

A Comparative Study of the Resurrection of the Body in Christianity and African Tradition Religion

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Abstract

The doctrine of resurrection is the heart of Christianity. It is what makes Christianity different from other religions. In the days of Jesus, there was a difference of opinion among the Jews concerning resurrection. The doctrine of resurrection, thus, has been opposed in history. Some scholars are doubtful of the opinion that the very body which was deposited in the grave would be raised up. While some early Christian fathers stressed the identity of the present body and the resurrection body. The dispute concerning the concept of resurrection lies in African Traditional Religion. Most scholars are of the opinion that African Traditional Religion is silent on this. Through a comparative study, the paper examined the concept of resurrection in Christianity and African Traditional Religion. Oral interview is a tool employed in this study to ascertain the perception of adherents of African Traditional Religion on resurrection of the body. This paper discovered that the idea of bodily resurrection is not absent in both religions. In African Traditional Religion, resurrection is conceived in reincarnation and apparition. The concept of resurrection is widely accepted in Christianity but not explicitly stated in African Traditional Religion.

Introduction

Is there any hope for a resurrection of the body, scholars ask? Mankind has constantly been searching for a way to live forever. The heart of Christianity is the doctrine of the resurrection. It is

that which makes Christianity different from other religions. Man has hoped for and looked for the resurrection since the beginning of time.

The usual word for resurrection is “*anastasis*”, a raising or rising up. It is used of a resurrection from physical death some 40 times (Purkiser, 1977). In the days of Jesus, there was a difference of opinion among the Jews concerning the resurrection. While the Pharisees believed in it, the Sadducees did not, Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:7. Paul met with mockery when he spoke of it at Athens (Acts 17:32).

The doctrine of resurrection has been opposed in history. Berkhof (1958) reveals that Celsus, one of the earliest opponents of Christianity made this doctrine the butt of ridicule. The Gnostics who regarded matter as inherently evil rejected it. Origen defended the doctrine over against the Gnostics and Celsus, but yet did not believe that the very body which was deposited in the grave would be raised up. While some of the early Christian fathers shared his view, the majority of them stressed the identity of the present body and the body of resurrection. The church already in the apostolic confession expressed its belief in the resurrection of the flesh (Sarkos). According to Berkhof, more so, Augustine was at first inclined to agree with Origen, but later on adopted the prevalent view, though he did not deem it necessary to believe that the present differences of size and stature will continue in the life to come. Jerome insisted strongly on the identity of the present and future body. The East represented by such men as the two Gregories, Chrysostom and John of Damascus manifested a tendency to adopt a more spiritual view of the resurrection than the West.

In African Traditional Religion, the resurrection of the dead comes as a rebirth. In an oral interview, Agbroko, Raymond stated

that there is no such belief in African Traditional Religion that a day is set aside for resurrection of the dead. In Agbroko's view, resurrection is for the purpose of coming back to make up for the former life one lived. Resurrection, which he sees as rebirth, occurs when one has not accomplished his assignment on earth.

One can deduce from the propositions of different scholars above that the resurrection of the body has been a subject of an age-long debate. To give an objective view on this subject however, it is important to look at scriptural passages which throw light on it both in the Old and New Testaments and in African Traditional Religion

In The Old Testament

In the Old Testament times, the Jews had a very high respect for the human body (McCain, 1996). There was something special about it. McCain views it that people during this period did not know too much about life after death. Death was thought of as a dark uncomfortable place where all the ancestors were. Job, who probably lived during the patriarchal period, was the first person to get a little glimpse about the truth of the resurrection. He asks a rhetorical question, "If a man dies, will he live again?" (Job 14:14). McCain (1996) in view of Job's question unveils that "the conventional wisdom up to that time was either "no" or "we don't know" (p.191). However, Job later answered his own question; "I know my redeemer lives, and that in the end, he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes...I, and not another. How my heart yearns within". (Job 19:25-27). What Job was saying is that someday he would see the Lord even though it might be after he had died. This is a very clear reference to resurrection. Strauss (1947) sees it in the same light. He said "it is

evident that Job was firm in his belief in the resurrection of his body and a future life beyond the grave” (p. 25).

