one-self to the will of God Almighty. That is, all saying and doing (acts) of human being must be influence and interpret by God through His Quranic doctrine sent via His messages (from Adam to Muhammad).[[11]](#footnote-11) There are many definitions, but, just to mention a few.

Religion is not primarily concerned with morality. Like Omoregbe says “the direct object of religion is not morality but worship, adoration through rites, prayers etc.[[12]](#footnote-12) on the other hand, ethics directly deals with morality. Some people claimed that morality is inseparable from religion. This is because they believe that man can neither exist nor act in *ab nitio* of God. J.S. Mbiti says ‘To be is to be religious in a religious universe”.[[13]](#footnote-13) However, human experience has shown in many occasions that righteousness and morality is not acquainted to religion. Omoregbe says “it is not necessary to be religious or to belong to any religion in order to be moral. Many people who belong to various religious live immoral lives while many others who have no religion live moral lives.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Morality is independent of religion. That is, it is not based on religion, but morality formed an essential part of religion. It is religion that needs morality to acquire general acceptance by the people. It is possible for one to be moral without being religious, while it is incomplete for one to be religious with lacks of moral sense.

A critic may even say if morality is the motives of religion, then religion is useless, because man has already acknowledged morality. And if the motive is God, then it has no meaning in human conduct and behavior. This is to say morality is based on human nature as a rational and social being. Morality is actually what judge religion. Omoregbe says “morality is the yardstick with which true religion is distinguished from false religion, and true religious actions from false religious actions[[15]](#footnote-15) prophet Muhammad (PBUH)[[16]](#footnote-16) says God is pure and clean and he will never accept any immoral act.[[17]](#footnote-17) Also he says God will not put the heal (solution) in what he forbid. So ethics as a systematic study of morality has nothing to do religion.

On this ground ethics and religion do not entail each other. Ethics is independent of religion and if ethics were to be based on religion as it is being claimed by some theologians, Nigeria suppose to be a country free of immoral acts like corruption, embezzlement of public funds, bribing, favourism, and etc because of the consistent and persistent increasing in number of religions. But the reverse is the case. It is very ironical that despite the numerous churches and mosques, corruptions and all sort of immoral acts widely spread all over the country. It is better to increase the standard of our ethics than our religiosity; perhaps we will have good Nigerian (both leader and subject) with good character and of moral observant.

The burden and loophole of religions and religious men cannot make us accept the religious foundation of African ethics.

**Moral Foundation of African Ethics**

African ethics is the totality of ways of examining values or human behavior and conduct by both African and foreign scholars in African perspective. African ethics is an interpretation of the moral ideas and values as found in the African moral language, conceptions of society, and conception of a person and so on.

A critics may even says, it is impossible to have African ethics in it universal form, because African has various cultural beliefs and norms. However it is easy for us to point out, some common values that are not only peculiar to African setting such as (a) stealing, (b) to kill innocent people for money, (c) to have sex with someone without his/her consent, (d) to deceive people, at least when not done in self – or other defense. (e) To break promise, for marginal personal gain (i.e. violation of trust). Needless to say all these are self-explanatory in all cultural kens. Thus, African ethics is not riddle and jokes task among philosophers (African and non-African).

African ethics is African not because some ethical or moral issues are peculiar to Africans, but examining philosophical problems in an African point of view in African cultural way. For instance, placid Temple’s (non-African) ontological approach to African values and moral conducts, Momoh’s moralism theory, the theory of empathy and communalism are all indigenous to Africa, just as categorical imperative by Kant and Golden rule principle by Aristotle are indigenously western although these and African ethical concepts can be apply universally.

To buttress this point, “Bertrand Russell observed that “Aristotle opinions on moral questions are always such as were conventional in his days”.[[18]](#footnote-18) The basic moral issues in African ethics is not about the scholars or the regional view of African ethical thought but, rather it is based rational ingestion of morality in African ethics. To posit that African ethics is based on religion is partial and incomplete claim about African ethics. In philosophical discourse, ethics is a reflection on the fundamental nature of morality and moral values. Therefore, to claim that African ethics is founded on religion is an attempt to condemn African ethics like African philosophy. Also, it is an idea to dehumanize African of being rational. Essentially, the natures and methods of African ethics which are holistic, communal and humanism will be exposed to waste bin of forgetfulness.

