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## INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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- |                                |                                                                              |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| G. Ferraro                     | Dialogo di Gesù con la donna di Samaria.                                     |
| A. Bottino                     | Cornelio e il discorso di Pietro.                                            |
| J. J. Kilgallen                | Acts 17,22-31: An example of interreligious Dialogue.                        |
| M. Dhavamony                   | The Christian theology of interreligious Dialogue.                           |
| B. de Give                     | Le dialogue interreligieux monastique.                                       |
| M. Borrmans                    | Le dialogue islamo-chrétien.                                                 |
| H. Tessier                     | Dialogue islamo-chrétien à l'heure de l'intégrisme.                          |
| P. Jackson                     | Christian-Muslim dialogue in India.                                          |
| H. Coward                      | Hindu-Christian Dialogue as « Mutual Conversation ».                         |
| K. Klostermaier                | Indische Christologie.                                                       |
| M. Fuss                        | Buddha und Maria: Dynamische Leere als Ikone des Dialogs.                    |
| J. Laube                       | Christian Dialogue with Tenrikyō.                                            |
| W. Johnston                    | Wisdom and Emptiness.                                                        |
| C. F. Starkloff                | Dialogue, Evangelization and Church Growth among Aboriginal North Americans. |
| M. O. Opeloye -<br>D. F. Asaju | Christian-African religious interactions in Nigeria.                         |
| C. B. Peter                    | Dialogue between Christianity and African traditional religion.              |
| D. O. Olayiwola                | Aladura Christianity in Dialogue with African traditional religion.          |



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# *Christian-African religious interactions in Nigeria*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In religiously plural societies such as Nigeria, interaction between adherents of different religions is inevitable. The capability to relate to one another depends on the nature of the religions, the preachers, the practitioners, the policies and actions of Governments. Interaction may be positive or negative. The latter is problematic because it engenders numerous social and political vices.

There are three major religions in Nigeria: African Traditional<sup>1</sup> Religion (referred to in this paper as AFREL - being acronym for African Religion), Christianity and Islam. Religious intolerance in Nigeria is more manifest in Christian-Muslim relations, with AFREL recording only few and remote cases of active intolerance. Most scholars of comparative religion in the area of interaction have dwelt on AFREL generally as a peaceful, accomodating and resilient religion, gradually infiltrated by the foreign religions. Some, especially foreign investigators treat the religion contemptuously with derogatory and opprobrious terminologies such as pagan, idolaterous, fetish, heathen, juju, etc. The AFREL God is cast as *deus Remotus* and *deus absconditus*. Emil Ludwig even questioned:

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the word 'Traditional' to denote African Religion is often questioned in that it erroneously confines it to the past whereas it is current and dynamic.

<sup>2</sup> See E.S. SMITH, *African Ideas of God* (London, 1950), p. 755.

Notable Nigerian scholars have tried through their published works<sup>3</sup> on AFREL to correct these errors with arguments which promote the religion as equal in stature and nature with other religions, while the African people are appreciated for their rich and enviable cultural heritage, theology, ethics and social values.

Our focus in this work is the relations between Christianity and AFREL adherents in Nigeria. We wish to investigate areas and degrees of concord or discord in their interactions. Of course, this necessitates a brief background examinations of the essential nature and doctrine of the religions which create differences.

We proceed in this task with some assumptions: (1) that religion is all-pervasive especially in Africa. Idowu was right in describing the Yoruba of Nigeria as being "in all things religious",<sup>4</sup> (2) that due to this, AFREL is synonymous with African tradition, culture etc., there being an element of AFREL in most Africans, irrespective of their present religious persuasion; (3) that the setback experienced by AFREL today is chiefly due to the onslaught on it by European Missionaries, Colonialists and their successors. Bascom and Herskovits believed that:

No African Culture (including Religion) has been unaffected in some way by European contact, and none has entirely given way before it.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. BASIC DEFINITIONS AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

### a) *Definitions*

African Religion is the original indigenous and 'traditional' religion of the African people. It arose on the African soil

<sup>3</sup> The works of E.B. IDOWU: *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962); *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM, 1973), as well as J.O. AWOLALU and P.A. DOPAMU, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Publishers, 1979) are leading texts.

