

Nigerian Contemporary Society and the Need to Reconstruct God

Selome Kuponu (PhD), Joseph Moyinoluwa Talabi (PhD) &
Exradallenum Olusegun Akinsanya

Abstract

The word "God" has been construed in different directions in different fields of study. By critical analysis, it has been observed that in socio-cultural context of Nigeria, the meaning of God is highly culture-specific. The cultural kaleidoscope through which this reality is gauged is socio-economic conditioned. Therefore, in reality people's perception of God is not conditioned by how He presented Himself through creation and religious traditions but factored through socio-cultural condition on the one hand and socio-economic index, on the other hand. As such, God has been largely misrepresented and this has been the bane of religious chaos in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper seeks to present a reconstruction of God in line with his revealed and observed attributes specifically from Judeo-Christian traditions. Using observation and philosophical arguments, it was established in this paper that no people can rise morally beyond the moral perception of God. As such, there is urgent need to reconstruct the idea of God along the lines of scriptural texts, traditions and reasoning.

Keywords: attributes, God, observed reconstruction, revealed

Introduction

The notion of who and what God is has been construed and presented in different directions in all human field of scholarships. In popular spirituality which is pervading thought in ancient Gnosticism and several contemporary thought such as New Age Religion, God is seen as a vague force or impulse that tilts towards goodness.¹ In Western Christian categories, God has been understood in terms of settled framework of being who is perceived as Unmoved Mover.² In this perspective, God is seen as the omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent being that is completely set apart from and unaffected by the reality of the world.³ This idea of God is somewhat inimical to biblical

1 W. Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2009. 19.

2 B. Morley, Western Concepts of God, accessed from <https://iep.utm.edu/god-west/> on 12/12/2020. 35

3 W. Brueggemann, 19.

articulation of God where He is presented as a fully articulated active Being (Jer. 32:27).

In African Traditional Religions, there are myriads of presentations or construction of God. In some cases, He is seen as the unapproachable, just like a distant king who could only be accessed through advocates or lieutenants. For instance, the worshipers of 'Ife' do see God as Omnipotent, Omniscient Being who can only be reached through divinities, who acted as his agents. Some cultures within African context described God in anthropomorphic terms such as Father, Mother and so forth. This could also be found in Judeo-Christianity traditions as well. While these are different perspectives of God in religions, it has been discovered that the meaning of God is highly culture-specific. How God is constructed seems to vary from culture to culture. The cultural kaleidoscope through which this reality is gauged is socio-economically conditioned. For instance, the harsh economic reality in Nigeria is making religious adherents to perceive God as the one who makes riches and bestows poverty at will. Therefore, in reality people's perception of God is not conditioned by how He presented Himself through creation and religious traditions but through socio-cultural and economic conditions. As such, God has been largely misrepresented and this has been the major of religious chaos in the world. Therefore, this paper seeks to present a "reconstruction God" in line with his revealed and observed attributes within Nigerian Cultural Context but in line with African Christianity.

God in Western Epistemology

It is essential to have a general view of how God has been constructed in major religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion with the people's understanding of God before the reconstruction of God is presented in line with his revealed and observed attributes. To start with the Christian Concept of God is largely shaped by the western concept of God.⁴The western concept of God falls within the framework of theism. Theism is philosophical proposition that presupposes that there is a God who is the creator and the sustainer of the universe. This God is unlimited in knowledge, power, presence and moral perfection. Though, he is largely seen as sexless or without *genderless*, He is traditionally being referred to by the masculine pronoun.⁵

4 As noted by B. Morley, in his article Western Concepts of God, the western ideology of God which was greatly influenced by ancient Greek Philosophy sharpened early Christian thoughts of God. B. Morley, Western Concept, God, n.p.

5 B. Morley, Western Concepts of God, accessed from <https://iep.utm.edu/god-west/>

In western traditions, the sources for the concepts of God are tripod: experience, revelation and reason. Experience has to do with subjective encounter, perception or reality of God that an individual or community possesses. By observation, experiences can be occasioned by universal phenomenon such as the order of creations, or can be something internal such as vision or dreams.⁶ In religious categories, experience is often closely linked with revelation. Revelation is the unveiling of that which is hidden. In regards to God, western category viewed revelation in terms of universal and particular. In Christianity, the universal dimension of revelation has to do with the revelation of divine attributes of God through creations (Psalms 19:1; Romans 1: 19-20). This *particular* dimension has to do with the revelation of God in the person of Christ Jesus (Hebrew 1:1-2).

