

The Arrogance of Faith and Religious Imperialism: Soyinka’s Radical Theistic Humanism and Generous Tolerance

by

Celucien L. Joseph, Ph.D.

celucien_joseph@yahoo.com

Assistant Professor of English, Indian River State College

Abstract

The Nigerian playwright, public intellectual, and humanist Wole Soyinka once announced, “Violence appears to be the one constant in the histories of all the major religions of the world—a primitive aggressiveness, violence.” The objective of this essay is to study Soyinka’s response to violence and terror fueled by religious imperialism, fanaticism, and religious conviction. While religion in general plays a central role in Soyinka’s creative writings, scholars have given limited attention to his engagement with faith in his non-fiction productions. Consequently, there exists both an intellectual and literary gap to bridge Soyinka’s religious ideas expressed in his fictions and those he enunciated in his other writing. This essay is an attempt to fill the intellectual void.

In response to religious imperialism and absolutism, the essay argues that Soyinka relies heavily on the wisdom and principles of two worldviews and ideologies: African indigenous humanism and African traditional religion and spirituality. It also suggests that the theoretical notions of radical theistic humanism and generous tolerance best summarize Soyinka’s ideals and systems of thought on this matter. Unlike Western humanism that is antisupernaturalistic, African humanism is informed by religious metaphysics—the religious value and life of the African people. Soyinka’s humanism is trapped within the religious ethos and sensibility and moral vision of the Yoruba people.

The article also contends that Soyinka presents African indigenous spirituality as a humanism for the twenty-first century, in the same manner Leopold Senghor projected Negritude, which he defined as “the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African World,” as a humanism of the twentieth century. Finally, the essay presents Wole Soyinka as a religious critic and radical theistic humanist who affirms the contributions of African religions in the project of human solidarity, open-mindedness, peace, and collaboration.

The Problem of Religion: Violence and Fear

Like the human will, religion is an imaginative human enterprise that animates good and/or bad choices, generates constructive and/or destructive ideas or concepts that shape the human experience in this world. “Religion, however it is defined, involves a certain kind of attitude.”¹ Immanuel Kant in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* associates the freedom of choice to the disposition (*Gesinnung*) of the will (*Willkür*). The paragraph below briefly references this vital aspect of Kant’s moral philosophy:

The freedom for the will [*Willkür*] is a wholly unique nature in that an incentive can determine the will to an action *only so far as the individual has incorporated it into his maxim* (has made it the general rule in accordance with which he will conduct himself); only thus can an incentive, whatever it may be, coexist with the absolute spontaneity of the will [*Willkür*] (i.e. freedom).²

Like religion, the human will “is neither *intrinsically good* nor *intrinsically evil*; rather, it is the capacity by which we freely choose good or evil maxims.”³ Nonetheless, we should not equate religion with the “faculty of free spontaneous choice” (*Willkür*); religious choices, beliefs, or convictions are the outright expressions of the disposition of the will. Silber establishes an important connection between the will and disposition:

The development of the [concept of *Gesinnung*] is, perhaps, the most important single contribution of the Religion to Kant’s ethical theory, for by means of it he accounts for the continuity and responsibility in the free exercise of *Willkür* and for the possibility of ambivalent volition, as well as the basis for its complex assessment... The disposition [*Gesinnung*] is thus the enduring aspect of *Willkür*, it is *Willkür* considered in terms of the continuity and fullness of its free expression. It is the enduring pattern of intention that can be inferred from the many discrete acts of *Willkür* and reveals their ultimate motive.⁴

Another important feature in Kant’s moral philosophy that could enlighten our conversation on the workings of religion is his understanding and theory of human nature. First of all, Kant categorically rejects Rousseau’s theory that human beings are born morally good and become corrupted as they mutually influence or interact with each other in the social sphere. Second, he discards the Calvinist theology of original sin that human beings are intrinsically evil because they are born with a corrupted nature. The nature of religion is akin to the human nature.

His understanding of human nature as intrinsically neither morally good nor morally evil also has significant consequences for his understanding of human history and progress. Kant seeks to walk a fine line. On the one hand, he is skeptical of the idea of moral progress whereby human beings can (and will) achieve human perfection. On the other hand, although human beings can never escape from the propensity to evil—a propensity—a propensity constitute of their species nature—there can be moral progress in history insofar as human beings can become actually good by virtue of their freedom. Kant’s faith in (limited) moral and political progress is played out against a dark background, a realistic appraisal of “crooked humanity.”⁵

Soyinka’s critique of religious violence and terror orchestrated by religious fanatics and zealots is concomitant to his understanding of the human nature and the disposition of the will to make free spontaneous choices that could either ameliorate the human condition or exacerbate human life. In 1991, Wole Soyinka delivered the inaugural lecture in the Archbishop Olufosoye Lecture Series at the University of Ibadan entitled “The Credo of Being and Nothingness.” In this seminal public address, Soyinka reflects theoretically and philosophically on the question of religion in both private and public sphere. He also discusses his personal attitude toward various religious worldviews and traditions. In the lecture, Soyinka informs his Nigerian audience that “the sphere of religion constitutes the ultimate challenge of the twenty-first century.”⁶ Commenting on the terrifying method religious imperialists and fanatics have used to transmit their faith, he announces that “It is not a new project; it dates back to the beginnings of man and has probably claimed more martyrs than most causes of human liberation. The dismal records of the Roman Catholic Inquisition are available to us, so is the iconoclasm of Protestant missionaries on African soil.”⁷

For Soyinka, the sphere of religion is the sphere of violence. Violence is the underlying concept he employs to describe all religious activities and transactions in the modern world. He goes on to remark that “Violence appears to be the one constant in the histories of all the major religions of the world—a primitive aggressiveness, violence.” The alternative to religious violence is radical humanism which promotes tolerance, peace, comradery, understanding, and ecumenical dialogue. While Soyinka stresses the practice and manifested presence of violence in the Abrahamic religions, their sacred texts often condemn and extol “holy hostility towards non-believers.” Second to violence is the notion of intolerance and fear, which are produced deliberately by all religious fanatics, zealots, or extremists. As to the process of proselytization, Soyinka observes that religious zealots and radicals use the method of religious imperialism to win converts to their faith. These elements constitute the negative effects of religion in both political realm and civil society.

Most scholars and specialists of religion come to a similar conclusion that the history of religion and exchanges between various religious expressions in the modern world has been marked by enduring violence, reciprocal antagonism, and the extreme suffering of innocents. Critics of religion have also linked violence to power, greed, and the desire to dominate. For example, consider the following provocative titles highlighting the centrality of violence in religion: Karen Armstrong's *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (2014), and *The Battle for God* (2001), Russell Jacoby's *Bloodlust: On the Roots of Violence from Cain and Abel to the Present* (2014), Paul Copan's *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (2011), Mark Juergensmeyer's *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (2003), and Hent de Vries's *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (2001). Among the represented authors include a religious scholar, historian, philosopher, public intellectual, theologian, and a political scientist; the shared intellectual interest among these thinkers is "the problem of how to reconcile evil with religious beliefs and convictions."⁸ They're also apprehensive about the future of religion in the public life and oblige to reconsider the intricate relationship between religion and human responsibility in the modern world.

