Using the Concept of Substitution in African Traditional Religion to Formulate Contextual Theology on Biblical Atonement: The Yoruba Example

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ABSTRACT—Like other traditional religions, Yoruba Traditional Religion (YTR) is not dying out. The believers in YTR take sacrifice seriously in solving life problems. Their concept of substitution in this regard is unique. The question is how the concept of substitution in YTR can be used to formulate a contextual theology of biblical atonement for the purpose of reaching potential believers in YTR? This paper examines this issue and seeks to formulate such a theology. It shows the basic and relevant elements in the concept of substitution in YTR, which are compatible with a contextual theology of biblical atonement. In doing so, it focuses on deliverance from transferable death among the Yoruba people of South Western Nigeria. The paper also recognizes that there are elements of substitution in YTR that are not compatible with the idea of atonement in the Bible. The paper concludes that using the suitable elements in YTR idea of substitution can help the Yoruba to understand how Christ substitutionary death has secured victory over both physical death and eternal death.

Keywords: Yoruba, substitution, atonement, Africa, traditional religion

I. Introduction

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The contemporary religion pattern of Nigeria has been described as triadic in nature as it comprises of Christian, Islamic and Traditional religions (Ejizu, 1998, p. 179). Interestingly, none of the three religions enjoys “an overwhelming statistical advantage over the others (Ejizu, p. 186).” For while Islamic religion is dominant in the northern part of the country, Christianity dominates in the southeastern and southern parts (Ejizu, 1998, pp. 182–184). It is not so in the southwest, which is the home of the Yoruba speaking people. Yoruba Traditional religion (YTR) has remained influential in this area. Its influence has even gone beyond its place of origin. Though the religion originates from Western Nigeria, it lays claim to millions of adherents throughout the world. Apart from Nigeria, other countries where it is practiced in one form or the other are the Republic of Benin and Togo in West Africa. Taking a more global dimension, the presence of the religion is felt include Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guyana, Jamaica, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago and St. Vincent (Emeagwali, 1999, pp. 1–2)

YTR, as an influential religion among the Yoruba and beyond, has a sacrificial system as one the cores of its beliefs and practices (Idowu, 1962, p. 118; Awolalu, 1975, p. 81). There are various needs for sacrifice among the Yoruba traditional worshippers. The basic ones are the need for propitiation, the need for prevention, and the need for substitution (Awolalu, 1978, pp. 143–146). Substitution is frequently practiced in the religion. Hence, this work focuses on substitution in YTR. The questions are: (1) What are the similarities and dissimilarities between the concept of substitution in YTR and the concept of substitution in biblical atonement? (2) Are there elements in YTR concept of substitution that are suitable for contextual theology on biblical atonement? (3) How can these elements be used to do contextual theology on biblical atonement?

In attempts to answer the above questions, the idea of substitution in YTR is presented, followed by the concept of substitution in biblical atonement. Next, an attempt is made to identify the suitable elements in YTR concept of substitution and use them to formulate a contextual theology of biblical atonement.

II. The Idea of Substitution in YTR

Among the traditional Yoruba, it is believed that there are wicked spirits who are determined to torment man. Emiefe Ikenga-Metuh sheds light on the identity of evil spirit in the thought of African people he explains: