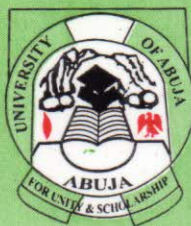
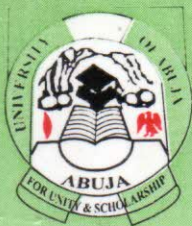


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Survival after Death in African and Christian Perspectives.

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Introduction

Among the realities that bring joy and fear to human beings on earth are birth and death. Birth comes with joy and it is usually welcomed while death is horrifying and often feared. Implicitly tied to these mixed feelings about birth and death is their meaning and the state of the human person beyond this world.

Death is as biological and inevitable as birth; and they are considered to be so by people who have faced the matters clearly, including preparing themselves one way or the other. In Christian perspective, death is often seen as liberation, while birth may symbolize the "enfleshing" of the image of God which at times, is called individual spirit. Other religions have various perspectives about birth and death. But the issues as to the meaning and the nature of the human person in the other world have remained a matter of speculation.

Here in this paper we shall examine the notion of survival after death in African Religion (Afrel) with particular emphasis on its meaning and implications. Then we shall go ahead to attempt a clear distinction between survival after death in Afrel and Christianity, bringing out the essential elements.

The objective of this approach is to see the relevance or the irrelevance of the African world-view in the light of Christianity. This is germane because a person's hope of finding meaning in birth or death lies in the belief in that which is beyond the present grasp.¹

Theoretical Framework

Great thinkers of all times have remained divided on the issue of survival after death. Socrates who lived between 469 and 399BC awaited his death. Before his death he propounded an argument in favour of survival after death. He led his students to see death as a friend, a great liberator and that which freed the soul from the confines and restrictions of the body. The soul within this view was indestructible. Armed with this kind of theology, Socrates willingly welcomed the coming of the end of the day and surrendered to death. Plato, the most intelligent student of Socrates, held the view that it is the human soul that survives after death and that the human body dies. In contrast, Aristotle (384-322BC) believed and taught that the soul was inseparable from the body and that death marked the end of single human existence.²

Thus, the question of survival after death lingers on and becomes interdisciplinary. This has given rise to various theories and arguments for and against humankind's survival after death. For instance, there is the atman in Hinduism which often slips into reincarnation and Nirvana in Buddhism. Though this paper is concerned with Afrel Christian perspectives, we shall briefly highlight some of the arguments on the issue.

Those who argue against survival after death are called mortalists. Their submissions are physical and analogous in nature. Norman Geisler and Paul Feinberg note that forceful statement of the arguments has been proposed by David Hume in his work titled: *"On the Immortality of the Soul"*. According to Norman and Paul, Hume argues that major changes in closely related realities bring about reasonable alteration. In this regard Hume submitted that:

Our bodies and minds are related in this way. Changes in our bodies produce proportionate changes in our minds, small pains lead to minimal mental confusion while great pain leads to total mental collapse. The total dissolution of the body at death is accompanied by the total dissolution of the mind.³

With the above and other related analogy from nature, the mortalists come to the conclusion that it is wrong to project survival after death. It however, remains contestable whether there is any practical evidence to buttress the mortalists position.

Another mortalist school of thought known as "Body-Mind Dependence" simply submitted thus:

the activity of the mind is dependent upon the body. We know that the brain is not mortal, ceasing to function at death. Further, all evidence points to the fact that our mental life is bound up with our brain structure and bodily energy. It is rational to conclude, then, that mental activity ceases with the cessation of bodily life, ...⁴

In the light of the above body-mind dependence argument, one cannot doubt the fact that a healthy mind influences a healthy body. But this argument does not go too far to prove or disprove survival after death.

Going by survival after death, one notes at least three doctrines. There is the immortal-soul doctrine; the reconstruction doctrine; and the minimal-person doctrine. Each of these is an attempt to describe how a man (or woman) might survive after death.⁵

The immortal-soul theory was advanced by Plato (428-347 BC). According to him, "it is the human body that dies... the human soul survives death and can be reborn again"⁶ Plato opined that human beings are essentially composite and therefore beyond ordinary bodies. For him, human beings are "enfleshed" souls and as such are capable of survival after death independent of the body. He went further to submit that that which survives after death is the really real, the human soul or the real person. Thus, since it is the soul that survives hereafter, the real person then is immortal.

The reconstruction doctrine states that after death our body will survive and our person reconstructed. This points to God calling human beings back into existence, probable in the context of eternity.