Most thinkers and experts on religion would agree that no existing religion promotes violence per se, but religious fundamentalists and imperialists use the instrumentalization of religion to enslave and colonize people and nations, inflict pain upon individuals, and disrupt the social order. Other critics have interpreted religion as a cultural production which highlights the systematic construction of truncated narratives designed to support avatars of religion and perpetuate structural inequities, structures of domination and subordination, forms of social oppression, and hegemonic transcendence.⁹ Still for other thinkers, religions have fostered a narrative of injurious violence along with other bellicose and terrorist acts toward individuals throughout human existence. Mark Juergensmeyer, who has argued that religion is violent by nature, has written cogently about the obstinate and paradoxical nature of religion in human interactions:

Within the histories of religious traditions—from biblical wars to crusading ventures and great acts of martyrdom—violence has lurked as a shadowy presence. It has colored religion's darker, more mysterious symbols. Images of death have never been far from the heart of religion's power to stir the imagination... Why does religion seem to need violence, and violence religion, and why is a divine mandate for destruction accepted with such certainty by some believers? Yet the forces that combine to produce religious violence are particular to each moment of history¹⁰

Radical atheist Christopher Hitchens once declared, “Religion had poisoned everything.”¹¹ Interestingly, elsewhere, Hitchens retracts the statement that religion is not the most serious problem in the modern world but “Secular totalitarianism has actually provided us with the *summa* of human evil.”¹² Yet, he qualifies his position by averring that:

For most of human history, the idea of the total or absolute state was intimately bound up with religion. A baron or king might compel you to pay taxes or serve in his army, and he would usually arrange to have priests on hand to remind you that this was your duty, but the truly frightening despotisms were those which also wanted the contents of your heart and your head... More than mere obedience was owed them: any criticism of them was profane by definition, and millions of people lived and died in pure fear of a ruler who could select you for a sacrifice, or condemn you to eternal punishment, on a whim.¹³

The *summa* of human evil should not be confined strictly to the realm of religion. As Bernstein has brilliantly argued:

There certainly has been a loss of the grip of traditional religious and theological discourse on people’s every day lives. Traditionally, evil has been closely associated with religious, especially Christian, concerns. But today, there is a prevailing sense of the irrelevance of theodicy. If we think of theodicy in a broad sense as the attempt to find “justification” for the evil and useless suffering that we encounter, we might say, with Emmanuel Levinas, that we are now living in a time after “the end of theodicy.” The philosophical problem...which is posed by the useless pain [mal] which appears in its fundamental malignancy across the events of the twentieth century concerns the meaning that religiosity and human morality of goodness can still retain after the end of theodicy.¹⁴

Richard Dawkins, in his influential and controversial text *The God Delusion*, seems to harmonize both Soyinka and Hitchens’s dictum that religion is the source of evil in human history. He grounds the tragedy of the human condition and collective suffering in the world in the dark side of (religious claim of) absolutism. Consider his observation as expressed in this paragraph:

It has to be admitted that absolutism is far from dead. Indeed, it rules the minds of a great number of people in the world today, most dangerously so in the Muslim world and in the incipient American theocracy. Such absolutism nearly always results from strong religious faith, and it constitutes a major reason for suggesting that religion can be a force for evil in the world.¹⁵

Soyinka associates religious violence with religious absolutism and dogmatism. Like many other humanists and critics of religion, he rightly understands religious absolutism and intolerance as a threat to cultural advancement, democratic peace, and human freedom and flourishing. He discerns that religious fanaticism in general presents a challenge to the security of human society and indeed its survival, and in the case of radical Islam in particular, it stirs global fear and extreme reactions cross-culturally.¹⁶ In his impassionate book, *Climate of Fear*, presented first as a series of lectures for the prestigious Reith Lectures at Oxford University, Soyinka alarms his English audience that “We have to speak to religion!”¹⁷ We ought to address the issue of religious indoctrination and the peril of religious radicalism and fanaticism. He continues, “We are obliged to recognize, indeed, to emphasize, the place of injustice, localized or global, as ready manure for the deadly shoots of fanaticism. However, the engines of global violence today are oiled from the deep wells of fanaticism, even though they may be cranked by the calculating hands of politicians or the power-hungry.”¹⁸

Soyinka deploys the subject pronoun “we” to designate collective responsibility and mutual accountability in matters of religious peace and interfaith dialogue. Every member of society is somewhat liable to contribute to a non-threatening social order and an environment suitable to the absence of religious terror and violence. Without the collaborative effort of every individual, unrestrained religious expressions and precarious religious dogmas will continue to be a global crisis that haunts us. In other words, religion is something that needs to be controlled, and human evil premised on one’s religious feeling and conviction heightens the human condition.

Religion as a Global Predicament

Soyinka always links religious extremism with the pursuit of power and domination. Sam Harris observes that religious extremists “see political and military action to be intrinsic to the practice of their faith.”¹⁹ Religious fanatics and power-hunger politicians enjoy an inseparable alliance; more recently, “the poised blade of fanaticism has become more proficient and inventive over its agency of execution.”²⁰ Lamentably, Soyinka declares, “the space of [religious] fanaticism aggressively expands into other nations of traditional tolerance and balance...The monologue, alas, continues to dominate the murderous swath blazed by succeeding religions—Christianity and Islam most notoriously. Deviationism—or heresy—is one shortcut to death.”²¹

Furthermore, Soyinka resituates the ambivalent discourse of race to the zone of religion as the conundrum of the twenty-first century culture. Religion is now perceived as a global phenomenon of shock and human calamity. With dazzling rhetoric and linguistic force, he declares:

The nineteenth-century black American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois once declared that the issue of the twentieth century would be that of race. It is becoming clear that while the century, the last, did indeed inherit—and still remains plagued almost continuously by—that social issue, race was replaced toward the end by religion, and it is something that has yet to be addressed with the same global concern as race once was. The issue of the twenty-first century is clearly that of religion, whose cynical manipulations contribute in no small measure to our current of fear.²²

Soyinka goes on to clarify his thesis that religion not race is the predicament of the twenty-first century. He does that by first defining the integral components of religion and then by explaining the threatening implications of the program of religious fanaticism to cultures, peoples, and civilizations. What's at stake here is the dreadful and singular claim of religion: the call to absolute submission.

Today, the main source of the fanatic mind is religion, and its temper—one that, ironically, is grounded in the doctrine of submission—has grown increasingly contemptuous of humanity, being characterized by arrogance, intolerance, and violence, almost as an unconscious vengeful recompense for its apprenticeship within the spiritual principle of submission.²³

Religion, when it is imported by coercion or transmitted involuntarily, sustains “terror against terror, and the submission of the world to a regimen of fear.”²⁴ To defend this thesis, Soyinka establishes the ambiguous rapport between religion, politics, and power: “To apprehend fully the neutrality of the power of fear in recent times, indifferent to either religious or ideological base, one need only compare the testimonies of Ethiopian victims under the atheistic order of Mengistu Mariam with those that emerged from the theocratic bastion of Iran under the purification orgy of her religious leaders. The Taliban remains a lacerating memory of antihumanism, as does the Stalinist terror in the former of Soviet Union.”²⁵ Afterwards, he launches a warning:

The axis of tension between power and freedom continues to propel the very motions of personality development, social upheaval, and nation conflicts. We must stress yet again that the urge to dominate may be the product of existing realities. Where such realities are not addressed, the political space is left fallow, enabling the calculating hand to fan the winds of fear... Power is self-sufficient, a replete possession, and must be maintained by whatever agency is required.²⁶

In addition, he accentuates the intersection of faith, power, fear, and death:

Power is, paradoxically, the primordial marshland of fear, from which emerges the precipitate of man's neurotic response to mortality. Therein he proceeds to attempt to match himself with the force of Nature, that agency through which the various apprehensions of God, Super Being, or whatever name—including Death—are filtered.²⁷