David was confident of a future life. He said, “my flesh also shall rest in hope” (Psalm 16:9), and “I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness” (Psalm 17:15). These words of the man of God refute the erroneous teaching that the resurrection refers to the spirit of man, and not to his body (Strauss, 1947). Neither the soul nor the spirit of man dies, but it is his body which dies and is buried. Therefore it must be the body that is raised from the dead, and not the soul or spirit.

According to Humbard (1963), Daniel 12:2 plainly teaches two resurrections. “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting contempt.” Humbard further says that this passage is translated by some of the most eminent Hebrew scholars as follows: “And (at that time) many (of thy people) shall awake (or be separated) out from among the sleepers in the earth- dust. Those (who awake) shall be unto life eternal, but those who (do not awake at that time) shall be unto contempt and shame everlasting.” Those who will be resurrected “out from among” the rest of the dead will be those who “shall be found written in the book” Daniel 12:1.

There is also a hint of resurrection in Isaiah 26:19 “The dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust awake and sing for Joy! For thy dew of light and on the land of the shades thou wilt let it fall” (cf. 25:8). God’s word to his people is “shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from death? O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction? Compassion is hid from my eyes” (Hosea 13:14). Purkiser (1977) opines that the Apostle Paul understood this suggestion of God’s power over death to be related to the resurrection (1 Cor. 15: 51- 57).

The resurrection in Ezekiel's "Valley of dry bones" (Ezek: 37:1-14) is admittedly a national and spiritual resurrection. But the passage would be meaningless if there were no concept at all of resurrection of the body. We can say on this note, that the concept was present in the Old Testament.

In The New Testament

Jesus, according to Paul, became the "first fruits of the resurrection" (1 Cor. 15-20). In other words, he became the first person to rise from the dead in the way that all believers will eventually rise. The question now is: "What kind of body did Jesus have? "First, it was somewhat like the original body though different. At times the disciples did not really know who Jesus was. And, at other times, they recognized Him immediately. McCain (1996) opines that, it may be that Jesus was able to conceal His identity at will. One thing that is apparent about Jesus' body is that it bore the marks of crucifixion even after the resurrection. The resurrection body has flesh and bone. In Luke's account of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in the closed room, we read these words:

And as they thus speak, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, peace be unto you. But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And he said unto them, why are ye troubled? And why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have (Luke 24:36-39).

Although the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost, it was not because the resurrection body of Jesus was transparent or

intangible. This was only because they could not believe He was actually raised from the dead. We can say that the body of Jesus seemed to have material substance at times, and at other times it did not. Thomas was able to see and feel the body of Jesus. Also, Jesus' body was such that could actually eat and assimilate food. In that same passage from Luke 24, the Lord then said to His disciples “have ye here any meat? And they gave him a piece of boiled fish, and of a honey comb. And he took it, and did eat before them” (vv.41-43). McCain (1996) notes that this suggests a body like the present body. On the other hand, the body was able to pass through closed doors and disappear at will. Nobody is able to do that with a material body

The resurrection body of Jesus Christ was able to operate in both the natural, physical realm and in the supernatural, spiritual realm. In John 20, Jesus appeared to his disciples in a locked room. Later on in that same chapter, we read about his second appearance to that group: “And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it unto my side: and be not faithless, but believing” (vv. 26-27). According to McCain (1996), another important thing to note is that apparently Jesus brought all his memories intact with Him into His glorified body. Even after the resurrection, Jesus continued to associate with all of the disciples. This suggests that the believer will be the same person after the resurrection, as before, only he will have a glorified spiritual body.

Virtually every sermon preached by the disciples in the New Testament revolved around the resurrection. It was the focal

point of the first sermon that Peter preached to the Jews on the day of Pentecost:

Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it (Acts 2:22-24).

