

# EXPEDIENCY OF A REVIEW OF ACADEMIC TRADITION IN CHRISTIAN STUDIES IN NIGERIA.

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## **Abstract**

For more than six decades now, the study of religion in general and Christian studies in particular in Nigerian tertiary institution has been one of the areas with which scholars have preoccupied themselves, attempting to make religion, in its multifarious and multidimensional manifestations, more intelligible. Structured activities in terms of accumulating knowledge and progressive, critical, and dispassionate research in Christian studies, which are well disseminated through teaching, learning and literature is what is taken to be a manifestation of the reality of academic tradition in Christian studies in Nigeria. It is however observed that this academic tradition is not consciously built around indigenous Christian studies' scholars in Nigeria, as views, opinions, or viewpoints on issues in Christian studies by Nigerian scholars are sometimes not well known by their colleagues; talk less of these constituting objects of academic engagements. This is in spite of the demonstration of vast knowledge of viewpoints espoused by foreign scholars by Nigerian Christian studies' scholars. This study adopted the descriptive method of research in explaining the current practice thereby identifying practices that do not engender robust academic tradition in Christian studies in Nigeria with the view to improving on this. The paper concluded that building a virile and enduring academic tradition in Christian studies in Nigeria requires deliberate attempts to promote interaction with indigenous academic works in Christian studies. This is not an advocacy for ethnocentrism but genuine efforts at domesticating knowledge in Christian studies.

**Keywords:** Review, academic traditions, Christian Studies, Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

Following the activities of European missionaries in Africa in 1842 and thereafter coupled with the adoption of that system of education in Nigeria, almost every nook and cranny of the country has had a taste of what Western Education is all about. In fact, this form of education has impacted so much on the life of Nigerians that many castigate as ridiculous and barbaric the call by members of *Boko Haram*, a group that has been unleashing terror on the people of Nigeria, for a rejection of Western education. It is indeed doubtful that this call is not just a guise under which these terrorists are hiding to perpetrate their heinous acts. The study of religion within the ambit of Western system of education has brought about unprecedented knowledge about the nature, scope, and meaning of religion. However true this may be, there are issues which requires attention, particularly in building and nourishing an academic tradition in Christian studies.

## **Reality of Academic Tradition in Nigeria**

Of note is that the relevance of Western education extends to virtually every strata of the society; hence the branding of disciplines as natural sciences, social, sciences, health sciences, arts and humanities; the category to which the subject matter in essay - religion belongs. Scholars in Nigeria as elsewhere, have taken it upon themselves to search for knowledge in these areas of endeavours through various methods of inquiry for the purpose of deploying the content of human knowledge pool for practical purposes as well as for acquisition of knowledge for knowledge sake; an approach that some pragmatists might find quite difficult to accommodate. It is within this purview that many Nigerians have distinguished themselves via unqualified and distinct contributions to knowledge. Structured activities in teaching and research, blossoming into well articulated intellectual engagement with the content of various disciplines, and evolved or evolving methodologies build up, to form "praxis" which endures over time to form tradition(s). The intellectual nature of this provides a veritable basis for referring to it as academic tradition or culture.

The Western connotation nonetheless, that the human capacity to develop the kind of pattern described above is universal has been variously argued consistently by many; notable examples are reputable advocates of the possibility and reality of African philosophy, irrespective of whether such is grounded in oral tradition and/or written records. The late prodigious Professor Oladipupo of the Department of Philosophy in the University of Ibadan, for instance, stands tall in this respect. Kwame Nkruma, highly held in esteem by the late sage - Oladipupo, also belongs to this category. Not the least in the same category are: Odera Oruka, Peter Bodunrin, Paulin Hountondji and Anthony Appiah. Oladipupo, pointing out what the agenda for African philosophy should be, and giving credence to the above claim of Africans' capacity for "well articulated intellectual engagement" suggested that:

The first one should be critical and reconstructive evaluations of our traditional cultural heritage so that we can build on it. The second one should involve a domestication of the intellectual resources of other culture ... [and finally] there is need to provide rigorous and sustained idealisation of a better form of life ... (Oladipupo, 2008, 74),

On his part, Wiredu, towards the close of the twenty century, reminded Africans of their human capacity for rigorous rational discourse when he opined that "the answer to Africa's problem of identity in the contemporary world does not lie in cultural traditionism but a **critical and reconstructive self-evaluation** (1992, 62).