The greatest threat to human freedom, peace, and harmony in the world is the scheme and politics of religious zealotry. Soyinka argues that religious extremism “menaces the peace of the world will make the uncomfortable discovery that this phenomenon is so much about religion, faith, or piety, but about power, domination, and its complementary idolization project unleashed on the rest of thinking humanity.”²⁸ Religious zealots not only provoke horror but nurture an environment conducive to terror; as Soyinka maintains, “the assault on human dignity is one of the primary goals of fear, a prelude to the domination of the mind and triumph of power.”²⁹ To put it another way, “the global climate of fear owes much to the devaluation or denial of dignity in the intersections of Communities, most notably between the stronger and weaker ones, an avoidance of the recognition of this very entitlement.”³⁰

Soyinka contemplates further on how Western religious imperialism and cultural imperialism had created violent societies and communities in Africa, as well led to social rift and disharmony among the African people. He sees both Christianity and Islam as agents of colonial conquest and violence in the Continent:

Cultural and spiritual violation has left indelible imprints on the collective psyche and sense of identity of the peoples, a process that was ensured through savage repressions of cohering traditions by successive waves of colonizing hordes. Their presence was both physical and abstract. Their mission was not merely to implant their own peoples on any lands whose climates were congenial—East and Southern Africa—but to establish outposts for surrogate controls where the environment proved physically inclement...The cultural and spiritual savaging of the continent, let us hasten to insist, was not by the Christian-European axis alone. The Arab-Islamic dimension preceded it, and was every bit as devastating, a fact that a rather distorted sense of continental solidarity leads some scholars to edit, at the expense of Truth and reality.³¹

Both Christianity and Islam produced networks of power relations, hegemonic processes of dominance and oppression, and engineered the framework for cultural production of evil and religious resentment among the African people. The religious hegemony allowed both religious traditions “to secure the consent of subordinates to abide by their rule. The notion of consent is key, because hegemony is created through coercion that is gained by using the church, family, media, political parties, schools, unions, and other voluntary associations—the civil society and all its organizations.”³² In a complementary statement, Soyinka intensifies his thesis that “A new inhuman act, some new destructive conflict is certain to have surface somewhere, one that is traceable to one or other of the so-called major religions.”³³

On the other hand, Philosopher of religion Paul Copan has suggested we should think about other possibilities, and that religion has not poisoned everything. Let us attempt to find meaning in his provocative thought on the subject matter:

Beyond this, history is littered with not-necessarily monotheistic tribes warring against each other or this communist government attacking that religious group. And why the focus on religion per se? Why not attack politics and political abuses of religion? What about ethnic tribalism that gives rise to hostility and violence, as in the former Yugoslavia? Why not consider complex sociological and historical factors that contribute to conflict? Alienation, poverty, disempowerment, racism/tribalism, power structures, historical feuding, and animosity may rise to anger and then to violence. Religion often turns out to be the label used to justify violence between warring parties.

So why think that religion is the sole factor, the entire cause of blame? Rather than dragging God into the situation to cover over the root problem (s), we should resist the manipulation of God for our purposes. And what about the positive effects of a religion? What if more benefit than harm comes from a particular religion? The notion that religion *causes* violence or harm typically obscures a complexity of factors involved.³⁴

The Challenge of Religious Intolerance and Exclusivism

Given the rampant spread of human violence and terror through the instrumentalization of dangerous religious convictions and daring ideologies, Soyinka calls for the obliteration of all religions in society. In an in an interview in 2002 with the South African journalist Peter Godwin, he declares unapologetically, “If religion was to be taken away from the world completely, including the one I grew up with, I’d be one of the happiest people in the world. My only fear is that maybe something more terrible would be invented to replace it, so we’d better just get along with what there is right now and keep it under control.”

Soyinka's call to "end" all public expressions deemed religious should be studied in its context and the history of religious violence in his own native land and in the modern world. Soyinka is not an anti-religion critic, but a fervent critic of religious terrorism and fanaticism.

In the same interview, he informs Godwin, "I cannot imagine the religion I was brought up in having such complete contempt for human lives. And yet these are supposed to be the world religions. So that's why I consider myself rather fortunate that I've been able to see what other religions had to offer." Here, Soyinka is referring to a recent massacre in Federal Polytechnic College in the city of Mubi in northeastern Nigeria, in which 50 Nigerian students became victims of religious fundamentalists. The Islamic religious militant group, known as Boko Haram, located in Northern Nigeria, orchestrated the crime in the first week of October in 2012. Initially, Boko Haram was linked with the al-Qaeda, and they collaboratively carried out a similar mission: the spreading of the Gospel of Islamic Jihadism, and devotion to Islam and the will of Allah.

Soyinka, having denounced the murderous orgy, argues that it is actually "the psychopaths of faith" who are guilty of bringing disrepute to the religion of Islam, whose mission, in the name of their prophet, constitutes the "commission of crimes that revolt our very humanity."³⁵ He deprecates his own country Nigeria for contributing to "international terrorism of the religious brand."³⁶ While he is unquestionably an enthusiast Nigerian Patriot, he is not a passive public intellectual and social critic.

Moreover, in an important statement, Soyinka exposes this baffling character of religious extremism: "Each major religion and even sect within the same religion appears periodically incapable of finding its own centre except by the act of reducing the other in some form or the other to nothing."³⁷ Although his target audience was Nigerian religious zealots, the moral of his provocation might be applicable cross-culturally and transnationally. Unquestionably, the human plague we call religious fanaticism has no boundary.

Religious intolerance has for its antecedence religious exclusivism, and is linked categorically to religious imperialism, which Soyinka construes as a menace to cultural relativism, democratic freedom, human rights, and religious diversity in the world. Soyinka coined the phrase "rhetorical hysteria" to theorize the perilous consequences of religion and to explain how religious exclusivists, extremists, and jihadists operate in the world. Let us provide a detailed description of the concept in order to establish rapport within the sphere of religion.

Hysteria is not always an outwardly expressed abnormality, usually loud and violent. In fact, there is the quiet form of hysteria. Hysteria can also manifest itself as a collective and infectious outbreak, one that cannot always be accurately traced to a logical causative event. At its most affective, it emerges as the product of a one-way communication that succeeds in blinding its followers to the very realities that surround them while sealing them in a community of conviction, even of the unresolved kind.³⁸

Rhetorical hysteria from a religious framework may be destructive, apocalyptic, disruptive, and contradictory “since it lays claim to rational processes yet acts with the dogmatism of pure revelation.”³⁹ Soyinka contends that “Sadly, it is within the religious domain that the phenomenon of rhetorical hysteria takes its most devastating form.”⁴⁰ What is susceptible about religious hysteria is that the thrust of its message is “embedded in an emotive fervent that may linger on, resulting in individual recalls, at various levels of consciousness, of the basic tenor of the collective experience, urging on the execution of its embedded message.”⁴¹ Agents of religious rhetorical hysteria promote a climate of mental fear in society. For example, Soyinka reiterates that radical Muslims or Islam extremism as practiced in Iran “has contributed, to a large extent, to the very condition of global intolerance, bigotry, and sectarian violence.”⁴² Comparatively, he exposes the same religious crisis in his own country, Nigeria:

has suffered, in the intervening period, a spate of religion-motivated violence on an unprecedented scale, and is fast becoming only another volatile zone of distrust, unease, and tension...Our experiences in Nigeria—shared by numerous others—testify to the frequency of the lamentable conversion of the mantra of piety to the promotion of the most hideous form of impiety, which, in my catechism, translates as the slaughter of other human beings in the cause of religious or any other conviction...It is an agonizing reversal to watch the faces of fanatics slaving after blood under the mandates of those same incantations.”⁴³

Consequently, Soyinka calls us to reason with him:

We have a duty to challenge a general reluctance to inquire why the adherents of some religions more than others turn the pages of their scriptures into a divine breath that fans the random homicidal spore to all corners of the world. Political correctness, itself an immobilizing form of hysteria, forbids the question, but, for those of us who prefer politically incorrect discourse to politically correct incineration or other forms of complicity in our premature demise, this question must be given voice.⁴⁴

