Pragmatism in the lenses of African Christianity: An emic approach to lived religions

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Abstract

African Christianity, as the synthesis of Christianity and African Traditional Religion, is often perceived as an ideal form of belief and practice that informs religious worship and ethics for nominal Christians. However, this form of expression is mostly dismissed by conservative Christians and African rigorist religionists as being syncretistic, and thereby seeing it as the 'pollution' of both religions, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. Even more criticism is given to those who regard themselves as Christians and African religionists – as they are assumed to have dual identities. In this paper, I explore the validity of African Christianity, as practiced by nominal Christians, through the lenses of pragmatism. This is imperative because pragmatism, as a theory of truth, rejects the separation of rational cognition and purpose. Thus, it posits that one cannot separate the people's systems of belief and forms of knowing from their social context, which they must inherently live by and inform their actions. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to locate and unfold the emic experiences of the experiencers of African Christianity, and to interrogate their lived experiences as guided by pragmatism as the theoretical premise.

Keywords: African Christianity, African Traditional Religion, Nominal Christians, Pragmatism.

Introduction

Within the backdrop of pragmatists, even though they admit that the world, as a form of realism is out there; they also posit that our knowledge of it is always interpreted subjectively, as people get to experience it. Accordingly, this means that there are no universal descriptions of reality. People cope with the realities of life and the world as they experience them. African Christianity, as the synthesis of Christianity and African Traditional Religion, is often perceived as an ideal form of expression of this realism. This is because both Christianity and African Traditional Religion are understood to independent systems, which cannot be juxtaposed. But, as it appears, this is the belief and practice that informs the religious ethic mostly held by nominal Christians. Outside nominal Christianity, this form of expression is generally dismissed by conservative Christians and African rigorist religionist as syncretism, and thereby classifying it as the pollution of both religions, Christianity and African Traditional Religion. In this paper, I explore the validity of African Christianity, as practiced by nominal Christians, through the lenses of pragmatism. This is imperative because pragmatism, as a theory of truth, argues that one cannot separate the people's systems of belief and forms of knowing from their social context, which they must inherently live by and informs their actions. The aim of the paper, therefore, is to locate and unfold the emic experiences of the experiencers of African Christianity, and to interrogate their lived experiences.

Pragmatism – the concept

The conception of pragmatism is directly an American philosophical heritage, which can be traced back to the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce, 1878), Ralph Waldo Emerson (Emerson, 1929), William James (James, 1907), and John Dewey (Dewey, 1931). Later philosophers such as George Herbert Mead (Mead, 1938) and Richard Rorty (Rorty, 1982) used and made the concept of pragmatism popular within the spheres of social sciences and linguistics. As a conceptual framework, pragmatism holds to a number of principles and philosophies. Its proponents argue that "the truth of all beliefs, knowledge and scientific concepts is provisional and defined by their pragmatic use in ongoing experience, not by correspondence with antecedent Truth and reality" (Carlsen and Mantere, 2007:1298).

As a historical movement, pragmatism sought to address the perceived problems of modern philosophy. These regarded the positivist ideas concerning the accumulative progress of science as the producer of absolute truths, which is attainable through objective depictions of reality (Carlsen and Mantere, 2007:1298). In reaction to this, the early proponents of pragmatism rejected the notion of absolute truth and the spectatorship of theoretical knowledge. They believed that there is no knowledge apart from the lived experiences of the knower. Thus, their reasoning moved away from scientific positivism in order to consider subjectivity and other methods of quantifying such subjective means of knowing.

As a theory of truth, pragmatism discards the separation of rational cognition and rational purpose. That is, the proponents of pragmatism argue that one cannot separate the people's systems of belief and forms of knowing from their social context, which they must inherently live by and enable their actions (Pihlström, 2009). Even though they admit that the world, as a realism, is out there; they also posit that our knowledge of it is always interpreted subjectively, as people get to experience it. Accordingly, this means that there are no universal descriptions of reality. People cope with the realities of life and the world as they experience them. William James referred to this as the "teleological weapons of the mind" (Pihlström, 2009:203).

In essence, this implies that truth is provisional. It is subject to fallibility as the context permits. However, even though subjective, pragmatists acknowledge the consensus view of truth or reality – that there are certain forms of truth and reality that are held in common by experiencers. Nevertheless, even these commonly held truths or realities come in various forms. They are not linear. Since they are experienced individually, they often carry a subjective undertone and are essentially interpreted as such by experiencers.