<sup>4</sup> E.B. IDOWU, *Olodumare, Op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> W.R. BASCOM and M.J. HERSKOVITS, *Continuity and Change in African Culture*, (Chicago: University Press, 1958), p. 53.

and passed on by the forebears to successive generations. Its forms have been preserved in oral tradition, the oracular corpus, songs, music, invocations, prayer, myths and proverbs, etc. The structure of the religion is made up of Beliefs in: God (as Supreme Being), Divinities (intermediaries between God and man), Spirits, Ancestors, Magic and Medicine. Liturgy of AFREL worship features libation, invocation, songs, music, divination and sacrifice (which can be foundational, preventive, curative and substitutionary).<sup>6</sup> There are priests and priestesses as well as other functionaries who serve the cults of the pantheon at their respective shrines, groves and temples. God-consciousness pervades all aspects of African life. The ethics, laws and values by which the society is governed derive from religion, as the taboos which served as moral regulators. Communalism is engendered by the extensive relationship network whereby every African in a community is his brother's keeper. This large communion is generously extended to the ancestors who are still venerated as existent moral and spiritual supervisors of the affairs of their families, class or communities. The various *Egungun* (masquerades) in most parts of Africa are symbolic of the continued interaction between the living and the dead. The institution of traditional rulership and the customary courts along with the festivals are major vestiges of AFREL in Nigeria today.

Christianity evolved from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. The faith which has its root in Israel is inseparably linked with the Old Testament Judaism as antecedent. In a way, Christianity is a continuation and fulfilment of the Old Testament religious expectations. Jesus himself claimed to have fulfilled the messianic prophecies. After the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, his disciples formed the Church (EKKLESIA - Assembly of Jesus disciples) and carried on the work of universal propagation of the Gospel. Christianity spread to Nigeria in 1841 through Western Missionaries, who after their initial pioneering work in the coastal village of Badagry, moved into the hinterland. The Missions' provision of education, healthcare and social welfare projects boosted the

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<sup>6</sup> IDOWU, *Olodumare*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 118-125.

attraction of Africans who adopted the faith. Today, the areas of Eastern and Southern Nigeria are largely Christian, while the North is mostly Muslim. Christianity met with resistance in the North because of the long prevalence of Islam in the area. In every part of Nigeria, AFREL has had to content with either Christianity or Islam (or both).

Doctrinally, Christianity is monotheistic though the concept is mysteriously linked to the Triune Godhead. Jesus Christ is regarded as the incarnate son of God through whom salvation can be achieved through faith and righteousness (Acts 4:12). Christianity has various denominations and is highly proliferated in Nigeria today.

#### b) *Similarities*

Christianity and AFREL share similarities in some areas. Both uphold the belief in one Supreme God served by divine intermediary agents (Jesus in Christianity and Divinities in AFREL). This God is named, depending on the people's concept of his nature and attributes. Some of the names common in AFREL have been adopted by Christians. The Yoruba name *Olorun* (Owner of Heaven) and the Igbo name *Chukwu* (Creator) are used today by all religions, for God. The Supreme Being is similarly conceived in attributes as king, creator, good, real and judge, etc. Belief in the problem of sin, the need for righteousness, ethical codes, human moral responsibility and divine accountability are commonly taught. Belief in life-after-death, judgement and alternate eternal destinations (heaven and hell-fire) are common to both religions.

#### c) *Differences*

Basic differences between Christianity and AFREL have contributed substantially to the gap of relations between the adherents. While Christianity demands exclusive loyalty, AFREL accommodates variety, but would not accept the tag 'polytheism' because it suggests lack of one Supreme Being. The vibrant evangelization of Christians has no similarity in the lack of zeal for membership drive in AFREL. The faith appears contented with continuity based on goodwill of suc-

cessive generations. The Christian Trinitarian Monotheism is different from the African pantheon which parades a large number of divinities. Christianity has only one Son of God but AFREL has Many Sons of God. The AFREL departmentalisation of the cosmological and social phenomena under the influence of the respective divinities is uncommon in Christianity. The generally broad spectrum of AFREL is connected with the people's philosophy of life (as the Yoruba saying goes):

*Oju Orun to eiye fo  
Lai fi ara kan ara.*

Translation: The sky is broad enough to accommodate different birds which fly without collision.