Atheist Humanist philosopher Daniel Dennett provides a profound thought on the bewildering message of religion to effectuate peace, tolerance, human dignity and solidarity in the world:

Indeed, many people think that the best hope for humankind is that they can bring together of the religions of the world in a mutually respectful conversation and ultimate agreement on how to treat one another. They may be right, but they don't know. The fervor of their belief is no substitute for good hard evidence, and the evidence in favor of this beautiful hope is hardly overwhelming. In fact, it is not persuasive at all, since just as many people, apparently, sincerely believe that world peace is less important, in both the short run and the long, than the global triumph of their particular religion over its competition. Some see religion as the best hope for peace, a lifeboat we dare not rock lest we overturn it and all of us perish, and others see religious self-identification as the main source of conflict and violence in the world, and believe just as fervently that religious conviction is a terrible substitute for calm, informed reasoning. Good intentions pave both roads.⁴⁵

Nonetheless, the following questions that remain unanswered beg for further investigation:

Can religion peacefully cohabit with humanism in the twenty-first? In certain parts of the world the question indeed appears to be: Can religion cohabit with humanity itself? Such is the degree to which religion has either been central to, or has facilitated, the deadlines of conflicts, prodigally sacrificing humanity on alters erected even to mere differences in doctrinal niceties or historical interpretations, and most lethally when this occurs within the same faith.⁴⁶

Despite the rhetorical tension in his language, and the shortcomings of his intellectual reasoning about religion, Soyinka is among the few theistic humanists who still maintain that the moral principles and religious values of the Yoruba religious cosmology may provide the best possible hope for humankind to deal with the problem of religious evil in the world, and to cultivate an ethic of tolerance, reciprocity, and a philosophy of relationality and human understanding. On the other hand, Bernstein has written perceptibly about the disposition of the will in regard to the freedom of choice:

Ultimately, we cannot know why one person chooses to follow the moral law and another person does not. Nevertheless, from a practical point of view, we can (and must) postulate freely good or evil maxims. We are responsible for our individual choices and for overall moral character. Furthermore, this disposition is not something fixed and unchangeable a good person can become evil, and evil person can become good.⁴⁷

Soyinka's Interpretation of Ancestral Faith

It is a common ideology that religion saturates every aspect of the African life. Generally, religious scholars have observed that the African people are very religious and spiritual. John Mbiti, an African religious scholar, has stated that "Africans are notoriously religious, and each people have its own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it."⁴⁸ E. Bolaji Idowu, writing about the religious world of the Yoruba (Soyinka's) people, has noted that "The real keynote of the life of the Yoruba is neither their noble ancestry nor in the past deeds of their heroes. The keynote of their life is their religion. In all things, they are religious. Religion forms the foundation and the all-governing principle of life for them...The religion of the Yoruba permeates their lives so much that it expresses itself in multifarious ways."⁴⁹ Consequently, it is possible to infer that religion serves as the social and humanistic source for the African moral vision and worldview, and the African humanistic values.

In his interpretation of African traditional religions—including the nature and attributes of African deities and the complexity of the Ifa in determining the divine will—Wole Soyinka presents African spirituality as a humanism in the same line of thought like Leopold Sedar Senghor, who, in his theorization of Negritude as "the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African World" (or "the sum of the cultural values of the black world"⁵⁰) construes Negritude as a humanism of the twentieth century. What does Senghor mean by this concept? While Soyinka explains the concept through African spirituality and the concept of God in African religions, Senghor focuses on African concept of ontology and reality. Hence, we now turn to his thought on the subject matter:

The paradox is only apparent when I say that negritude, by its ontology (that is, its philosophy of being), its moral law and its aesthetic, is a response to the modern humanism that European philosophers and scientists have been preparing since the end of the nineteenth century, and as Teilhard de Chardin and the writers and artists of the mid-twentieth century present it.

Firstly, African ontology. Far back as one may go into his past, from the northern Sudanese to the southern Bantu, the African has always and everywhere presented a concept of the world which is diametrically opposed to the traditional philosophy of Europe. The latter is essentially *static, objective, dichotomic*; it is, in fact, dualistic, in that it makes an absolute distinction between body and soul, matter and spirit. It is founded on separation and opposition: on analysis and conflict. The African, on the other hand, conceives the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique, reality that seeks synthesis...

The African is, of course, sensitive to the external world, to the material aspect of beings and things. It is precisely because he is more so than the white European, because he is sensitive to the tangible qualities of things—shape, color, smell, weight, etc.—that the African considers these things merely as signs that have to be interpreted and transcended in order to reach the reality of human beings. Like others, more than others, he distinguishes the pebble from the plant, the plant from the animal, the animal from Man; but, once again, the accidents and appearances that differentiate these kingdoms only illustrate different aspects of the same reality. This reality is *being* in the ontological sense of the word, and it is life force. For the African, matter in the sense the Europeans understand it, is only a system of signs which translates the single reality of the universe: being, which is spirit, which is life force.⁵¹

We shall now proceed with Soyinka's thought on the contribution of African religions in the discourse of world religions and the project of human solidarity and tolerance. We begin by highlighting Soyinka's interpretation of God in African indigenous religions. In the process of our analysis, the connection with Senghor will become evident.

God in African Religion

According to Soyinka, in African religions, "The real cohesive factor of religion is the living God and that without this one factor, all things would fall to pieces. Life belongs to God. It is he who summons it into being, strengthens and preserves it."⁵² In African religions, God is the Sovereign Lord who gives and sustains all life. Yet, because of his comprehensive otherness, he has freely chosen to manifest himself and reveal his will directly through the Orisa, who function as facilitators or mediators between God and humanity. With further clarity and precision, Soyinka explains the ontological transcendence and relational immanence of the African deities:

In the process of their visitation, the gods assume form, shape, and character—and responsibilities. They acquire supervisory roles over phenomena, in some cases becoming thoroughly identified with them...the deities themselves appear to experience a need, periodically at least, to be united with the mortal essence, no matter the excuse—altruistic, self-sacrificial, in pursuit of moral redemption, or simply as an adventure in divine tourism...The gods are products of a primordial unity, as narrated in the myth of Atunda—literally rendered as "the one who recreates."⁵³

All gods, the Yoruba understand, are manifestations of universal phenomena of which humanity is also a part. Ife is replete with *odu*—those verses that form a compendium of morality tales, historic vignettes, and curative prescriptions—verses that narrate at the same time the experiences of both mortals and immortals for whom Ifa divined, counseled, and who either chose to obey or ignore Ifa. The skeptics are neither personalized nor hounded by any supernatural forces. The narratives indicative that they simply go their way... The gods remain totally indifferent toward who does or does not follow them or acknowledge their place in mortal decisions. The priest of Ifa never presumes to take up cudgels on behalf of the slighted deity. No excommunication is pronounced, a killing fatwa is unheard of. The language of apostasy is anathema in the land of the Orisa. There is neither paradise nor hell. There is no purgatory. You can neither seduce nor intimidate a true Orisa faithful with projections of a punitive or rewarding afterlife...⁵⁴

It seems to us the “secular African deities” affirm various religious systems and traditions and consider them “as equally legitimate religious alternatives, with preferences among them largely being functions of individual characteristics and social and cultural factors.”⁵⁵ Next, Soyinka establishes the Orisa within their rightful place: the monotheistic religious tradition. He counters Hegel’s famous claim that monotheism “represents the pinnacle of religious consciousness of which man is capable... [and that] a major deficit in the African’s intelligence is his incapacity to conceive of a unified godhead.”⁵⁶ Soyinka interprets Hegel’s reasoning regarding African religions and African intellectual faculty as a “baseless notion” and “sheer falsities” since religions such as the Orisa actually acknowledge the existence of a supreme deity... There is absolutely no foundation in reason or logic that the ascending order of godhead in monotheistic form represents a higher development in man’s conceptual capacities than the obverse. It is no more valid than an opinion that favors despotism above democracy.”⁵⁷