The focus here is the recognition of the capacity of Nigerians, and indeed Africans, to engage in critical and dispassionate intellectual activities, which has as its goal attainment of knowledge; of truth. Inasmuch as all humans are endowed with rational capacity, myopic tendencies to equate or confine rationality, which serves as the pivot of any academic tradition or culture, to specific geographical, cultural, or ethnographical milieu is simply a distortion of the reality. It is therefore a legitimate position taken by Oladipupo, for instance, in repudiating "European ethnocentrism" espoused by reputable philosophers such as, Hume, Kant, Hegel and Marx, who he (Oladipupo) held have affirmed an equation of civilisation and reason with Europe (Oladipo, 2008, 62).

To this extent, since there is appreciable fact that the kernel of universities' goals in Nigeria as elsewhere is dispassionate and painstaking research, which informs qualitative teaching, thereby contributing to life in the society, it is obvious that academic tradition or culture is not non-existent in Nigeria. Nigerian Universities are populated with seasoned professors and other academics that are serious minded in terms of ascertaining qualitative teaching, prodding into

areas of human life for purpose of knowledge acquisition, and sharing such knowledge with colleagues within and outside the country, and ultimately seeking to contribute in ingenious ways to the life of the community. The unique ability to share information in a lucid and comprehensive manner using the vehicle of language is so vital; and this was recognised by David Christian (2012), who singled out effective communication as a central unique factor that distinguish humanoids (humanity) from other existents. He opined specifically that it is not only intelligence that confers uniqueness on the humanoids but the ability to share information.

For tradition to be what it is, it must be transmittable. This is also obtainable in Nigeria. The intellectual traditions that are developed over time and in responses to various practical societal and theoretical challenges are disseminated through academic journals, conference proceedings, books of readings, textbooks, monographs, patent works, discoveries and the likes. These are transmitted verbally, in print, as well as in electronic media. As such, knowledge evolves as errors are continuously exposed, corrected and discarded while considered true opinions are tested and re-evaluated for the purpose of advancing towards the truth. The tenacious nature of the academic tradition is quite indubitable. Oyesiku, acceded to this when he opined that "... [a]ll these depend on perseverance, sacrifice ..." and that (in recognition of the vital role of mentoring) "... gradual learning from others who have genuinely made it academically" (Oyesiku, 2005, 5-6). The use of the perfect verb "made it" is not likely to imply a stage of perfection since it is widely admitted that human knowledge is provisional in nature.

However, that academic tradition or culture is extant in Nigeria is just a side of the coin. Of crucial importance is the determination of its adequacy and whether or not there is need for any review of this noble tradition in Christian studies particularly, and within the shores of Nigeria. Attention shall be directed to this in this in due course in this paper.

### **Academic Tradition and Religious Studies in Nigeria**

Religious studies, a cognate to academic tradition in the title of this essay, is one of the areas of endeavours that Nigerian scholars have made remarkable attempts like their counterparts beyond the shores, to illuminate human ignorance through rational explanation of those distinctive human activities that go under the word religion. Religion, like other areas of human experience, has been subjected to rational discourse. The goal is a cumulative understanding of what religion is and what it is not, and the determination of its role in the human society. Bolaji Idowu described this quest as searching for "the thing which is of enduring value in religion" (Idowu, 1973, 20). Before examining the status of academic tradition in Christian studies in Nigeria today, a brief survey of the history of religious studies in Nigeria shall be undertaken.

It is no doubt that Religious Studies is one of the academic disciplines in universities and some other tertiary institutions of learning today. In Nigeria, it has a history of over six decades within the University system. In view of the structure of European missionaries' curriculum in Nigeria, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is common to trace the beginning of the study of religion in Nigeria to the educational activities of the Europeans settlers and missionaries (Sulaiman, 2004, 19). At least, at its most elementary form, the curriculum included the study of religion; emphasis though, was basically on the ability to read the bible. For Chitando (2008) and other scholars who reasoned in the same manner, this line of thinking is not unconnected with the age long prejudice and pejorative thinking against Africans. He argued that this thinking is a clear indication of equating education with literacy thereby relegating oral traditions to the background. Chitando noted that, Africans [and by extension, Nigerians] had a comprehensive system of religious education before the advent of the missionaries is glaring since "the vast majority of religious expression throughout history has been of non-literate nature, taking the form of speech, performance, or iconography" (cited in King, 1999, 62). Apart from this, Chitando argued that "there was, and has remained, scope for the critique of religion in African

societies” (2008, 105), meaning that critical thinking about religion had been a fact in the life and times of Africans even at a time when literacy had not been in practice. This is because individuals could adopt critical stance and at times a rejection of some religious practices in indigenous religious system. Stressing this further, he opines that:

pre-colonial African education though non-formal, serves as a precursor to religious studies by promoting a non-fundamentalist approach to religion. Individuals were encouraged to adopt a critical stance towards religious practice. Oracles from the divinities and ancestors could be questioned if it was felt that they were going against communal good. (Chitando, 2008).