From philosophical angle, there are complications in interpreting revelation and determining the extent to which it can be adjudged as subjective. Reason, in western epistemology, has been taken as ancillary to religious experience and revelation. In some regards, it is seen as an independent and only reliable source of concepts of God. Among religious adherents, each of these sources has had those who regard it as reliable, veritable source and basis for understanding God. In Anglican traditions, these sources are viewed alongside scriptures as means of apprehending the concept of God.⁷ In spite of these different approaches to understanding God, theism has been the main construed theme in the history of western thought.

It is important to have a view of how God is traditionally construed in western thoughts. The western epistemology on the concept of God somewhat has its root in Greek category and philosophical understanding of God. The early Christians indirectly adopted some of these Greek categories fused with Judaism understanding of God.⁸ In the writing of Augustine (354-430 AD), God is regarded as omniscience, omnipotent, omnipresent, morally good, the creator (*ex nihilo*) and *sustainer* of the universe. Morley writes pertaining Augustine's understanding of God that:

Despite these multiple descriptors, God is uniquely simple. Being entirely free, he did not have to create, but did so as an act of love.

on 12/12/2020. Also, see Thomas V., Morris, *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991)

6 B. Morley, n.p.

7 Olusina M, Fape, *Knowing the Fundamentals of Anglicanism*, (Sagamu: More Blessing, 2013), 1-2.

8 B Morley, np

As his creation, it reflects his mind. Time and space began at creation, and everything in creation is good. Evil is uncreated, being a lack of good and without positive existence. Though God is not responsible for evil even it has a purpose: to show forth what is good, especially what is good within God.⁹

This idea of God as presented in Augustine's thought has dominated most of the Christian thoughts for centuries (though with some variations). It must be noted that Augustine was greatly influenced by Greek Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno of Citium. He further affirms that God "lives in the highest sense"¹⁰ and is "the most powerful, most righteous, most beautiful, most good, and most blessed."¹¹ He added that when we think of God, we endeavour to "conceive a being that is most excellent and sublime in existence."¹² For Augustine, God loves his creatures to the extent of becoming incarnate in Christ in order to be revealed to them and to reconcile them to himself. In some of his works such as *Confessions and City of God* Augustine made it clear that God is providentially active in history right from individual level to national level.

God in Islamic Traditions

Islamic doctrine emphasizes the oneness, uniqueness, transcendence, and utter otherness of God. As such, God is different from anything that the human senses can perceive or that the human mind can imagine. God, from Islamic perspective encompasses all creation, He manifests through his creation; and through reflection humankind can easily discern the wisdom and power behind the creation of the world.

In Islamic traditions, God is perceived as the uncreated, eternal being that has no beginning or end. This God is self-existent Being who is neither born nor *begotten* any Son. He alone is the most merciful, most righteous, God of Justice.¹³ The God in Islamic traditions is heavily influenced by the idea of God as seen in Judaism. In Judaism, God is one and demand full submission and worship. The same idea is fundament to Islamic belief. Therefore, Islamic

9 B. Morley, n.p.

10 B. Morley, n.p.

11 B. Morley, n.p.

12 B. Morley, n.p.

13 Shafiul Islam and M. D. Islam, "African Traditional Concept Of God: A Critical Analysis," *Green University Review of Social Sciences*, Volume 02, Issue 01, June-2015. 2

traditions have a hardline theism regarding the nature and existence of God (Deuteronomy 6:4).