Accordingly, African spirituality belongs to the world of monotheism, and Africans are not polytheists. Unlike, Regina Schwartz in *The Curse of Cain*, Soyinka does not subscribe to the thesis that the legacy of religious monotheism is violence, and that the belief in the unity of God allegedly leads to problems for everybody else.”⁵⁸ As we will see in subsequent paragraphs, Soyinka accepts the maxim that “exclusive truth claims create an *us-them* mentality: to preserve *our* identity and religious purity, *they* must be removed.”⁵⁹ He questions religious terrorism and imperialism as adequate method to force people to clinch to the “one true God.” Let us reason about a possible inference: if “the absolutism of religion has been revealed especially in the notion of cosmic war,”⁶⁰ is it conceivable to prevent religious warfare in this age of religious violence and terrorism? Soyinka finds great promises in the tolerant and adaptive nature of African religions and the “secular gods” of the Yoruba people, which he proposes could potentially contribute to human peace and cooperation.

What we must pursue, therefore, is not a competitive, bruising arena for the claims of ideology or religion but an open marketplace of both ideas and faiths. It is within this context, without any ambiguity, that the Orisa and their body of divine precepts, Ifa, prove of great humanistic value in the realm of religion. As quest, as the principle of spiritual enquiry, Ifa exemplifies this field of accommodation for all seekers, under no matter what structure of belief. This ancient religion that we have co-opted as a guide into our exploration of a noninterfering order of faith and spirituality proposes that “warfare between religions need not be. Its very nature protects it from the bellicose instinct that leads followers of other beliefs to defend even the most trivial annotation of their doctrinal text with their lives or, more accurately, with the lives of others, conveniently designated infidels, unbelievers, apostates, enemies of God, and other charitable epithets... Humanity is better served by the adoption of secularized deities than by those other gods of undoubtedly entrancing liturgies that evoked as control zones on humanity, tyrannized over by morals, no different from ourselves.”⁶¹

On one hand, Soyinka would have us to believe that religion in general is the source of human suffering and violence in human history. On the other hand, he presents the Yoruba religious tradition as a possible solution to the human predicament and the problem of religious tolerance in the modern world. Consider this important paragraph that reveals the democratic and tolerant nature of the Orisa:

Religion, or profession of faith, cannot serve as the common ground for human coexistence except of course by the adoption of coercion as a principle and, thus, the manifestation of its corollary—hypocrisy—an outward conformism that is dictated by fear, by a desire for preferment, or indeed, the need for physical survival. In the end, the product is conflict, and the destruction of cultures. Let this be understood by the champions of theocracies where religion and ideology meet and embrace. Orisa admonishes them: you will not bring the world even close to the edge of combustion. The essence of Orisa is the antithesis of tyranny, bigotry, and dictatorship—what greater gift than this respect, this spirit of accommodation, can humanity demand from the world of the spirit?

Thus, for all seekers after the peace and security of true community, and the space of serenity that enables the quest after truth, pleading for understanding from the Orisa for this transgression of their timeless scorn of proselytizing, we urge yet again the simple path that travelled from the soil of the Yoruba across the African landmass to continuous nations, across the hostile oceans to the edge of the world in the Americas—*Go to the Orisa, learn from the Orisa, and be wise.*⁶²

Admittedly, Soyinka is proselytizing individuals to the Yoruba faith and spirituality. It also appears that he is expressing a particular brand of religious exceptionalism—a thesis he will refute—committing the similar transgression of the Christians and Muslims, whom he fiercely opposes? Perhaps, Soyinka is unable to reconcile intellectually this internal tension and rhetorical ambiguity—within himself. Is he being impartial? Is he demonstrating religious favoritism? Shall we be able to effectively respond to any of these queries in the positive, therefore, we should not consider Soyinka a genuine religious inclusivist and relativist, which he portrays himself to be.

Because of the openness and fluidity of African religions, Soyinka strongly believes that they could be used potentially as agents of social transformation to the dilemma of religious exclusivism and religious violence in the world.

For the rest, I wish only to exhort you: study the spirituality of this continent. As in all things, selectiveness is the key. To limit myself to that with which I am on familiar grounds, I say to you: go to the *orisa*, learn from them and be wise. The religion of the *orisa* does not permit, in tenets, liturgy, catechism or practice, that pernicious dictum: “I believe, therefore I am.” Nowhere will you find the sheerest skein of reasoning in that direction to human self-apprehension. Obviously, therefore, you will not find its corollary: “You do not believe, therefore you are not.” *Orunmila* does not permit it. *Obatala* cannot conceive of it. *Ogun* will take up arms against it. No one *odu* of IFA so much as suggests it. It is not weakness in the character of this religion however, it is not even tolerance. It is simply—understanding. Wisdom. An intuitive grasp of the complexity of the human mind, and a true sense of the infinite potential of the universe.⁶³

At this point, we shall turn our attention briefly to Senghor’s thought about God in order to show further points of convergence and confluence between his ideas and those of Soyinka. Senghor’s instructive explanation about the African concept of God will help fill the intellectual gap:

The whole universe appears as an infinitely small, and at the same time an infinitely large, network of life forces which emanate from God and end in God, who is the source of all life force. It is He who vitalizes and devitalizes all other beings, all the other life forces...It is by bringing the complementary life force together in this way that Man reinforces them in their movement towards God and, in reinforcing them, he reinforces himself; that is, he passes from *existing to being*. He cannot reach the highest form of being, for in fact only God has this quality; and He has it all the more fully as creation, and all that exists, fulfill themselves and express themselves in Him...

We have seen what constitutes for the African the “deep resemblance between Man and the world.” For him, then, the act of restoring the order of the world by re-creating it through art is the reinforcement of the life forces in the universe, and consequently, of God, the source of all life forces—or, in other words, the Being of the universe. In this way, we reinforce ourselves at the same time, both as interdependent forces and as beings whose being consists in revitalizing ourselves in the re-creation of art.⁶⁴

The Sacrifice of Africa

In our previous analysis, we have examined Soyinka’s thought and attitude toward religious violence and his criticism of spiritual dogmatism. While he denounces the violence spread by Christian and Islamist extremists, Soyinka celebrates the irenic nature of African traditional religions. He maintains that the indigenous faiths of Africa do not promote deadly fanaticism and religious imperialism. He also claims that African religions stimulate open-mindedness and contagious tolerance to other faiths. Yet, he laments that African religions are “those ‘invisible religions’ that the world continues to ignore as possible sources of cultural arbitration.”⁶⁵ For the detractors of Africa, “Africa does not exist, much less matter.”⁶⁶ In an apologetic tone, he writes constructively and meritoriously about the vitality of African indigenous spirituality and its contribution to the campaign for world peace and human solidarity:

The spirituality of the black continent in the religion of the *orisa*, abhors such principles of coercion or exclusion, and recognizes all manifestations of spiritual urgings as attributes of the complex disposition of godhead. *Tolerance* is synonymous with the spirituality of the black continent, *intolerance* is anathema!⁶⁷

Unlike the Abrahamic religions, African religions don’t seek to convert or proselytize atheists, (non-theistic) humanists, or non-believers, nor has historically engaged in vehement conquest to gain territory jurisdiction or hegemonic domination:

African religions do not proselytize, but let me break with that tradition yet again in the worthy cause of a global quest for harmonized coexistence, and offer the world a lesson from African spirituality, taken specifically from the religion of the Orisa, the pantheon of faith of the Yoruba people. This religion, one that is still pursued in Brazil and others parts of South America and the Caribbean, has ever engaged in any equivalent of the crusade or the jihad in its own cause. The words *infidel*, *unbeliever*, *kafiri* are anathema to its scriptures; thus it does not recognize a spiritual division of the world.⁶⁸

Soyinka advances this conversation by underscoring the exceptional character of African religions in the preservation of African cultural identity and practices. African spirituality is a form of resistance to foreign oppression:

Religions do exist, such as on this continent, that can boast of never having launched a war, any form of jihad or crusade, for the furtherance of their beliefs. Yet those beliefs have proved themselves bedrocks of endurance and survival, informing communities as far away as the Caribbean and the Americas...The religions of this continent rescued us as conscious race in the Diaspora, preserved our identity and, what is more, infected even those claimants to a superior knowledge of the Supreme Deity—those religions whose exalted high priests sometimes claim to be on first-name acquaintance with their deities, on whose personal authority they mete out diabolical punishments to unbelievers, even for secular activities.⁶⁹

Soyinka celebrates the legacy of African religions for their leniency and flexibility toward alien religious expressions. African religions empowered enslaved Africans to endure slavery, white oppression and violence, and ultimately, they served as catalyst for collective emancipation in North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean isles. The virtue of African spirituality is the fact that it is incompatible with human oppression.

Despite its reticence, however, it has penetrated the globe and survived in the confident retention by the displaced and dispossessed slaves, its infections hold extending even to their European violators. Its watchword is tolerance, a belief that there are many paths to truth and godhead, and that the world should not be set on fire to prove the supremacy of a belief or the righteousness of a cause.⁷⁰

Unfortunately, African religions have been marginalized by the aggressive, often bloody intrusion of Christianity and Islam onto this continent, a spirituality which, despite its seeming effacement, has continued to spread across the globe, providing sources of spiritual strength to our kin in the Diaspora and acting as a rallying-point in their struggle for liberation and human dignity...Their validity remains unchanged and they repeat a necessary warning against the unrepentant in this stubborn reiteration of the Nothingness credo against African spirituality.⁷¹

Furthermore, in his postcolonial critique of Islam and Christianity, Soyinka provocatively denounces both traditions for inflicting tremendous pain on the African people and radically altered their culture and tradition.

Both Islam and Christianity have been guilty not merely of physical atrocities on African soil, including enslavement of the indigenes, but of a systematic assault on African spirituality in their contest for religious hegemony. Therefore the claims of either religion to mutual tolerance, I proposed, were still limited to the binary insularity of the world's incorrigible hegemonists, since they have proved incapable of taking into consideration the rights of other religions to equal respect, equal space, and tolerance.⁷²

On the cultural and religious level, V. Y. Mudimbe describes the process by which Western colonial missionaries pugnaciously partitioned and changed African societies:

The new *espace metisse* was allowed by at least three factors that made a complete reproduction of the Western model difficult. First, the reformation of the indigenous past in what is signified as violence for rewriting a genesis created a spirit of resistance among the indigenous people. In order to protect their memory, they moved their most signifying practices from an open to a hidden social space, often restructuring in newly organized esoteric lines what were before the popular narratives and rituals of the colonial experience... Second, another factor that made a complete conversion problematic: the barrier of languages. Colonial policies encouraged missionaries to describe indigenous languages in a systematic manner and, generally, promoted their work for standardizing certain idioms. Nevertheless, the existing multitudes of languages reflected itself as a barrier for the penetration of both the colonial rationality and the Christian message... Briefly, in the socioeconomic and cultural reconfiguration of Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; an *espace metisse* imposes itself against the far from peaceful ancient traditions and the newly substituted program in colonial history. No wonder that the consciousness produced by this new space sometimes questions the validity of what is affirmed as truth, and beneath the confluence of currents that made it possible... that accounts for the power of the Western will to truth.⁷³

Soyinka also reveals that, in seeking to implant a corrective spirituality, both Christianity and Islam have effected cultural alienation and human aggression and conflict in the Continent. They were bonded together to obscure the indigenous beliefs and spiritual practices, and altered organic relationships between man and environment.⁷⁴ He decries the violent conquest of Islam and Christianity and laments over the cultural destruction orchestrated by external forces and influences:

Both religions came and subverted the organic systems of belief that pre-existed their arrival, religions older and, in many aspects, more humane than the manifested tenets of their own. The Euro-Christian armies of conquest, fast on the heels of missionaries and early adventurers, plundered and looted African civilizations, burnt and smashed priceless carvings, which, from the point of view, were nothing but manifestations of idolatry and satanism. Conversion to Christianity was, admittedly, sometimes by persuasion, more often it was enforced—through military conquest, terror of enslavement, and punitive (economic) controls.⁷⁵

As a result, he calls for the complete eradication of all foreign religious practices and expressions in Africa: “I have stated my preference: Let us expel alien religions altogether in all forms.”⁷⁶ This proclamation seems to be conflicting with Soyinka’s liberal openness to other religious traditions and his embrace of religious inclusivism and tolerance. Soyinka does not question the religious syncretism that is prevalent in the continent nor does he find it problematic. Jacob Olupona’s informative and insightful observation about the dynamics of Islam and Christianity in African societies will shed further light on the issue:

Africa domesticated the two exogenous religions. While Islam and Christianity both came to African from outside, both traditions have been present on the African continent for nearly as long as they have existed. This means that Africans have had centuries to develop unique adaptations to Christian and Islamic practices, and theologies to make them well suited to African needs. It also means that in many respects neither to be considered particularly foreign to Africa; in some cases, their African forms are older than certain “traditional religions.” In the same way that Islam and Christianity have changed, so too have traditional religions, which in some cases have adopted entirely new forms. This is an important corrective to the tendency to view traditional religions as old and global religions as new. In fact, all religions are always changing and incorporate new aspects into their practices.⁷⁷

Lannin Sanneh also comments intelligently on the religious encounters and the interpenetration of these faiths:

In the African situation, we find Muslims adopting elements from the local religions and blending these with their practice of Islam—as in fact happened—then it is clear that the Islamic code as it exists in the law books has been displaced as a determinant of religious perception... In the encounter with traditional religions, African Muslims have delineated the situation in terms of what Islam permits (halal) and what it forbids (haram).

In this way judgment is made on the methods and forms of traditional religious worship and divination, not on the content and ideas. Ifa divination, for example, is assessed on the basis of whether it contravenes the religious code, not on whether it introduces people to ideas of the supernatural. African Christians, on the other hand, would seem to be attracted to those features of Ifa which prepared people for faith in the Creator and His Providence, considering as of less consequence the forms and methods of Ifa practice. It is this religious culture of African religions which acquired a new importance in the Christian setting.⁷⁸

Soyinka has not addressed the issue of “interreligious transformation” as African indigenous religions encountered the influence of Islam and Christianity. In fact, he praises African religions for being accommodative to alien faiths, which could be viewed both as a positive and negative affect:

Yoruba society is full of individuals, who worship the Anglican God on Sundays, Sacrifice to Sango every feastday, consult *Ifa* before any new project and dance with the Cherubim and Seraphims every evening...No spiritual conflict is created within them and no guilt is experienced. Being unwesternised in religious attitudes, that is, not slavishly tried to the western concept of a single form of worship for the attainment of spiritual exaltation or divine protection, they live without any internal contradictions.⁷⁹

At this juncture, Soyinka’s point of view on the interplays and approachability of African religions does not contract his praise report about African indigenous spirituality, and his claim that they possess inherent value and wisdom to potentially cure the conundrum of religious bigotry and zealotry in the modern world. On the contrary, when a foreign religion is grafted in the receiving (“occupied”) religion, it is conceivable that the imported faith would alter the nature and constitutive elements of the receiving religion; thus, it will become a “fragmented religion.” Secondly, both African Islam and African Christianity do not work well with the indigenous faiths. The interreligious conflict is inevitable, almost necessary.