AFREL nature is Unity in Diversity.

Unlike Christianity which is doctrinally more systematic based on its written scripture (The Bible) AFREL has no coded scripture. As mentioned earlier, its verities are preserved in oral tradition, which poses problems of information, loss, addition and preservation for the future. This problem can lead to gradual extinction of functional AFREL, more so as many aged human repositories and practitioners of the faith are dying with little hope of able and interested successors, the youths who today find white-collar jobs in the cities more attractive.

General areas of differences between Christianity and AFREL include: Christian rejection of mystery cults, divination, polygamy, use of amulets and charms, practice of witchcraft and superstitions etc. Christian hostile attitude towards AFREL was partly suggested by odd features of the religion. In Iwes opinion,

Some of the gross, gruesome and cruel aspects of our culture were conspicuously evident. The origins of Christianity beheld our culture battling with cannibalism, nudity, infanticidal destruction of twins, local and tribal strife and blood-bath, mass-illiteracy, lack of sense of documentation, idolatry, human sacrifice, slavery and witchcraft.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> N.S. IWE, *Christianity, Culture and Colonialism* (Port Harcourt: College of Education, 1985), p. 77.

We must add however that these vices belonged to the past in Africa and that they were not the exclusive preserve of the Africans. Virtually every people the world over passed through this crude stages before modern civilisation and scientific/technological developments evolved modern societies. It was unfortunate that the dark side of Africa have been given much prominence by the Europeans (and Christian Missionaries) while the great positive values, goodwill and religious treasures of the African people are usually unnoticed or relegated.

### 3. CONCORD AND DISCORD IN INTERACTION

#### a) *Positive Interactions*

At times it is difficult to separate in the life of an African Christian between African culture and Christian living. Because of the all-pervasive nature of AFREL over Africans, African Christians mostly combine both, although at varying degrees. Many African converts to Christianity maintain their African names, many of which are derived from AFREL and its deities. The Yoruba names: *Ogunbiyi* (*Ogun* - god of iron, has given birth to this); *Ifayemi* (*Ifa* - the oracular god befits me), etc. are typical. The more common phenomenon is the adoption of the AFREL names for God as derivatives of Christian names, for example: *Oluwaseun* (The Lord has done so much) and *Olorunto* (God is worthy to be King) etc. In Nigeria most Christians have both the traditional names and a Christian (Biblically adopted) name in addition to the surnames. Worthy of note is the continued usage by Christians of such names as *Babatunde* [father (dead) has come back (to life)] and *Iyabode* [mother (dead) has come back (to life)]. These names are reflective of the AFREL pronounced belief in reincarnation, a concept which is entirely repudiated in Christianity.

The African characteristic Communal living is not usually disturbed by diversities in religious affiliations of its members. Religion is regarded as personal, between the individual and his God. Freewill and freechoice is the norm. Many Nigerian families are composed of people who belong to different reli-

gions. There are married couples who belong to different faiths. Most Nigerian families have relations who are ardent AFREL devotees. This philosophy of unity in diversity has enabled peaceful coexistence among the people.

In contemporary Nigeria, marriage solemnization ceremonies are done, combining the AFREL pattern and the Christian. Many married Christian couples first had to perform the traditional African wedding, where dowries are paid, parents each bless the couple and the feet of the new bride is washed and ushered into wedlock; then comes the Church wedding. It may be noted however that even the traditional wedding is done utilising Christian prayer and songs while retaining not the essence but the forms of AFREL concepts and rites. Also the practice of child-naming in Christian families is done combining AFREL symbolic elements; for example water (for purity and a life of indispensability), oil (for enrichment and smooth life), salt (for a tasteful life), honey (for a sweet and lovable existence), alligator pepper seeds (for a life of fertility - with many children). In some more liberal Christian families, even AFREL libation and invocations are incorporated.