God in African Traditional Religions

The idea of God in African traditions ranges from the perception of his greatness, transcendence, immanence to creating abilities. In most traditional African communities, God is supreme and great over all visible and invisible beings.¹⁴ For instance among the Zulus in South Africa, God is seen as '*unkulunkulu*' meaning 'the Great-great-one'.¹⁵ The Shona in Southern Rhodesia view God as the '*Mwari*' meaning 'the Greatest of the great.' In various tribes such as the Tonga, the Ngoni, the Akan, the Baluba God is designated as 'the Great God,' or 'the Great One' or 'The Great King'.¹⁶

Also, in African Traditional Religion God is viewed as both transcendent and immanent being. The transcendence dimension of God presupposes that he is beyond the reach and scope of our imaginations. The *Akans* of Ghana refer to God as 'He who is there now as from ancient time' and the *Ngombe* sees God as "the everlasting One of the forest". For these people, God's existence is never ending and it preceded the beginning of His creation. In clear terms, the transcendence of God in African traditional religion categories signifies that he transcends all boundaries and all things ever known to man.

His immanence suggests that he is close to His people. For this reason, those who believe in him can address Him through prayers, invocations, offerings and sacrifice. The idea of his immanence is closely related to the idea of Pantheism (though cannot be mixed up with it).¹⁷ In fact, the *Ngombe* prefer to see God as the One who fills everything. His immanence often elicits anthropomorphic terms ascribed to God in various African Communities. For example, the Shona and the Ndebele call Him "Father, Mother and Son." The Yoruba people say that "Only God is wise" and "He is the discerner of hearts". For them, He is the only Being "who sees both the inside and outside of man."¹⁸ Among the Barundi as well, God is the *Watcher* of everything.

Furthermore, in African Traditional Religious God is view as the Almighty

14 Shafiul Islam and M. D. Islam, "African Traditional Concept Of God: A Critical Analysis," *Green University Review of Social Sciences*, Volume 02, Issue 01, June-2015. 2

15 A. J. B Hughes, J., Velsen, and , H., KuperTheShonaand Ndebele of Sothern Rbodesia, *International African Institute*, London, 1954. 103.

16 Shafiul Islam and M. D. Islam, 3.

17 Shafiul Islam and M. D. Islam, 4.

18 E. B., Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, Wazobia Publication, London, 1994. 40.

and all-powerful being. This belief is entrenched among the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Ngombe, The Hausa, the Akan and the Igbo. These tribes also view God as the self-perfect being that is self-dependent, self-supporting. In a biological sense, the Herero, a Bantu ethnic group of South Africa note that 'God has no father and is not a man and does not even eat at all.'¹⁹ The Gikuyu, a Bantu speaking people who live in the highland area of south-central Kenya opine that God has, 'No father nor mother, nor wife nor children,²⁰ He is all alone. He is neither a child nor an old Man; He is the same today as He was yesterday.' Theologically, Zulus think of God as 'He who is of Himself' or 'He who came of Himself into being.'²¹ For the Bambuti, 'God was the First, who had always been in existence, and would never die.' Spiritually, all these tribes conceive God as a 'Spiritual Being' or a 'Spirit.' One of the most explicit Shona hymns describes God as 'the Great Spirit' *Who* piles up rocks to make mountains, causes branches to grow and gives rain to mankind.²²

According to a traditional Pygmy hymn: "in the beginning was God; Today is God; Tomorrow will be God; who can make an image of God? He has nobody, He is as a word which comes out of your mouth. That word! It is no more, it is past, and still it lives! So is God."²³ To support this evidence of God's spirituality, societies like the Shilluk, the Ga and the Langi call Him to be like air or wind.²⁴ Air has no visibility in that sense but we can feel its presence. Though, there is no one or no intellect can examine Him and that is why the Ashanti designate Him as the Fathomless Spirit.²⁵ Moreover, African societies view God as the eternal being who is closely associated with His nature. For instance, the Ashanti and Baganda address Him directly as 'The Eternal One.' The Yoruba view Him as 'The Mighty Immovable Rock that never dies.' In fact, in their understanding 'one never hears the demise [death] of God!'²⁶

Finally, God is a perfect moral being and as such several moral attributes are ascribed to Him. Followers from the Ila, the Bacongo, the Akamba, the

19 J., Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya*, (Vintage: London, 1938), 233.

20 J. S., Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, Great Britain: Morrison & Gibb Ltd, 1969. 34

21 E. W., Smith ed., *African Ideas of God*, London: Edinburgh House Press, 1961. 109

22 Smith, 127.

23 P., Schebesta (1936), II: *Revisiting my Pygmy Hosts*, London: Stanford University Press, 1936. 171.

24 Idowu, 36, 43.

25 Shafiul Islam and M. D. Islam, 5.

26 Idowu, 43.

Igbo, the Herero, the Banyarwanda and several others believe Him to be very Kind, Merciful, Generous to His people, Fortune Provider, Pitiful, etc. In time of personal and natural problems or difficulties, people feel the need of His urgent help and feel Him as Merciful. God causes rain during drought, provides fertility to all animals and averts calamities. It is believed that God uses to solve difficulties and that is why, the *Akan* and the *Akamba* call God as 'the God of comfort'.