The most imperative point to make with reference to pragmatism is that it is a fundamental theory of lived experiences. It cogitates experience as plural, ambivalent and on-going. Experience therefore is perceived as an active and on-going phenomenon in which the experiencing subject and the experienced object are linked and constitute a central relational unity. They form part of the plural flow where there are no inactive spaces or static positions of spectatorship, rather all forms of inquiry are logically gained experientially as life goes-on. Truths about reality, in this backdrop, are individual or social constructions rather than objective discoveries. That is, the world is a continuous mutability where the notions of self, mind, knowledge and social structures are best conceived as a process of becoming.

Pragmatism in religion

Some of the famous proponents of pragmatism, such as William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey dealt largely with religion and religious experiences. James' work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in Human nature*, for instance, is a book derived from the Gifford Lectures on natural theology, which were delivered at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland around 1901 and 1902 (Romania, 2018). In this book, James shows how religious experiences are in no way special experiences when compared to other forms of experience; and how religious emotions are ordinary emotions directed towards religious objects. In that case, the reality of religion was thought to be determined by the real effects it produced in one's experiential life.

In addition to this, religion was also perceived as an entity, which possessed a noetic character that opened the way into accessing the unseen moral order and contributed towards the organization of one's life. James described such an understanding in the following manner: "There is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto" (James, 2002:46). Thus, even though it may be a general concept, religion is highly subjective as it operates at a personal level. It regards "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James, 2002:29-30).

This subjective positioning in understanding and interpreting religion situates itself within the scope of pragmatism. Religion, as James perceived it, is individually disposed: "The pivot round which the religious life, as we have traced it, revolves, is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny. Religion, in short, is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism". As can be seen, individuals take a central role in representing religion as they encounter or experience it. Hence, James argued that "[i]n the more personal branch of religion it is … the inner dispositions of man himself which form the centre of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness" (James, 2002:379).

This perception of religion is pragmatic. It falls within the scope of pragmatism for at least three primary reasons, even though there may be more. The first is that religion is an antidote to contingency and can serve as a source of meaning against the meaninglessness of life. This is an attitude that requires the concept of transcendence, which allows for the essential contingency of life and its threads to our seeking for meaningfulness and harmony (Deuser, Joas, Jung, and Schlette, 2016). This implies that pragmatism adds to religion the necessary function of counter-balancing power (that persons are not an end to themselves but can look to ultimacies for meaning and fulfilment) in theorizing the omnipresence of contingency. In other words, the notion of transcendence presents itself as the existential means of regulating contingency.

The second is that religion can be seen as a transforming agent, which may instill, shape and reinforce behaviour. Taken from a pragmatic point of view, this begins with the knowledge or awareness of self in relation to others and the universe. Religion has the ability to make one understand themselves within a pluralistic universe with various cultural undertones and perspectives. That is why Deuser *et al.* (2016:2) asserted that "[r]eligiousness is principally characterized by its optional status as a means of self-understanding in a pluralistic universe of various cultural perspectives on reality, and its quality is judged by its contribution to solve problems in the process of individual self-realization". In this regards, actions such as good conduct or moral ethic come as a result of self-awareness.

Lastly, religion has the ability to enforce various rules of action and thinking processes. Such intentional actions and thinking processes are often based on higher ideals that are thought to emanate from the divine. These higher ideals constitute practice and normativity. Elaborating on this idea, Siebert (2016) attested that "one may finally say that religious ideas – as elements of belief – are means of orientation in an at-least-twofold sense: 1) they orientate the manner a person understands the world/the universe; 2) they align the ways a person is engaged in particular action situations" (Seibert, 2016:26). In this regard, "[r]eligious concepts and practices have sometimes been vehicles by which ethical concepts, norms, practices, and institutions have been naturalized or represented in such a way as to render invisible the fact that they are contingent products of human society and culture" (Proudfoot, 2016:110).

These three reasons or components strongly connect religion with pragmatism. They deem pragmatism as a valuable resource in illuminating and unfolding religious experiences as experiencers encounter them. This, in no way, is a state of reality that can be objectivized or gained through spectatorship (objective observation). It is highly subjective and rests upon the realities of experiencers as subjects of enquiry. In that regard, personal reflections and interpretations about what constitute reality to the experiencers is imperative. Hence, this paper looks at pragmatism as the enabler of religiosity – in this case, specifically paying attention to African Christianity.

Pragmatism in the lens of African Christianity

African Christianity refers to the synthesis between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (Mndende, 2013). It is a distinctive brand of devotion in which the ethico-spiritual principles of Christianity are practiced in conjunction with those of the African Traditional Religion (Maluleke, 2010). This brand of faith is fully represented by members of African Independent or Initiated Churches, even though it also prevails to some extent in Reformed, Evangelical, and Catholic traditions (Ntombana, 2015; Southern African Catholic Bishops, 2016). In order to maintain clarity within the scope of this chapter, my focus is primarily dedicated to Christians who synthesize Christianity and African Traditional Religion, and practice as Christians and diviners.