Later in the third chapter of Acts, after healing the lame beggar at the entrance to the temple, Peter preached a second sermon to the Jewish crowd:

The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob the God of our fathers hath glorified his son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. But ye denied the Holy one and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; and killed the prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead: wherein we are witnesses (Acts 3: 13-15).

Wherever Peter went, he preached the resurrection of Christ. So did Paul. Every-time he related the story of his conversion, he emphasized that it was the Risen Jesus who appeared to him on the road to Damascus. In his letter to the Church in Corinth, Paul builds his case on this same critical issue -the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. His question to the Corinthians is this: "if Christ Himself was raised from the dead, as I and other eye witnesses have testified, how then can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead?" I Cor. 15:2. In describing the return of the Lord Jesus to earth at the end of the

age, Paul writes to the Thessalonians: *For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: And the dead in Christ shall rise first (I Thess. 4:16)*. How can we be sure that those of us who have died in Christ will rise first to meet the Lord in the air. We know this will happen because Christ himself has already risen from the grave to ascend into Heaven. His resurrection and ascension guarantees our resurrection. That is why the resurrection of Jesus is so important.

In Revelation 20:6, we read, “Blessed and holy is he who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priest of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with Him a thousand years.” This means that there will be two resurrections. The use of the word “first” simply implies that there is yet another resurrection—a second resurrection for the righteous, and here we see that there is a period of one thousand years between the two resurrections (Humbard, 1963). The scripture then clearly teaches us that there will be two distinct resurrections, one for the righteous and one for the wicked.

The concept of resurrection of the body is fully taught in the New Testament and particularly the epistles. Jesus talks a lot about His own resurrection and generally refers to the future resurrection of all men. However, Paul fully developed this concept. Paul had heard that, among other abuses and irregularities in the Corinthian church of his home, there had grown up a teaching to the effect that there is no general resurrection of the dead. Though resurrection is referred to many times in Paul's writings, his most complete reference to the doctrine of resurrection is in 1 Corinthians 15. The verse 22 in 1 Corinthians 15 is of great importance in the study of the resurrection of the body. “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be brought

to life”. Death entered the world through Adam; all men inherit death as their destiny. Barrett (1971) points out that that all who is in Christ shall be brought to life, which implies that the dead in Christ shall rise. After death, the body starts decaying. However, the resurrected body will not be susceptible. When Paul says that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”, he is referring to our flesh and blood as they are now: cursed and under sin. But the resurrected body shall be incorruptible (Alcorn, 1998). When Paul uses the term “Spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44), he is not talking about a body made of spirit, or an incorporeal body. It can be deduced from the above proposition that the phrase “a spiritual body” does not so much infer that the resurrection body will be a body without substance.

The reality of the resurrection is the central issue of the message of salvation, the foundation of our belief in Christ Jesus. Paul wants the Corinthians to realize that without that truth, the Gospel has no validity or purpose. Paul however asks, “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1Cor.15:12). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not just one of the tenets of the Christian faith; it is the primary and essential truth of the whole Gospel of salvation. The resurrection body of Jesus is a little picture of the future resurrected body of the Christian. It is the conviction and hope of all Christians that they will receive that glorified body on the resurrection day.

In African Traditional Religion

What occupy the minds of Africans concerning life after death in the realm of religion are his ancestors. The majority of spirits are thought by most people to be the spirits of the departed human

beings. More so, the dead in Africa are believed to come back to life and continue living through the process of reincarnation.

The concept of resurrection of the body will be looked at in the light of African Traditional Religion. According to Mbiti (1975), God gave the first man one or more of the three gifts of immortality, resurrection and the ability to become young again. But all these three were lost and death came into the world. From the few people I was able to interview who are adherents of African Traditional Religion, one will ascertain whether resurrection of the body is totally absent in African Traditional Religion or not.