Most of the indigenous African believers think that God does only good to them and they need not to be worried at all. The Ewes firmly believe that 'He is good, for He has never withdrawn the good things from us which He gave us'.²⁷ But for the evil deeds, they do not categorically blame God. They think those as the works of spirits, magic workers or as punishment for their own misdeeds. That is why, God always seems to be 'Just'. The Nuers consider that, God throws things out and He is ever rightful. According to the belief of the Ila tradition, God can never be charged, since He is above the level of 'fault', 'failure', 'wrong' and 'unrighteousness'. The Yoruba think in the same way that 'God is the pure King . . . Who is without blemish'.²⁸ So, African God is ever holy to them. This belief is tied to his creating abilities as all these tribes perceive God as the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

God in Contemporary Nigerian Society

Having established the basic and traditional understanding of God in three major dominant religions in Nigeria: Islam, Christianity and African Traditional Religion, it has been noted that the reality of God among religious adherents in the nation deviates from what scriptures and traditions of the religion profess. In fact, it may be asserted that there is an immense problem in articulating God in a generally acceptable way in the contemporary Nigerian Society. However, through critical observation, it is discovered that there is deformed understanding of God among religious adherents all over the nation. Predominately in the northern part of the country,²⁹ God is viewed according to the Quranic presentation with diverse interpretations, some of which

27 D., Westermann, *The Shilluk people*, Negro University Press, 1912, 197.

28 Idowu, 47.

29 According to Pew Forum: The 1963 Nigerian census found that 36% of the population was Christian, 38% Muslim, and 26% other; the 2008 MEASURE Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) found 53% Muslim, 45% Christian, and 2% other; the 2008 Afro-barometer poll found 50% Christian, 49% Muslim, and 1% other; Pew's own survey found 52% Muslim, 46% Christian, and 1% other. See Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Appendix B, "Pew Forum, 2010, 3.

present God as genocidal, vengeful and blood-thirsty being. This idea of God fuelled the fundamentalism ideology of the Boko Haram which views killing non-Muslims as an accepted act of worship. Then, there are those who possess mild understanding of God. They view God as a bit accommodating, forgiving yet full of justice and will not tolerate those who fail to follow the path he laid in Quran. Thus, the Sunni Muslims who populated the North have a somewhat different mood of worship and some differences in structure, still the same with the Sufis Muslims. This is due to hermeneutical difference since both camps read the same Holy Quran.

In the South, understanding of God is dominated by Christian thoughts, due to early Christian missionary influence. This understanding traditionally views God as the Father of Christ Jesus. God is seen as the one who sent his Son to die the world that the world might be saved from their through the acceptance of His sacrifice. However, the emergence of prosperity gospel among Christians in the South has shifted the understanding of God. The God preached from Christian pulpit is God who specialises deliverance from witches, wizards and evil. It is God who delights in taken gifts to bless His people. This kind of God is God that is full of love and grace, who is capable of justice.

In addition, this understanding of God is no longer limited to the churches. Muslim communities in the South are now preaching the same idea of God. However, the contemporary idea of God in the South is that of a God who is comfortable with corruption and blesses the corrupt as long as they honour him with their stolen or ill-gotten wealth. Therefore, there are cases where political office holders swear by the name of God using Christian or Islamic scriptures and still go ahead to embezzle money and siphon funds meant for public good. Therefore, it appears that the God preached and served in churches and mosques is God of money and position; the God that delight in evil. This lopsided view of God is the bane of the socio-political chaos in Nigerian public space.