This is because the facticity of their realism cannot be merely understood or fully uncovered by rational arguments and scientific proofs, as pragmatism holds. However, it requires an in-depth exploration of experiences of the experiencers. It is a philosophy that puts essence back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of persons and the world from any starting point other than that of their facticity. This implies that the reality of people who synthesize Christianity and African Traditional Religion, especially those who are Christians and diviners, cannot be ascertained outside their lived experiences.

That is why pragmatism has been used as a philosophical stance to inform and guide the processes of this study. Pragmatism enabled the researcher to explore the world of, and get in touch with the lived experiences of the participants. Its value rests in that it explores the lived realisms of participants without beginning an enquiry with a set of preconceived assumptions. It views the study of consciousness as the primary source of access to lived realities and that entails the exploration of meaning structures and practical outcomes of the projected actions of the participants.

The central idea therefore, in employing pragmatism, is that it was able to assist the researcher in grasping the meaning structures and practical implications of participants who synthesize Christianity and African Traditional Religion. Because these are two different religious systems – Christianity and African Traditional Religion, it sometimes appear as if they are contradictory and cannot be made coherent at a practical level. However, the voice of those who live this realism, as insiders, seem to carry more weight than external assumptions about perceived contradictions between the two religions – Christianity and African Traditional Religion.

Methodology

This section consists of the empirical data that was collected from participants who synthesized Christianity and African Traditional Religion, and practiced, at the time of the interviews, as Church leaders and *Sangomas* (traditional healers). The empirical data was collected after ethical clearance from 12 participants, both male and female, who came from two geographical areas. One at the Eastern Cape in the vicinity of Alice, and the other from Lesotho in the vicinity of Maseru. The age groups of the participants ranged from 30–40 years; from 41–50 years; and from 51 years and older. Out of the 12 participants, 4 ranged between the ages of 30–40 years, 6 ranged between the ages of 41–50 and the last 2 ranged between the ages of 51 years and older.

Discussions

The researcher conducted in-depth physical face-to-face interviews with the participants in order to uncover the realism understudy and to understand how the participants as experiencers describe this reality. The study upheld all the ethical considerations and related regulations that underpin human research participation. It was approved by the University of the Free State's General Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethical clearance number: UFS-HSD2020/1214/10408). The overarching question to this systematic and qualitative enquiry was: "what are the effects of juxtaposing Christianity and African Traditional Religion to personal identity?" In order to create a context in which the participants could sufficiently respond to the main question, the following sub-question was asked: Do African Christians who are also African religionist embrace dual identities? In the process of data analysis, this sub-question served as the theme of discussion for the empirical data provided by participants.

African Christianity and duality of identity

The participants, responding to the question: "Do African Christians who are also African religionist embrace dual identities?", seemed to confirm previous studies conducted by Menton Hirst on nominal Christians among amaXhosa communities of the Eastern Cape. In like manner, the participants argued that Christianity and African Traditional Religion do not clash with each other, but reinforce one another in a mutually benefiting way. Hirst's work on Xhosa systems of divination corroborate this presupposition. He noted that to most traditional healers, Christianity and traditional religion are considered to be related systems of thought and practice:

> Most healers are nominal, if not practising, Christians. From the healers'
> perspective, Christianity and traditional religion are considered to be
> related systems of thought and practice. The terms of one system are
> translatable into the terms of the other and the ensuing transpositions used
> in a mutually reinforcing way (Hirst, 2005:4).

This implies that traditional healers do not inevitably perceive any contradictions between the two religions, nor do they regard themselves as assuming two different religious traditions. But they see themselves as holding a unified worldview, which is composed of two religious traditions. This unified view brings consonance and balance in their lives. Because it incorporates two religious traditions, this worldview is not linear. It is not simply characterized by "a mind-body dualism consonant with Western biomedicine and consumer culture" (Hirst, 2005:4).

However, it is a complex dialectical process in which old and new [religious forms] are integrated, synthesized and increasingly supplement each other (Hirst, 2005). The African Traditional Religion, as an old religious form, is systematically integrated with Christianity, the new religious form, and both religions increasingly continue to supplement each other as practitioners consistently try to adjust to the socio-religious realities of life. Thus, the experiencers of African Christianity uphold a unified worldview, and not a dichotomous worldview, based on duality as embodied in Western philosophy.

This is a unified worldview, which acknowledges both Christ, as the Saviour of the world; and ancestors, as custodians of indigenous traditions or customs. From the vantage point of the participants, Christ and ancestors do not contradict each other, as they each fulfil a specific task or purpose within the respective religious traditions. There is no surprise therefore, as to why the experiencers of African Christianity argue that the two religious traditions – Christianity and African Traditional Religion, are compatible.