One could argue that the emergence of religious studies in Nigeria has much to do with European expansionist strategies; crucial among which was the role played by the missionaries (either consciously or otherwise) in setting up educational institutions. Universities were set up in parts of the sub-Saharan Africa and Religious Studies was part of the programmes in these Universities. In the aftermath of the Second World War and in its quest for expansion among other intention, perhaps, the colonial office, which had planned to have more tertiary institutions in Africa, established the University College, Ibadan, among others, in 1948. The Department of Religious studies was inaugurated in this University by J.W Welch and Geoffrey Parrinder in 1949, thereby signaling the beginning of religious studies as we have it many tertiary institutions in Nigeria today.

The depth of evaluation of the nature and practice of religion by Chitando and Kings pointed out above indicates that as far back as the pre-colonial era, critical attitude towards religion and religious manifestations have been in place. As such, the advent of religious studies as a discipline in the University might be construed as further and, undoubtedly more sophisticated attempts by Nigerians (and indeed Africans) to understand religion.

This tradition, started by J. W Welch and Geoffrey Parrinder is still in place today. Seasoned religious scholars: Awolalu, Dopamu, Bidmos, Nabofa, Oloyede, Odumuyiwa, Akanmidu, Dzurgba, Balogun, Asaju, Oshitelu, Raji, Ojo, abound in Nigeria today. Others in this category and so many religious scholars in Nigeria have engaged in the academic study of religion, with the goal of rendering religion and religious manifestations more intelligible.

Apart from this, the activities of scholars in religious studies in general and Christian studies in particular have engendered an academic tradition in the sense that had been described above. Painstaking researches have been conducted and many are ongoing with the goal of proffering logical, consistent, lucid, comprehensive and systematic account of the human experience within the world of religion. In doing this, positions are taken on issues that arise in the study of religion, rebuttals are offered for such positions, and responses are generated for such rebuttals; such responses might also form the starting point of another round of discourse; and the discussion continues! Transmission of this pool of resources is done via publication in learned journals, conference proceedings, mimeographs, and the likes.

As such, just as is the case in other areas of study, the reality of an academic tradition in Christian studies, which is the focus in this paper, is a truism. What then is lacking? What is the issue at stake which needs attention in Christian studies scholars’ quest for the nurturing and preservation of this academic tradition?

### **Perceived Gap in Academic Tradition in Christian Studies in Nigeria**

In the foregoing, we have argued for the reality of academic tradition in Christian studies in Nigeria in particular, as well as the ubiquity of academic tradition in Nigeria in general. The situation is undeniably the same in the Western world. There is no doubt, however, that the

development of Western academic tradition, among other things, has been a function of critical interaction with areas of human engagement with reality. These are well disseminated via various media.

One important point to note in the development of a strong and sustained academic tradition in the West is a sustained interest in painstaking analyses of viewpoints espoused by scholars by other fellow scholars thereby leading to virtually unending thread of intelligent discussion of various issues in religious studies. Our emphasis here, it must be pointed out, is Christian studies. Little wonder then that despite the fact that Plato, Aristotle, Tertullian, St. Augustine, St. Anselm, St. Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Blaise Pascal, Karl Barth, Joseph Butler, G. K. Chesterton, Robin Collins, Etienne Gilson, Soren Kierkegaard, C. S. Lewis, Bernard Lonergan, Jacques Maritain, John Henry Newman, Paul Tillich, Charles Taliaferro, are centuries away from one another, none of these, up till this moment in human history has ceased from enjoying considerable attention in the academia in Christian studies. Theistic arguments of Anselm, Aquinas and Robin still constitute core areas in philosophy of religion; even here in Nigeria. Augustine's theodicy is very prominent, and the nature of religion and faith as accentuated by Tillich still enjoys much attention in Christian studies till date. Same applies to all the above listed scholars and even more.

The catalyst for such enduring and seeming unending engagement with intellectual output of previous and contemporaneous scholars in the Western tradition is simply, the tireless and widespread efforts at studying the content of thought or viewpoints of those scholars on various issues in religion(s). While this is the case, conscious attempts are made by scholars in religion in the Western world to critically and continuously examine viewpoints espoused by fellow academics. The outcome of this is twofold.