Next, Soyinka sees Christianity as a slave religion, and condemns Western Christianity for supporting the selling of African flesh to European slavers:

A religion that separated humanity into the saved and the damned—the latter being qualified for mass deportation to distant lands as beasts of burden—can hardly be considered fundamentally compatible with the people on whom such a choice was imposed...From the West coast of Africa to southern Africa, the story is the same.

In the same line of thought, Soyinka posits that the Arab-Islamic record in Africa was not an improvement. He is in an agreement with George Hardy, the author of *l'Art negre* (1927), that "Islam began the work of destruction"⁸⁰ in the continent. The crime of Islam is comparable to that of colonial Christianity, Soyinka maintains.

Conversions for the glory of an equally alien deity. Nothing that the Islamic invaders encountered was sacred; all was profane except the sword and the book of Allah. They set the precedent for compelling converts to shed their indigenous names, names that narrated their beginnings and conferred on them their individual and historic identities. They inaugurated the era of slave raids on the black continent for Arab slave markets. The routes of slave caravans began from the central and eastern heartlands of the continent, stretched through Northern Africa to Saudi Arabia, or passed over the waters by slave dhows from Madagascar and *Dar es Salaam* to Yemen, Omar, etc.⁸¹

Soyinka's condemnation of Jihadist Christianity and Islam is vindicated on historical record. He is indignant about the method (religious imperialism, terror, and fear) the colonizers used to introduce the natives to their religion and spread their faith across the Continent: "Africa was enslaved under the divine authority of the Islamic Christian gods, their earthly plenipotentiaries, and commercial stormtroopers."⁸² What is then the burden and hope of reconciliation as the title of Soyinka's book (*The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*) indicates? How should Africans now respond to these historic atrocities and violence inspired by religion in the postcolonial moment?

While Soyinka is not attempting to malign the memory of the African past or dismiss the grievous affects and consequences of religious violence on the Continent and its people, he nevertheless finds a way to talk honestly about both conflict and healing; the memory of religious viciousness of the (African) past carries over an inexorable weight of shame and dishonor on the (African) present:

Every landmark is a testament of history, and in our own indelible instance—from Goree through the slave forts of Ghana to Zanzibar—every fort and stockade, increasingly turned into museums, is filled with grim evocations of this passage of our history. They are indices of Truth, an essence and a reality that offer any peoples, however impoverished, a value in itself, a value that, especially when rooted in anguish and sacrifice, may dictate a resolve for redemption and strategies for social regeneration. To act in any way that denigrates the lessons, the imperatives of that Truth, for demagogic or other opportunistic reasons, is to pollute a people's Source, and declare a new round of exterior control of a people's heritage.⁸³

Soyinka is critical about the value of Christianity or Islam to foster peace and comradery in the modern world. He is persuaded that the world should turn to African spirituality and traditional religions to learn meaningful life lessons about tolerance, human dignity, interdependence, and mutual reciprocity; as he declares, “Today, there is urgent need for Mother Religion, of whatever inclination, to come to the rescue of humanity with the benevolent of infanticide.”⁸⁴ As we have discussed in preceding pages, in his book *Of Africa*, Soyinka once again highlights the place of African spirituality in promoting peace, freedom, and humanistic values. He establishes close relationship between African indigenous religions and the creed of humanism.

The Logic of Radical Theistic Humanism and Generous Tolerance

It is indisputable that Wole Soyinka is a champion of humanist values and religious inclusivism. Soyinka has modelled an exemplary life of public intellectualism and literary ingenuity, through which he promotes humanism as a worldview, and African spirituality as an alternative to the Abrahamic religions. In regard to this matter, we suggest that the theoretical notions of radical theistic humanism and generous tolerance best summarize Soyinka’s ideals and systems of thought. The subsequent paragraphs outline several characteristics of Soyinka’s humanism and situate him within the African humanism and African religious traditions. Soyinka’s humanism is trapped within the religious ethos and sensibility, and moral vision of the Yoruba people. In his quest for relevance, Soyinka presents African theistic humanism and indigenous spirituality, in the words of the eminent Kenyan novelist and literary critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “as a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe.”⁸⁵

The radicalism of Soyinka’s humanism is warranted because of its strong religious resonance—unlike most modern humanists who categorically reject theism as an option. Soyinka rejects the non-theistic Western humanism to embrace a different brand of humanism sourced in African traditional theistic humanism and African culture and thought. That does not mean he was not also influenced by western humanism. Soyinka’s generous tolerance is grounded in the personality of the Yoruba deities and the tractability of African traditional religions. As we have shown in our analysis, African religions are generous to accommodate alien faiths and are subject to contingencies. Soyinka’s humanism is a creative intellectual and spiritual enterprise that does not split the life of the mind and the life of faith. The promotion of human welfare is the basis of its foundation. William R. Jones has insightfully commented on the workings of humanism:

Religious humanism exists as a philosophical/theological *perspective* and not as an on-going *institution*...Because humanism affirms radical freedom/autonomy as the essence of human reality, humanism is most prominent in those cultures where individuals exercise in fact considerable control over their environment and history. The humanist understanding of wo/man comes into being, it appears, as the consequence of this type of experience and the material situation it presupposes.⁸⁶

Prominent Ghanaian Kwama Gyekye has shrewdly remarked:

The humanist norms of traditional African society most probably were at the base of the interpretations of the communitarian system as a form of socialism. That the traditional morality of African societies was preoccupied with human welfare has been noted in some studies. If one were to look for a pervasive and fundamental concept in African socioethical thought generally—a concept that animates other intellectual activities and forms of behavior, including religious behavior, and provides continuity, resilience, nourishment, and meaning to life—that concept would most probably be humanism: a philosophy that sees human needs, interests, and dignity as of fundamental importance and concern. For, the art, actions, thought, and institutions of the African people, at least in the traditional setting, reverberate with expressions of concern for human welfare...The humanist and social strand of the African socioethical thought and life is reflected in the African perception of the place of religion in human life.⁸⁷

Unlike Western humanism, African indigenous humanism is not antisupernaturalistic or anti-religious. African indigenous humanism maintains a rigid supernaturalistic metaphysics that is rejected by Western nontheistic humanism.⁸⁸ Lewis Gordon has stated that “If we define humanism as a value system that places priority on the welfare, worth, and dignity of human beings, its presence in precolonial African religious and philosophical thought can easily be found.”⁸⁹ From the perspective of the Akan humanism in Ghana, Kwame Gyekye offers an informative commentary on the matter:

The position of Akan thinkers here is quite different. In their view, the pursuit of the welfare and interest of human beings in this world—which for them, as for every humanist, is the crucial meaning of humanism—need not lead to the rejection of supernaturalism. It is possible, they maintain, to believe in the existence of supernatural entities without necessarily allowing this to detract from the pursuit of human welfare in this world...