The Nigerian institution of traditional rulership is unique in inter-faith relations. The traditional rulers, the Yoruba *Obas*, and Igbo *Obis*, are epitomes and chief custodians of the 'traditional' religion, culture and values of their respective peoples. In this capacity, it is mandatory that they become supernumerary priests of AFREL, partaking as sponsors and supervisors of ritual sacrifices made on behalf of the communities. They also partake in ancestor veneration and hosting of the festivals, where masquerades of sorts entertain. Many of such Obas were avowed Christians before their enthronement; some still lay claim to Christianity afterwards, while many combine both. In a similar vein are numerous functional or honorary chieftances which are endowed and select Nigerian citizens by their respective local communities, irrespective of their religious affiliation. Some of the nominees are Christians who consent to undergo the chieftaincy rite of conferment under strict AFREL beliefs and procedure, with the AFREL priests and the Traditional ruler presiding.

Language, songs and music are strong vehicles for con-



veying thoughts, actions and religions as well as cultural values. Early Christianity was European in coloration with the ascendancy of Black consciousness; Christians researched into AFREL and adopted aspects of the songs, dance, rhythm, musical instruments and praise chants for God to Africanize Christianity. This trend is institutionalised today in African Indigenous Churches such as Cherubim and Seraphim Church (Nigeria), Musama Christo Disco Church (Ghana), and the Kimbanguist Church (Zaire). Here, the talking drums have replaced the Organ, ecstatic dances in tune with rhythmic music have replaced the solitude of hymn singing and extempore and evocative prayers are preferred to the Stereotyped petitions in the European Churches' prayer books.

'African' Churches in Nigeria have gone further in modifying 'Mission' Christianity by incorporating traditional norms rejected earlier by European Mission Churches. Polygamy is permitted by some churches and polygamists are communicants at the Eucharist. Prayers for traditional rulers have replaced that for the Queen of England (in the revised Anglican prayerbook, for example). Prior to Nigerian independence on 1st October, 1960, many of the Nigerian Nationalist fighters were Christians. These included late Herbert Macaulay, late Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe. They fought incorporating political, Christian and African cultural ideas in their struggles under the influencing aegis of 'Ethiopianism' (the African Consciousness expressed through Christianity). The slogan then was "Africa for the Africans"<sup>8</sup> even in Christian Matters. Two notable Ethiopianists were late Bishop James Johnson (of Breadfruit Anglican Church, Lagos) and late Mojola Agefeti (an African Christian radical). They both aroused Nigerians, irrespective of their religion, to identify themselves with their African roots.

In the academic areas interactions have been largely positive. Inter-religious associations such as the 'Nigerian Association for the Study of Religions (N.A.S.R.) are made up partly of Christians and AFREL devotees. Under such bodies, especially through their (usually) annual national conferences (and

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<sup>8</sup> E.A. AYANDELE, *Holy Johnson: A Pioneer of African Nationalism*, 1970, p. 293.

publications), Christian Scholars and Church leaders have carried out comparative studies on aspects of AFREL - Christian relations. A typical example is the published study on "Divine mysteries and secret cults in the African Traditional Religions and in Christianity"<sup>9</sup>, authored by the current Catholic Bishop of Abuja (Nigeria's Federal Capital), Rt. Rev. (Dr.) John Onaiyekan. It is also remarkable that majority of the renowned Nigerian scholars of African Religion are Christians. These include late Professor E. Bolaji Idowu (Emeritus, and former Patriarch of the Methodist Church of Nigeria), Professor (Rev.) Omosade Awolalu (Emeritus, an Archdeacon of Anglican Church of Nigeria), Prof. (Rev.) S.G. Onibere (a priest of the Anglican Church and Head, Department of Religious Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria) and Prof. Peter Dopamin (of the University of Ilorin).

Partly due to the disposition and pioneering orientation of the above scholars on AFREL, the curricula in most Departments of Religious Studies in Nigerian Universities and Colleges of Education are designed to ensure cross-cultural and inter-religious studies. Students admitted to study Christian Religious knowledge are compelled to offer subsidiary courses on African 'Traditional' Religion as well as Islam, vice-versa. Such exposures enhance mutual understanding and harmonious relations, as well as minimize, if not totally eliminate inter-religious hostilities.