First, in engaging in the activity described above, scholars are consciously or unconsciously celebrating one another. By this, we mean that through an ongoing review of academic output by fellow scholars, the Western man is disseminating and spreading the viewpoints of his/her fellow scholar. Of course, we are familiar with so many positions of various scholars through such secondary means. Second, the activity thus described inevitably translates into an engendering of an enduring cultural transmission. By this, we mean that the cultural context that gives birth to or within which a theoretical framework develops is rendered all the more intelligible (consciously or unconsciously) to the receiving audience thereby facilitating and promoting the depth of self-knowledge of the milieu within which such academic work is produced.

Those two outcomes definitely render an academic tradition not only enduring, but also reflective of the context within which a tradition develops. The utilitarian value of those outcomes in the quest for self-understanding and in fulfilling the communal responsibilities of academic endeavours is indubitable. Some of these are what we hold to be a bit deficient in the academic tradition in Christian studies in Nigeria.

The development of an academic tradition in Christian studies built around scholars within the shores of Nigeria, just as is the case the beyond the shore, is a need that demands serious attention. Many scholars in Christian studies are well-equipped with the standpoints of Western scholars on various issues in the academic study of religion, while they demonstrate ignorance about the standpoint of their colleague(s) in the office next door, who even shares the same areas of specialisation in Christian studies. In the same vein, undergraduate students are encouraged to anchor their long essays' titles on foreign scholar(s) or their viewpoints or theories sometimes to the uttermost abandonment of scholars in Nigeria. This situation is premised on the failure of Nigerian Christian studies' scholars to preoccupy themselves with the intellectual output of indigenous scholars who have attained some level of expertise in their intellectual pursuits in Christian studies and the failure to encourage religious studies' students (undergraduate and

postgraduate) to engage in the academic study of the positions, views, and standpoints espoused by their lecturers, mentors, indigenous professors, and even their colleagues; even while writing final year long essays. This attitude is capable of rendering impracticable the aspiration of scholars with the same spirit as Nwala (2007) who averred that:

Unless the younger generation understands the point their predecessors have reached in the construction of the great universal edifice of human knowledge/civilization, they will not know how to proceed meaningfully in placing their own blocks in the process of building that edifice. They will not even know the significance of their own contributions.

It is doubtful that the younger generation can faithfully fulfill this quest for meaningfulness if all they are exposed to are those well documented religious thought and experiences of people in other parts of the world.

The position being advanced here is that an academic tradition in Christian studies built around Nigerian scholars is capable of facilitating an unprecedented but desirous celebration of Nigerian scholars, in terms of vigorous dissemination of indigenous scholarly viewpoints on various issues in Christian studies on the one hand. On the other hand, such viewpoints are capable of being very rich and reflective of the immediate experience of the religious practices and activities of Nigerians. A by-product of this is likely to result, for instance in a ‘theology of African Religion’ adduced to by Bolaji Idowu (1973, xi) or peculiar experience in African/Nigerian Christianity. This, also has the potential of providing Christian studies’ students with burgeoning indigenous literatures in various areas in Christian studies, such that, while students studying Christianity are conversant with the ideas of Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Rudolf Bultmann, William Lane Craig, and the rest they would also be competent in discussing the positions of Idowu, Dopamu, Bidmos, Nabofa, Odumuyiwa, Akanmidu, Dzurgba, Oshitelu, Asaju, and others on topical issues in the study of the Christian religion. A good piece (example) in this line of thought is the conceptual theistic considerations of Fagunwa, from a philosophy of religion’s point of view by Adesewo (2011).

### **Conclusion**

From the foregoing, it is crystal clear that there is a virile academic tradition in religious studies in general and Christian studies in particular in Nigeria, and it is the responsibility of every Nigerian Christian studies’ scholar to make important attempts at nourishing this academic edifice. It is our submission that a potent way of realizing this is to pay adequate attention to indigenizing the academic tradition in Christian studies in view of the merits accruable from such attitude as described above. It should be noted, however, that this is not a call for ethnocentrism, as work written by scholars elsewhere would continue to be authoritative, reliable, and useful in many respects. Rather what is advocated here is doing things in ways that will add value to academic endeavours in Christian studies in Nigeria; particularly in terms of paying attention to the immediate religious experience of Nigerians. This will definitely facilitate a good self-understanding which is needed for any real development to take place. Part of this task and responsibility is what Oladipupo prescribed above as the “domestication of the intellectual resource **and practices** of other culture” (2008, 74) to our specific cultural and experiential demands. The ultimate goal in all of this is to improve meaningfully and qualitatively the three tripod of a University life – research, teaching, and community development.

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