The basic difference between immortal soul theory and reconstruction doctrine gave rise to the minimal-person doctrine. The dividing line seems to be the place and role of the human body after death. This position states that the real person that survives after death is corporeal to the extent that the age long issues of identification and individuation can be overcome. In the same vein the minimal person is as well incorporeal since it can no longer be bound by the ordinary earthly body when it is committed to the earth. It is within this context that Eliade submitted that 'death is only the result of our indifference to immortality.'⁷

The above arguments and theories for and against survival after death are not without problems on various grounds. A comprehensive treatment of the problems would require a text-book. So, we turn our attention to the examination of the positions of Afrel and Christianity on survival after death based on the outline earlier given.

The Notion of Survival After death

Survival after death has no generally accepted description. The explanations given to it is resourcefully varied. Yet they rotate around a given meaning. Thus, survival after death has been variously described as:

the infinite prolongation of human existence and of the human personality beyond death;⁸

The state or condition of living forever;⁹
or an endless life.¹⁰

Critical studies of the above descriptions bring out the following essential features:

that survival after death may not necessarily mean eternity;
that life after death is not, so to say, the same as immortality;
that survival after death, thus, can mean infinite life despite the cessation of physical life.

It is within the above context that the question of Afrel perspective on survival after death comes to the fore. Do Africans believe in survival after death? What are the salient contents of such a belief?

Survival after Death in Afrel

Belief in the survival after death is one of the salient features of African Religion (Afrel). It is to account for this belief that the origin of death is reduced to myths all over Africa. Death as explained in myths in African context is only a mere end of biological functions. According to Anusi Martin, "after the change of this phase of life by and through death, man continues to live."¹¹ It is believed in many parts of Africa that from the very beginning of human life, that God intended unending existence for human race. Therefore, life is looked upon as sacred and physical end of biological functions, otherwise called death is accorded due respect in Africa.

Again, to balance up the tension between birth and death; enhance survival after death, Africans see marriage and initiation ceremonies as sacred responsibilities. As John Mbiti wrote,

Marriage is the meeting point for the three layers of human Life... the departed, the living and those to be born. The departed come into the picture because they are the roots on whom the living stand. The living are the link between death and life. Those to be born are the buds in the lions of the living, and marriage makes it possible for them to germinate and sprout. If one deliberately refuses to get married it means, therefore, that one is cutting off the vital link between death and life....¹²

Summarily, African world-view does not tell people how to overcome physical death. What it does indicate, however, is that to render death powerless that one has to marry. "Therefore marriage and child bearing are the medicines against death",¹³ while physical cessation of biological functions threatens survival after death, marriage and child bearing enhance it. This makes it possible, according to African perspective, for human life to continue even after death. The sacred duty to get married or be initiated into ancestral society is, therefore, the only guarantee of human survival after death. The marriage and initiation cultures represent a twofold conception of survival after death in African. They are the personal and collective survival after death. These two forms are intimately related and interwoven. In Africa it is believed that the ancestors live on at least in the telling of their stories individually or collectively. They continue to live in their living legends. In other words, as long as their names are uttered and their stories recounted, they go on living. This is described as 'after death influence'.

In Afrel, when a person dies, his/her biological functions are suddenly terminated. At this point, the person is partly present and partly absent. He or she is regarded at this level as a "living-dead" Mbiti puts it succinctly that,

as soon as a person dies, he becomes a living-dead, he is a spirit in the sense that he is no longer in the body, and yet he retains features which describe him in physical terms. He still retains his person name....¹⁴

This implies that as long as there are living descendants of the "absent-living" through marriage, who remember and bear the personal name of the dead in question, he is in personal survival or immortality of progeny. The period of personal survival gradually leads to the phase of collective survival. These account for the elaborate rites of passages Africans accord the living and the physically dead.

Christian View

Belief in the survival after death is in no way peculiar to Afrel. Christianity as a religion is as well rooted in a confident hope of resurrection or survival after death. This is first and foremost because the first Christians were Jews. Their grasp of the meaning of Jesus' life and death was conditioned by their Jewish heritage; just as African understanding of Jesus and his gospel ought to be conditioned by the African heritage.