#### b) *Negative Interactions*

Areas of negative relations between adherents of Christianity and AFREL are not very pronounced. This is due to the generally peaceful nature of the two religions. AFREL does not present a united front by the diverse cults of the divinities under its umbrella. Thus, it is not cohesively organised like Christianity. It has no generally recognised and accepted leader or spokesperson in Nigeria. Therefore the government in Nigeria has not accorded AFREL the status it deserves. Public holi-

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<sup>9</sup> J.O. ONAIYEKAN, "Divine Mystery and Secret Cults in the African Traditional Religion and in Christianity" in S.B. MALA and Z.I. OSENI (eds.) Nigerian Association for Study of Religions Conference proceedings (NASR), 1980, pp. 73-79.

days are not officially declared for its festivals unlike the Christian Christmas and the Muslim *Id-el-Fitri*. Yet during AFREL festival many indigenes in towns and cities return to their respective homes to celebrate and reunite with their pals. The Yoruba has a syncretic saying that:

*Awa o soro ile wa  
Igbagbo ko wipe ki a ma soro.*

Translation: We shall perform our traditional religious rites, (membership in) Christianity does not prevent us from performing our rites.

There were pockets of resistance by AFREL devotees to the conversion advance of Christianity. Christianity was seen as a foreign religion which should not be allowed to unseat the home religion of the ancestors. Some parents resisted their children becoming Christians fearing they would abandon the AFREL heritage. There were/are serious cases where diabolical secret cults such as the Yoruba *Oro* which, prior to European colonialism governed traditional societies, saw Christianity as threat to their esoteric practices and authority. The *Oro* also disrupted social life. Held in dread, the masquerade comes out amidst forcefully imposed curfew at night (a cover for dreadful rituals). The masquerade must not be seen by females. *Oro* clashed with Christians and their doctrines of freedom, liberty and opposition to 'heathen' and 'pagan' practices. In some cases, there were physical clashes between the adherents.

Early Christian missionaries were persecuted by AFREL devotees. Some of them were killed. In Badagry the cradle of Christianity in Nigeria, there is an "Early Missionary Cemetery" (a tourist attraction) where some of the slain missionaries were laid. The Badagry of today is still largely AFREL in devotion, Christianity making minimal evangelistic conversion impact. In the Yoruba hinterland, for example, Abeokuta, Christian converts were severely persecuted for renouncing AFREL. A local historian recorded that:

Some of the converts quited their several homes in order to dwell in communities at Aje, Ogbe, and Ikija. These settlements were called "Wasimi" (come and rest) and in

them they were free from molestation, pests and persecutions of their heathen neighbours and relatives.<sup>10</sup>

Ajayi and Smith reported that "on Saturday, 13th October, 1867, a spontaneous riot developed into a mass attack on all European Missionaries and traders alike, as a result of which they were expelled from Abeokuta."<sup>11</sup> At Ibadan, Anna Hinderer (with her husband, David Hinderer, the first white missionary to Ibadan), reported that the Ibadan people "had been doing their best to get rid of us by their persecution of our young converts. The fire and fury of persecution has raged to a very great extent; our hearts have ached for the sufferings of the little flock. Satan fights because his kingdom is endangered, the country priests (AFREL) fight under their master's banner because their cruel lies and deceit are being exposed"<sup>12</sup>. The perception of AFREL by Christianity in a manner typified by the above has always evoked reactions and hostility by adherents of Christianity. This attitude and reaction still exist.

#### 4. THE SYNCRETIC TENDENCY

Persons torn between compelling loyalties to both Christianity and AFREL have a tendency to syncretise, that is, combine elements of both in belief, practices and worship. There are Nigerians who claim to be Christians and at the same time faithful 'Africans' (practising AFREL). This is done in spite of the doctrinal exclusiveness of Christian Scripture (Acts 4:12). Initially, AFREL was more accommodating of other religions because of its inherently diverse cultic pantheon. It saw Christianity as a welcome addition to the numerous cultus of God. Adelowo reports the general disposition of AFREL devotees towards Christianity in the following statements by an Ibadan

<sup>10</sup> A.K. AJISAFE, *History of Abeokuta* (Lagos: Kash and Klare Bookshop, N.D.), p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> J.F. ADE AJAYI and R.S. SMITH, *Yoruba Warfare in the 19th Century* (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in MODUPE ODUYOYE, "The planting of Christianity in Yorubaland" in OGBUKALU (ed.), *Christianity in West Africa*, (Ibadan: Daystar, 1978), p. 272.