Nonetheless, it is the position of this paper that no people can raise morally beyond the moral perception of God. Nigeria, as a nation, is morally bankrupt because the nation religious space preaches God who has no keen interest in moral justice, moral rectitude and perfection. In fact, worshippers will become what they worship no matter what. Nigeria as a nation is enmeshed in corruptions and moral evil, because the God peddled and preached in religious circles is God who is at home with corruptions and moral evil. There-

fore, there is need to re-imagine God within the context of scriptures and observed attributes.

Reconstruction of God

It is the view of this paper that to reconstruct God, religious adherents must objectively re-imagine, re-interpret and re-present God from the context of their scriptural traditions, reason and veritable experience projected by scriptural revelations. To reconstruct God, one must do the following: first, one reconstruct God alongside the established religious scriptures and traditions. From the brief survey of the nature of God in the established religious traditions, it is clear that God is morally perfect and eschews all forms of evil and corruptions. A careful analysis of religious traditions showed that though God is God of love yet He is God of justice. In Christian traditions, various prophetic literatures especially in the prophetic book of Amos, God is portrayed as a being who fully has interest in social justice. The same is seen in Quran and African Religions traditions. He is also portrayed as the One who is both Holy, highly detached and un-influenced by man politics, yet close enough to hear the prayers and plead of the humble and poor. This God who is fully active being of love, mercy and justice must be re-introduced again to the pulpits in the mosques and churches.

Secondly, there is the need to reconstruct God alongside the revealed attributes in the nature. The order and well-planned structure of the creation testifies of an orderly being. In Aquinas teleological argument on the existence of God, it was argued that the fact that God is the creator, may be due to the fact that there is a grand designer of the universe. The intricate and well-structured designed of our world is too complicated to adjudge that universe is created by chance. The orderliness in our world has implication for the belief in a God of order and justice. The creative abilities of God as revealed in creation also point us to the need to fear and reverence God in any socio-cultural context.

Thirdly, it is essential to reconstruct and place Him in proper context in the age where he is totally misconstrued and misunderstood. The damning effect of postmodernism and misrepresentation of God to millennialists has devastating influence on socio-cultural structure of the world. The repositioning and reconstruction of God must therefore be in context of social justice and moral uprightness in the society. The moral rectitude and perfection of God must be increasingly brought to the fore. It is the honest view of this paper

that to correct the moral bankruptcy of this age, a God who is morally upright and demand the same from His people and creation must be reintroduced.

Conclusion

Representing and Reconstructing God is crucial to the social healing and transformation of the society. The society is a conflicted and chaotic one, the socio-political upheaval of the world needs re-imagination and re-projection of God of truth, moral rectitude, social justice and peace into the sub-consciousness. The social prosperity of this age is conditioned by the prevailing knowledge of God. The significance of the knowledge of God lies in the root of ideology. Regardless of any profession or belief, it is the god(s) or God that people believe in that rules their lives. As such, it is incumbent on religious practitioners and priests to present God alongside the revealed and observed attributes in the scriptural traditions and natural phenomena.

REFERENCES

- Brueggemann, W. *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2009.
- Fape, Olusina M, *Knowing the Fundamentals of Anglicanism*, (Sagamu: More Blessing, 2013).
- Hughes, A. J. Velsen, B J., and Kuper, H., *The Shona and Ndebele of Southern Rhodesia*, International African Institute, London, 1954.
- Idowu, E. B., *Oludumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, Wazobia Publication, London, 1994.
- Kenyatta, J., *Facing Mount Kenya* (Vintage: London, 1938).
- Mbiti, J. S., *African Religions & Philosophy*, Great Britain: Morrison & Gibb Ltd, 1969.
- Morley, B. *Western Concepts of God*, accessed from <https://iep.utm.edu/god-west/> on 12/12/2020.
- Morris, Thomas V., *Our Idea of God: An Introduction to Philosophical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991)
- Schebesta P., II: *Revisiting my Pygmy Hosts*, London: Stanford University Press, 1936.
- Shafiul Islam and M. D. Islam, "African Traditional Concept Of God: A Critical Analysis," *Green University Review of Social Sciences*, Volume 02, Issue 01, June-2015.
- Smith E. W., ed., *African Ideas of God*, London: Edinburgh House Press, 1961.
- Westermann, D., *The Shilluk people*, Negro University Press, 1912,