As people who embrace both traditions – Christianity and African Traditional Religion, one may wonder if there is no point of identity crisis in this matrix. Reasonably so, because religion, in itself, can serve as identity. Religion as an identity refers to the intimate link between religion and ethnicity. A number of scholars seem to think that there is little doubt about the intimate link between religion and ethnicity (Marty, 1975; Padgett, 1980; Stout, 1975). This means that religion can serve as a point of reference for ethnic identification. Abramson (1980:869-875) argues that in some instances, such as the Amish, Hutterites, Mormons, and Jews, ethnicity equals religion.

By implication, this denotes that were it not for religion, these ethnic groups would have not existed. In this sense, religion is an identity or identity shaper. The correlation therefore, of religion and ethnicity holds that whether one perceives ethnicity subjectively or objectively, or whether ethnicity is measured along the lines of acculturation or by assimilation, the involvement of religion in the characteristics of one's ethnic group is always judged to be dominant when correlated with ethnic identity (Hammond, 1980). The construct of identity, however, is not so apparent as the correlation between religion and ethnicity. It has a dualistic temperament. This means that there is no single way of defining identity.

Alluding to this dualistic nature of identity, Hammond (1980:2) stated that "[t]he first way of looking at identity suggests the immutable, or at least the slowly changing core of personality that shows up in all of a person's encounters, irrespective of differing role-partners. The second way suggests the transient and changeable self as persons move from one social encounter to another, offering a somewhat different identity, as it were, in each place." Remarking on this assertion, Oppong

(2013:13) stated that the first way of conceptualizing identity "brings up the issue of involuntary dimension of identity, while, the second raises the issue of adaptability of identity".

The involuntary dimension of identity concerns the elementary core of personality, which does not change or at least changes slowly over a long period of time. This kind of identity is enforced by primary groups, precisely parents or care-takers, arguably in the early stages of life and remains intact throughout one's lifespan. The adaptability of identity concerns the transitory changes and developments in identity that occurs due to new life experiences, and social milieu outside of primary groups. This form of identity is continual and not static. In relation to the data that was gathered from the participants, the main point of discussion appeared to be around the involuntary dimension of identity (Hammond, 1980).

This is because the participants noted that they were raised-up within families that embraced both traditions – Christianity and African Traditional Religion. They clearly stated that their parents openly professed to be, and regarded themselves as Christians while African religionists. They did not perceive any contradictions or objectionable patterns of doing or thinking from this phenomenon. This line of thought speaks to the involuntary dimension of identity, which is enforced by primary groups, such as parents or caretakers, and arguably occurs in the early stages of life (Oppong, 2013).

In this scenery, the upbringing of the participants seems to suggest that the embracing of these two religious traditions did not, and is not a problem. It does not constitute as double identity or cause any identity crises because it has always been around them, experienced from people who openly acknowledged. The participants stated that the coming together of Christianity and African Traditional Religion does not affect them negatively, nor distort their identity. Instead, they argued that the synthesis of Christianity and African Traditional Religion supplements or reinforce the limitations that are found in Christianity in terms of addressing immediate needs. Thus, the coming together of these two religious traditions therefore, seems to suggest the consolidation of identity rather than an identity crisis.

Conclusion

It appears that African Christianity, as the synthesis of Christianity and African Traditional Religion, is indeed an ideal form of belief and practice that informs religious worship and ethic for nominal Christians. Nominal Christians seem to perceive no contradictions in juxtaposing Christianity and ATR and have embraced the practice of these two traditions in the consolidation of their identities and spirituality. Even though this form of expression is largely dismissed by conservative Christians and African rigorist religionist as syncretism, nominal Christians feel strong about it and openly acknowledge it. To them, the coming together of these two religious traditions does not imply the pollution of either or both religions – Christianity and/or ATR. Even though criticism is given to those who regard themselves as Christians and African religionists, their stance is that they are also Christian, who are proud of their African religious heritage, and are not afraid to show that. This, for them, does not even begin to raise questions about the assumption of double or dual identities. Using pragmatism as a theoretical lens in exploring this realism, it becomes evident that the lived experienced of nominal Christians, as practitioners of African Christianity, are also valid and cannot be fully understood outside of their viewpoints as real-time experiencers. In line with this, pragmatism, as a theory of truth, rejects the separation of rational cognition and purpose. Thus, it posits that one cannot separate the people's systems of

belief and forms of knowing from their social context, which they must inherently live by and inform their actions. Thus, pragmatism seems validate the stance of nominal Christians and give voice to their lived experiences.

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