Chief in response to attempts by the Wesleyan Minister, Rev. J.J.F. Hallingway to convert him:

When we get old we do not care to change our religion, and I shall die believing in the god my fathers trusted. But as for my children and my people, they are young and may like a new religion, and do as you say. Let them follow the white man.<sup>13</sup>

Nigerian villages are still largely devoted to AFREL. Here the traditional herbalists and witchdoctors are still patronised. Christian evangelism has apparently affected AFREL's dominance. Western medicine and hospitals have almost relegated the herbalists; the rapidly expanding Gospel Pentecostal Churches are threatening the shrines; Evangelists are challenging AFREL priests. As a result of urbanization AFREL devotees find it increasingly difficult to impose their usual ritual curfews upon communities made up of non-AFREL people.

Syncretists believe that inspite of differences between Christianity and AFREL, there are areas where they are either the 'same' or 'alike'. Therefore, they combine elements of the two, regarding such as compatible. In Badagry, our recent study revealed this practice.<sup>14</sup> At St. Thomas Anglican Church (the first church in Nigeria), several church members are at the same time strong devotees of the traditional *vodun* cult. A lay reader of the Church was at the same time a Priest of the cult of *Igunuko* (mysterious masquerade).<sup>15</sup> At the 'Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, Badagry,' the resident priest Rev. E.D. Hartnett reported the persistent attempts by the Church to curtail syncretism by its members. In spite of stern warnings by the Church, many youths engage in initiation ceremonies into the esoteric cult of *vodun*.<sup>16</sup> Some 'Christians' patronise

<sup>13</sup> E.D. ADELOWO, "Islam and the Christian Church in Yorubaland Religion," *Journal of NASR*, Vol. 4, 1979, p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> See D.F. ASAJU "Christian Evangelism in Badagry" and M.O. OPELOYE'S "Islam in Badagry" in DEJI OGUNREMI (ed.), *Studies in Badagry History and Culture* (Ibadan: Thomas Nelson), 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview, Rev. S.S.O. Kunnuji, Pastor, Anglican Church, Idale, Badagry, 27/1/90.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview, Rev. (fr.) E.D. Hartnett, Priest, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Badagry, 3/2/90.

AFREL medicinemen who operate, invoking and sacrificing to AFREL deities. On the other hand, AFREL Priests and members are known to have visited Churches for prayers and miracle cures. Christianity outright forbids syncretism but AFREL permits it.

The concepts of 'sameness' or 'likeness' of Christianity and AFREL is partly built upon some teachings of AFREL. Proponents of 'sameness' argue that both religions serve the same God but in different ways, and that the revelation of God and the salvific mission of Jesus Christ his son were exactly the same with the revelation of *Olodumare* and the salvific mission of *Ela* his son, these beings only known by different names. This logical concept poses a theological problem. In Yoruba Religious Mythology, *Ela* (saviour) is believed to be the son of *Olodumare* (Supreme Being), sent to the world to do good, save man and subdue the forces of *Esu* (devil). Incidentally, during the process *Ela* was temporarily overpowered and killed but resurrected on the third day as predicted by the oracle. He later ascended to heaven. It is believed that the world under continued influence of *Esu* will know no peace until *Ela* returns to earth again to finally subdue *Esu*.<sup>17</sup> A similar story is told of Osiris in Egyptian Mythology. The *Ela* story tally with the story of Jesus Christ's person, incarnation, nature, mission, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and expected *parousia* (second coming to earth). It is not certain yet whether the Yoruba adapted the Christian story but it is known that the myth has existed for ages. Christians do not share the view of sameness but regard it as 'likeness', more so that the depth of Christian Soteriology and the atoning effect of Jesus' death remain unique. However the belief that both religions are the same or alike has encouraged syncretic tendencies.