In answer to a question on what African Traditional Religion believes on the resurrection of the dead, Agbroko, Raymond from Urhobo tribe in Delta State, Nigeria said “African Traditional religion is silent on resurrection of the dead. It could only be implied in reincarnation shown through names and divination.” He narrated his personal experience about his son before he was born. According to him, a diviner told him that the child his wife was pregnant of was going to be a male child and this was his great grandfather. He was told that the name of the child would be revealed to him in a dream. All these later came to pass. Agbroko reveals that in African Traditional Religion, there is no specific date when everybody will be brought back to life. Agbroko further says that “it is possible for one to die and come back to life but not after been buried.” There are a few cases of people who died and came back to life narrating their Judgment ordeals in the world beyond.

The resurrection of the dead comes as a rebirth. Chukwuedo (2015) gave a detailed report of an oral interview carried out to find the views of adherents of African Traditional Religion. She discovers that there is no such belief in African

Traditional Religion that a day is set aside for resurrection of the dead. In Agbroko's view, resurrection is for the purpose of coming back to make up for the former life one lived. Resurrection, which he sees as rebirth, occurs when one has not accomplished his assignment on earth. The spirits of the dead have contact with the living and can be consulted. In the case of rebirth, a female dies and comes back as a female, and a male comes back as a male respectively. One who died through accident can come back with scars indicating the area affected by the accident in the former life.

In response to the question asked on the views of African Traditional Religion on the resurrection of the dead, Nwogwo Chukwuma of Aba-Ngwa in Abia, Nigeria states that Ibos view resurrection as reincarnation and apparition. Some people with marks on certain areas of their body who died had come back to life through reincarnation and still having those marks. Nwogwo disclosed that the dead resurrect after three days of death. This happens in a form of apparition. The dead appear as ghosts. This means that they can never be touched but those whom the dead want to reveal himself to, can see him. In African land, according to Nwogwo, certain objects like cutlass and axe can be buried with one who was murdered so he could fight the person who killed him. This is embedded in the belief that the dead are not dead.

In the course of an oral interview with Mr. Peter Etoh on this subject of the resurrection of the dead in African Traditional Religion, he revealed that the dead could resurrect and go to a place where people do not know them and continue to live. This happens in the case of one who died untimely and such people can disappear when they see one who knows they are dead. Mr. Etoh told a story of a man who died on his way to a friend's house through accident. Though he was dead, he still went to the friend

that was unaware of his death. The friend later came to discover that he was dead after he had left his house.

A priestess (name withheld) who hails from Delta State in an oral interview said that it is only the spirit that we know that can resurrect. Resurrection, according to her, is “the departure of the soul or spirit from the body at death. This is to say that the spirit is not buried alongside the body. When she was asked whether she has seen one who died and resurrected, she responded, “I have not in my lifetime seen people who died and came back to earth. The people I make mention of were dead but before preparations were completed for their burial, rose up. They were not actually buried”. People who die and wake up before burial are considered to be people who died before their appointed time and during their judgment were considered not guilty of death.

A Comparative Analysis and Conclusion

The concept of the resurrection of the body is widely accepted by Christians. However, African Traditional Religion does not have much to say on this. Resurrection of the dead is the foundation of Christianity. The resurrection of Christ gives hope for the resurrection of the dead and points to the fact that those who believe in him will resurrect at the last day.

The responses gotten from African Traditional Religious believers in the course of this study, show that the resurrection of the body is not explicitly stated in the African Traditional Religion as it is in Christianity. One of the respondents in an oral interview says that in the Ibos' mind, resurrection is viewed as reincarnation and apparition.

Though the concept of resurrection is not clearly stated in African Traditional Religion, it does not negate the fact that there is hope for the dead to come back to life. The belief in

reincarnation helps us to grieve less over our dead loved ones. As Paul in 1Thessalonians 4:13 enjoins believers in Christ not to sorrow even as others which have no hope. We conclude on this note that Christianity and African Traditional Religion are analogous on the immortality of the soul but disagree on the resurrection of the body.

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