Many attempts have been made to support and oppose this view by philosophers and scholars (Africans and non-African). Those who support, especially the African logical neo-positivists (such as Peter Bodunrin, Kwesi Wiredu, Paulin Houngondin, Odera Oruka etc.) claim that religion permeate African life and also that, there is no uniquely African philosophy. This is grounded on the saying that “African philosophy is a missioner because philosophy is basically western philosophy.[[19]](#footnote-19) A denial of African philosophy is automatically dismissing of African ethics. That religion permeates people’s life does not really imply that they are not rational or all their thought must be based on religion. Anyway, the same had been said of Chinese people, but intellectual discourse and debate have made them re-established and affirm African philosophy as well as Chinese philosophy.

The African ethics is rational just as its philosophy. This is because Africans are human being like other being in the world. Hegel says human is first a thinker (i.e. rational). On this Dr. John Chukwuemeka Ekei quoted Franz Boas’ classic statement; “in the main, mental characteristic of man are the same all over the world”. He says “and since morality is a product of man’s reason, or man’s mental characteristic, it then, means that man all over the world has never failed to employ it (reason) in generating principles of (moral) action in solving the problems of human limitations, powerlessness and ambivalence”.[[20]](#footnote-20)

A critic – P.O. Bodunrin says “not every rational, coherent, reasonable and logical conceptual system is philosophy”. After all, science and mathematics are eminently rational and logical but they are not philosophical system.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, Professor G.E. Azenabor says “to be rational, therefore, is to be able to identify your situation and problem, then being able to find a solution that will be benefiting within the system”[[22]](#footnote-22). This is to say African ethics is rational, because African can identify their moral problems and rightly proffer solution in Africa point of view.

In African moral system, religion only strengthened it, in other words, African ethics is not and cannot be based on religion. This is because African does not engage in religion that cannot satisfy his/her objective or wellbeing otherwise; he/she will abandon such religion. So is that mean moral teachings of such religion will be outdated. To base African ethics on religion, it follows that we cannot have stable moral code and conduct as well as moral theories in African system.

Africans can adduce reason why something is good or bad, moral or immoral and right or wrong. Authority for morality is not with gods or religion.

Question needs to be asked why then Africans are still practicing one or other religions? What is the essence of religion? What actually bring the questions of religion into African ethics? This is to directly ask about the role of religion in African moral systems or ethics.

The role of religion is that religions or the gods are just agent of moral sanctions rather than sources of morality. For example, in Yoruba, Aye lala worshipers believe that Aye lala is the strongest god to reveal the bad or deceptive matter done in secret. The god Ayelala strike or fight the wrong or evil doers with thunder and thereby expose their evil or immoral act to the public. The gods sanctions are immediately and effective and there is nothing like hereafter or forgiveness except the wrong doers confess in public. This confession at times if they appeal to gods, its work not for the gods to strike, but at time it may be late and judgement will be pass without any recourse to sympathy. The gods are the last court of appeal on the matter of moral judgment.

Religion only enhances African values system and not that value is based on religion. The gods are only caretaker of African values. The gods prevent immoral actions through revealing wrong or evil things and as well the gods have retributive spirit to pass moral judgment adequately.

In African, religion is not the basis of morality, but rather a moral agent or mean to moral justification. In line with this religion cannot be the basis of African ethics.

**An Evaluation**

Ethics and religion deal with moral phenomenon. Even though, a distinction can be made between ethical and religious understanding of morality.

Ethics provides a clarification, better explanation and understanding of morality. Thus, ethics is theoretical and morality is the basis of ethics. Therefore, morality is the principles and rules of right or wrong, good or bad in human behaviours and conduct. It is practical. If we systematically reflect on morality we have ethics. Morality can be social or individual. Morality is not really enforceable, while ethics is. for instance, it is morally wrong to make jest of other fellow man, but in football it happens without any moral sanction.

Ethics is a reflection on the fundamental nature of morality. Religion is simply an indirect way of looking at morality. In other word, the question of morality-good and bad, moral and immoral, right and wrong is not only restricted to ethics, but also there is religion perspective. Religion and ethics are concerned with morality of human conduct and therefore, both presuppose human – freedom and responsibility. Morality can be independent of ethics and religion. Ethics reflect on morality to formulate moral principles and rules.

Religion deals with morality, but it is not inseparable from morality. Being religious does not really mean one is moral and being immoral does not imply that one is religious. Religion is not automatic appropriate to morality. These are two different concepts that do not imply each other. One can be religious and not moral (this may be a real contradiction to religious claim) and one can be moral and not religious. So religion is not basis of morality and therefore, cannot be foundation or basis of African ethics.