The Africans in *diaspora* out of patriotic zeal to identify themselves with their roots found a way out by syncretising AFREL with Christianity. AFREL divinities were adopted and renamed after Roman Catholic Saints. Pierre Verger's study<sup>18</sup> gives the situation in Brazil and Cuba:

<sup>17</sup> See E.B. IDOWU, *Olodumare*, *Op. cit.*, pp. 101-106.

<sup>18</sup> PIERRE VERGER, "African Cultural Survivals in the New World: The examples of Brazil and Cuba" in *Tarikh*, 20, p. 84f.

*Brazil:*

<i>Yoruba Deity</i>	<i>Roman Catholic name</i>
Yemoja	Virgin of the Immaculate Conception
Nana Buruku	St. Anne
Ogun	St. Anthony
Obaluwaye	St. Lazarus
Shango	St. Jerome
Oshun	Our Lady of Candlemas
Obatala	Christ of Bumfin
Osumare	St. Bartholomew
Oshosi	St. George.

*Cuba:*

<i>Yoruba Deity</i>	<i>Roman Catholic name</i>
Shango	St. Barbara
Orisa Nla	Virgen de la Meroco (Virgin of Mercy)
Oshun	Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre (Virgin of Charity)
Yemoja	Virgen de Regla (Virgin of Order)
Obaluwaye	St. Lazarus
Ogun	St. John the Baptist
Osonyin	St. Raphael
Ifa	St. Francis of Assisi.

We should remark that the characters of the respective deities in AFREL are not compatible with the Christian names 'awarded' them. Although the idea of Roman Catholic Saint-hood finds similarity with ancestor veneration in AFREL, after all some of the deities were deified ancestors. The Africans in diaspora used such adaptations as cover-up for unhindered worship of AFREL gods pretending that they were worshipping Christian Saints, before their masters.

In Nigeria of the 1920s, some groups emerged which advocated active syncretism of Christianity and AFREL. There was the *Ijo Orunmila Adulawo* (Assembly of Black Devotees of Orunmila - the deity of divination). The group replaced Church hymns with readings from the *Ifa* oracle corpus. There was also the so-called 'Reformed *Ogboni* fraternity' which was a secret cult operating within the Church.

## 5. AFRICAN-CHRISTIANITY: THE CONFLUENCE?

Dissatisfied with the danger of relegation (or possible extinction) of the African Culture and religion on the one hand, and the Europeanisation of Missionary Christianity on the other, notable Africans in the spheres of religion, theological studies and politics have taken steps which today have contributed towards forging a harmony between Christianity and AFREL. These are in compatible areas but not the core.

Africans take Christianity as a universal faith which can be localised in any community or continent. In this sense, this religion can be brought home to the Africans in a way reflective of their culture. A revolution was borne in Africa in the wake of this century when Africans founded indigenous churches which were pentecostal and prophetic in nature. Among the Yoruba they called the *Aladura* (Praying Churches).

It is widely acknowledged that the independent churches grew up all-over Africa in response to the desire for a church, where Africans may feel at home. This desire also shaped the worship, beliefs and practices of the traditional churches to make these churches distinctly African.<sup>19</sup>

The indigenous churches represent African Christianity, because, according to Thomas, they possess the following features:

- (1) They existentially recognise the relevance of the prior African religious consciousness in origin and leadership;
- (2) They were founded and nursed by African Prophets;
- (3) They are self-affirming as African religious movement;
- (4) They have genuine African-Christian lifestyles of personal self-discipline and organizational self-determination;
- (5) Their "expression of joyfulness in the spirit of freedom inspite of suffering, while maintaining creativity in witness";
- (6) They are brotherly, compassionate and responsive to

<sup>19</sup> CALVIN RIEBER, "Traditional Christianity as an African Religion," in N.S. BOOTH (ed.), *African Religions*, (Lagos: NOK, 1979), p. 269.



human needs in the manner of African tradition of communality.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the above broad classifications are the changes effected in favour of African dresses, African music, songs and dance, permission of polygamy, indulgence in church rituals (e.g. burning of incense and candles in church, ritual baths, Psalm meditative readings etc.). These were types to replace the aspects of AFREL. Indeed gradually the *Aladura* Prophet virtually replaced the oracles. A large number of Christians in Nigeria today belong to the indigenous Churches, particularly 'Christ Apostolic Church' (CAC), 'Cherubim and Seraphim Church' (C.&S.) and 'Celestial Church of Christ' (CCC). The C.C.C. is the most syncretic of the three.