In Christian religion, the teachings on life after death do not fit together into organic whole. The teachings before and during the time of Jesus were clearly controversial. In fact, in pure Judaism that gave way to Christian religion,

The dead did not become wholly extinct, ... but entered the underworld known as sheol. The inhabitants of sheol are called rephaim, whom we can refer to perhaps as "shades". Their mode of existence is dim, ... they are cut off from the fullness of life as it is known to those still in the body. But dimness is not the same as sheer nonexistence....¹⁵

This understanding of survival after death in Hebrew thought brings out her elements. For example, there is the belief that soon after death, that each person will give account of his/her earthly life, after which the spirit would either be saved or condemned. For the Jews who held this belief, sheol exists as the dwelling not of all the spirits but only of the damned. Sheol therefore, "evolved, as it were, into Gehena, a place of torment and burning."¹⁶ It is in this way that the famous story of Lazarus and the rich man makes sense (Lk. 16:19-31).

The Sadducees, one of the prominent classes in Hebrew society, rejected all expressions of survival after death; the Pharisees accepted the belief. Jesus, on whose life and teaching Christian religion anchors, clearly sided the Pharisees and it is on record that he refuted the Sadducees on this matter (Mk. 12:18-27). According to Penelhum, Jesus is reported to have believed and taught in a way that points to survival after death. He strongly submitted that Jesus, "is recorded as saying things that imply the reality of an afterlife immediately following death, one on which the dead are divided by some sort of judgment".¹⁷ The above is supported by Luke 16:19-13; 23:39-43.

To this end, Paul seems to give the fullest account of what survival after death means in Christian religion. He wrote:

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Cor. 15:20-21).

Paul's teaching spells out the Christian hope: to be with God, to survive death and begin a life of abiding union with God.

Christianity therefore, holds that the human being survives after death. According to this religion, human beings are unions of bodies and spirits. In biological cessation, there is disintegration. Yet the hope subsists that there will be a time when the human being will be united in body and spirit unto eternity.

Despite the merits and demerits of this teaching, it is beyond argument that Christian religion and Afrel hold on to survival after death. However, the nature of the life after death remains adequately unexplored.

Traditional Christian theologians depict survival after death as a reward or punishment. The contemporary Christian theologians avoid the idea of heaven and hell whether as a reward or punishment. As Roger has correctly observed,

Eschatology, the study of final things, is a serious focus, but theologians are reserved in their speculations. Hell is seen not as a punishment for sin but as the consequence of a person's continued and ultimate rejection of God exercised through the use of free will, which God respects.¹⁸

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So, it remains an issue in Christian religion what the real contents of survival after death entail. This is especially the case when some theologians teach that ultimately, all creatures will share the beatific vision. In all, one feature that is fundamental in our discussion so far is that the belief in survival after death is valid in Afrel and Christian religion.

However, it must be noted that Christian religion has a very unique answer to the problem of survival after death. And that the answer lies in the example of Jesus Christ in the face of death. Unlike Socrates, Jesus did not see death as His friend or His liberator. Death did not come to Him to free His immortal soul. No, death came to annihilate Him. 'Death was His enemy, because death was God's enemy'.¹⁹ Therefore, Jesus being the mediator of salvation is the very one who in His death conquered death itself. According to Cullman, 'He cannot obtain the victory by simply living on as an immortal soul, by fundamentally not dying. He can conquer death only by actually dying, by betaking himself of the sphere of abandonment by God. When one wishes to overcome someone else, one must enter his territory'.²⁰ It is in this regard that the resurrection of Jesus calls back to life not just a part of the human person, but the whole being, all that God has created—body and soul.

Conclusion

For Socrates and Plato no act of creation is needed in survival after death since the body is viewed as bad and to die is to be free from the influence of the body. Based on this understanding, that part which is to live on, the soul does not die at all. To understand the Christian faith in the survival after death from the lens of Afrel, one must completely disregard the early Greek thought of the body as bad. For the African Christian, the death of the body is as well seen as the destruction of God created life which is recreated in the resurrection.

Afrel and Christianity are by no means homogeneous entities. It is primarily to affirm that the people who received the gospel in Africa were real human beings that this study was undertaken. Behind this is a more fundamental belief that God is open to all human history and that all human histories are called to open up to God in turn.²¹ It is this fact that moved Africans to worship God in their own way and in turn expected meaning and fulfilment from their way of life. Therefore, African beliefs and stories qualify as stepping stones for the Christian message to articulate itself intelligibly. Karl Muller buttressed this point when he said that, "such a process took place first in the encounter with Judaism, then with Hellenism and in the Roman Empire, and also in the Gallic-Germanic sphere".²²

Thus, the relationship between Afrel and Christianity, in the light of what has been discussed, is relevant. And as a result the encounter between the two religions ought to be less problematic. The contemporary efforts to detach Christianity from the dominating Western culture should be encouraged and promoted by all based on the relevance of most African beliefs and practices to Christian message.

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