 African ethics is that branch of African philosophy which deals with critical reflection on the nature or manner of life, conduct, behavior and character of the African.

The claim that African ethics is based in religion is predicated to the fact that African life is permeated with religion and that Africans comprehend the world to be religious universe. On the contrary, we support the view that African ethics is not based on religion. This is because the religious basis of African ethics is to deny African ethics and philosophy just as it is done to Chinese philosophy.

The relationship between gods and man in African setting is enough for us to look for basis of African ethics somewhere else. In Africa, god is killable, if the god is not doing or satisfying the devotee, then, the devotee of such god ceases to perform a ritual or worship in honor of a god, that god is believed to be dead.

According to Sophie Oluwole, Yoruba morality is not religious morality, but on the contrary, a secular morality with a rational basis. She distinguishes between taboo (attributed to the gods) and moral rules. Taboo is based on religion and explained in terms of gods demands, while moral law in Yoruba is based on reasoning and explained in terms of the Golden Rule and utilitarian considerations. To buttress the point on taboo K. Wiredu argues that among the Akan people of Ghana, that is only an ordinary man that attributes taboos to the gods. The sages have a rational basis why it would be wrong to do things that are forbidden by taboo. This is to say in Akan, morality is not founded on religion but on rational reflection as to what is conducive to human welfare.

On the other hand, Africans still believe in gods intervention in moral judgment, but, why? The Ancient African realizes that no matter how we try to pass reliable, objective and adequate moral judgment, man will fail. This is because we are limited by our natural abilities as human being. Man is imperfect.

The two notions of Protagoras that “man is the measure of all things” and he can make the worse to be better’ that is, man can be and not be spontaneously. Here we discover the danger and short coming of leaving justice in the hand of man. So it is best for us to allow who has the ability or power to know beyond the seeing to pass the moral judgment. It is the gods who bridge the gap between man’s limitation and absolute justice. This is being in practice for long in Africa. It is tested, trusted and confirmed, but the power is mostly limited to the priest of gods.

That Africans believe in gods intervention in moral judgment is not unique or embarrasive to Africans, because, it is recently reported that FIFA by 2014 will be using “Goal line” to determine when ball is a goal or not. This is to say that the referee and the last men cannot pass reliable and adequate moral judgment whether ball is goal or not. So they need gods in form of “Goal line”. It is left for referee to confirm it, just as African make attestation to gods’ moral judgment. If the gods pass wrong moral judgment, African person will know as a rational and social being and therefore, reject it immediately. This is why we say that religion is only a means or agent of morality and not the source or foundation of African ethics. African ethics, is holistic, humanistic, communal and well defined and understand in ontological basis of African philosophy.

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1. Stanford Encylopedia of Philosophy “African Ethics”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. S.E. Stumpf, Op.cit., p.340. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief,* (Great Britain: Iowe & Brydone Printers Ltd, 1962), p.145. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. C.S. Momoh (ed.), *Substance of Africa Philosophy* – “African Moral Atheism”by C.S. Momoh, (Auchi: African Projects Publication, 2000), p.378. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bolaji Idowu, op.cit., p.144.

Note: Morality as it is used by Bolaji Idowu is not theoretical in terms of ethics, because philosophy as a rational basis of all there is (reality) is traced to Thales around 5 century B.C. and not to talk of ethics that emerged from or as a core branch of philosophy. “Experience comes before Theory”, Idowu Bolaji, p.146. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. J.I. Omoregbe, *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study*, (Lagos: Joja Education Research and Publishers Ltd, 1993), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. J.I. Omoregbe, Ibid, p.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Religious belief is mostly dogma and not in epistemological sense. That is, is not a justified true belief, but rather is grounded on religious faith, which is not open to doubt or question for a religious believer. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. C.S. Momoh (ed.), Op.cit., p. 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sheik Adam Abdullahi, Dhurusu Taoheed – Arabic version (Lagos: Morcas Press, 1953), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. J.I. Omoregbe, op.cit., p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Morrison and Gibb Ltd, 1967), p.262. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. J.I. Omoregbe, op.cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, p.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. PBUH: Meaning, Peace Be Upon Him, (Prophet Muhammed). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Elias Imam Abdullahi Al-Lory, Miatu Lihadith (1992), p.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online) “African Ethics”. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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21. Godwin Azenabor, *Understanding the Problems in African Philosophy*, (Lagos: First Academic Publishers, 2002), p.58. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, p.59. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)