In the Academic foray, African Theologians and Philosophers have advocated the presentation and practice of Christianity in the African context. Some of the terms commonly used to denote this effort are Africanisation, inculturation, indigenisation, incarnation and contextualisation. The exercise is to produce a Christianity which adopts African culture and religion as model.

Alyward Shorter's edited book on 'African Christian Spirituality'<sup>21</sup> presents select Christian leaders of African thoughts who have supported the contextualisation trend. Shorter's article on 'Culture: A Living Tradition', recognizes that the Christian vocation is the reconciliation or the unification of humankind and not the imposition of a world culture. He opines that a Universal Church is one in which many cultures contribute, and that two attempts at inculturation are ongoing, that is, christianizing African tradition, and Africanizing Christianity.<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Kaunda (Ex-President of Zambia) believes that "the spiritual dimension is an integral part of the human personality",<sup>23</sup> and that genuine Africanness which has its roots in the soil of our continent rather than in the lec-

<sup>20</sup> G.B. THOMAS, "Kimbanguism: Authentically African, Authentically Christian," in N.S. BOOTH (ed.) *African Religions* (Lagos: NOK, 1979), p. 275.

<sup>21</sup> AYLWARD SHORTER (ed.), *African Christian Spirituality*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1978).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

ture rooms of Western Universities is basically a religious phenomenon".<sup>24</sup> He notes that "the coming of Christianity had a complex effect on this African worldview, partly disrupting and partly enlarging it."<sup>25</sup> Leopold Sedar Senghor (Ex-President of Senegal) postulates that the African nature, culture and religion as constituting "the heart of Negritude underlies the Black man's ontology"<sup>26</sup> which is a model to the world.

A prominent way this message has been effectively conveyed in Nigeria is through the creative and dramatic arts. African drama groups (on stage or by Television) have projected AFREL, to the religiously pluralistic society, positively but at times negatively through emphasis on witchcraft and sorcery as a part of African life and problem. A notable twist in the local television drama emerged in January, 1994 when a Christian evangelical drama group, the 'Mount Zion Dramatists' based at Ile-Ife, Nigeria produced a widely accepted television serial titled 'Agbara Nla' (Mighty Power) where the plot shows conflict between forces of Christianity and AFREL in which Christianity ultimately prevailed.

#### CONCLUSION

From a position of absolute dominance in Africa, AFREL the indigenous religion of the African people has dwindled in prominence in Nigeria. This is due to the ways in which the 'foreign' religions particularly Christianity have related with and towards it. Due to massive negative criticism of it and large conversions from it, AFREL today appears to have reclined to a rural and esoteric religion. This however does not seriously undermine the degree of its patronage since the religion permeates basic African life; also syncretism is a common element among the people.

Recent changes in Nigeria's socio-political order has not helped AFREL. With modern Government, Police, Courts

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> L.S. SENGHOR, "Love: The Essential Energy" in A. Shorter (ed.), *African Christian Spirituality*, *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

etc., the authorities of traditional rulers and priests who erstwhile enforced AFREL principles and norms, have been largely reduced. As Bishop Onaiyekan sarcastically remarked of the Kabba people, even AFREL masquerades (symbolizing reincarnated ancestors) who manhandle a citizen can be sued and imprisoned.<sup>27</sup> Traditional rulers themselves are subject to the Governors and can be dethroned at slight excuse.

The efforts to adapt compatible elements of AFREL to the expression of Christianity both in Churches and in Theological institutions is an effective vehicle for the preservation and propagation of African values. Christianity and AFREL are in some respect similar and compatible. This being so, the occasional incidences of inter-religious disharmony is uncalled-for. Our panacea is that each religion deserves and should be accorded respect, recognition and equal treatment. Each religion should propagate the virtues of their faith without attacking others. This way, the much-needed inter-religious peace, harmony and progress which has eluded Nigeria can be achieved.

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<sup>27</sup> J. ONAIYEKAN, *Op. cit.*, p. 78.