In Akan thought this tension between supernaturalism and humanism does not appear; for the Akan, religion is not seen as hindering the pursuit of one's interests in this world. on the contrary, the supernaturalistic outlook of Akan humanism is the consequence not only of a belief in the existence of a Supreme Being and other supernatural entities, but, more importantly I think, of a desire to utilize the multificence and powers of such entities for the promotion of human welfare and happiness.⁹⁰

The fundamental thrust of Soyinka's radical humanism is the elevation of human dignity, needs, and interests, and the pursuing of the common good. As he asserts, dignity "captures the essence of self-worth, the sheer integrity of being that animates the human spirit, and the ascription of equal membership in the human community."⁹¹ Soyinka's humanism lies in the bundles of human virtues: "integrity, love, tenderness, graciousness, generosity, or indeed the spirit of self-sacrifice. Dignity, however, appears to give the most accessible meaning to human self-regarding."⁹² Elsewhere, he reminds us that "dignity in the management of Community lies at the heart of our preoccupation...Dignity is simply another face of freedom, and thus the observe of power and domination, that axis of human relationship that is equally sustained by fear—its poles doomed to remain permanent conflict, yet complement each other."⁹³ Hegemony is the ethos of religion driven by fear and terror. Such attitude transgresses the values of theistic humanism.

At the World Humanist Congress held in 2014, Wole Soyinka was honored with the International Humanist Award from The British Humanist Association. In presenting the award to Soyinka, the trustee, Patricia Rogers, defended the organization's choice in this statement: "In the sharpest possible contrast to the terrorist Boko Haram's dichotomous disavowal of 'western education' as alien to their world, Soyinka has long been the intellectual leader of distinctively African voices within the universal Enlightenment tradition." Because of illness, Soyinka was unable to attend the ceremony; therefore, he accepted the award via a recorded audio. It is to the text of the recording we now turn to explore Soyinka's form of humanism.

It is good to inform the readers that the message of Soyinka's acceptance speech should be understood within the cultural backdrop and historical violence of the Nigerian Islamist extremist group known as Boko Haram. In April 2014, the religious extremists of Boko Haram abducted 276 schools girls from a learning center in Chibok, Borno. Hence, we can anticipate Soyinka to denounce the crime in his speech.

Generally, Soyinka's radical humanism is against any form of human terror and oppression. Its basic goal is the betterment of humanity and the elevation of human dignity. Based on our understanding of Rogers's declaration cited above, such radical humanism should be first understood within a very specific framework, cultural tradition, and system of thought. Incontestably, Soyinka's humanism is connected to his work of intellectual activism and cultural criticism.

Soyinka is a trans-continental public intellectual whose commitment to the good and welfare of humanity is aligned with the Western humanist tradition. We concur that his public intellectualism is also shaped by the life and politics of continental Africa, and the plight of the African people.

In his acceptance speech, he cautions humanists to come up with a stronger rejoinder to dismantle the arrogance of imperialism and cross-cultural terrorism committed in the name of religion: “We need to deploy a new language whose message is: the world is not your jurisdiction.”

Soyinka appeals to the imperative of language as an instrumentalization to wage war against religious terrorists, and to silence religious purists—such as the Boko Haram and ISIS gangs. A complementary characteristic of Soyinka’s humanism is his approval of the just war theory—which excludes him from being called a pacifist; as he declares in the closing words of his speech: “Each time some wound to religious sensibilities is used to unleash terror on innocent communities, the obvious response should be: invade and inundate that space with the very material that is alleged to have given offence.” Evidently, Soyinka sees “destructive weapons” as a means to foreclose the deep wounds of religion, and to fight religious terror.

With greater details, he expounds on the call to arm to avenge the blood of the victims:

An aerial bombardment with weapons of the mind—invades that space through whatever medium of transmission is feasible. If textual—pages, chapters, illustrations, word clusters floating in space, descending on church steeples, minarets, schools, farms, factories, prisons, markets and barracks, floating down on the pompous, hypocritical chambers where self-designated theologians order the arrest, torture, imprisonment, decapitations and hangings of those alleged to be enemies of an unseen deity...Prove even deeper the wounds of insecurity already gouged in the self-esteem of gloating, arrogant, seemingly crazed abductors—and their allies everywhere—who dance their mockery of the world on video...The world should wake up to the fact that the menace is borderless, aggressive, and unconscionable.

In the paragraph above, it is indecisive whether Soyinka is calling upon humanist groups to collaborate together in order that they might inflict punishment on religious fanatics or has he conferred the sentence to the hands of the state? (“The world should wake up to the fact that the menace is borderless, aggressive, and unconscionable.”) Given the excellent track record of Soyinka as a fierce human rights advocate and freedom fighter, it would be absurd and unreasonable that he would confer the judgment of religious extremists in the hands of individuals. As could be inferred, Soyinka endorses the just war theory which places him in the Augustinian tradition.

Soyinka submits that there exists a wide gap between religion and humanism. The creed of humanism is not compatible with the ideology of religious extremism. Both articulate competing systems and conflicting visions of the world, history, and humanity. Soyinka sees religion as a threat to the evolution of humanism in the world, and the ideals of humanism: "Perhaps Humanists should pause from time to time and ask themselves a simple, straightforward, even neighborly question: what do religionists really want? Not what they worship—that is beyond rational comprehension for many but—what do they really seek." Soyinka advances the idea that religion is predominantly responsible for the world's catastrophes: "If society appears to be foundering, and along lines that clearly indicate religious factors—the world being in no shortage of current exemplars." He expresses the same thought provocatively: "The conflict between Humanists and Religionists has always been between the torch of enlightenment and the chains of enslavement." As a result, it is the duty of humanists to deliver religion people from religious enslavement. Here, Soyinka is possibly referring to dangerous religious ideas and beliefs that trigger suicide bombing and mass destruction. In such circumstances, humanist groups are responsible to maintain "self-preservation, to understand what the various constituent parts seek for their self-fulfillment." Soyinka warns humanists and the world at large about the supposedly-harmless mission of religious radicals:

We are speaking here of a resolute, but proliferating minority who declare their objective as the right to intervene dictatorially in the rights, mores and undertakings of others—all in the name of their presiding deity. This claim to the privileged exercise of Control is what plagues the world in ever expanding arenas of conflict, a belief that absolute authority is invested in them by a supreme, though invisible entity, to meddle in the lives of others, not even in an advisory role, not even as provider of optional guidelines, but with an absolutism that brooks no dissent.

Soyinka calls this deliberate activity in which religionists exhibit a pretense of piety and propagate a climate of fear, "religious imperialism." He argues that it is erroneous to believe that religionists in general seek "to serve God;" on the contrary, their objective is to gain power, jurisdiction, and influence, by any means necessary. Soyinka construes "the myrmidons of religious imperialism not simply as a threat to human freedom but also a challenge to tolerance and peace, "indeed the all-out assault on humanity."

We have noted in our previous analysis that Soyinka does not attribute religious discomfort to a few individuals of the religionist camp, but to all religions and religious zealots, whose ultimate objective is to proselytize others to their faith. Soyinka construes the act of proselytization or religious conversion as a transgression to humanist creed and a distraction to religious pluralism: "Fundamentally, in spite of the prominence of schisms in the intensification of religious carnage, we should avoid distraction by the claims of one set of beliefs against another."

As can be observed, Soyinka's reasoning on religion is not absent of intellectual conflict and paradox. Soyinka supposes that those who use religion as a weapon to oppress people are not worthy of religious freedom. At what point should the State censor religious freedom without violating the freedom of expression? Soyinka attempts to respond to this difficult question by relating it to another equally valid matter. Soyinka's unconditional preference for religious relativism is not always evident in his writings. We shall return to this issue shortly in the conversation.

Arguably, the arrogance of faith expressed especially "when one sect promotes the supremacy of precedence, to which a purity—and authenticity—of belief is then attached, as against later 'corruption,' against which an orgy of purification is then launched." The stubbornness of religion is also entrenched on the absolute claim of truth such as the Bible or the Qur'an is God's revelatory word, and the unrelenting conviction that the Bible is the supreme source of authority to provide guidance in matters of faith and practice. Soyinka rejects this proposition on ideological grounds:

The proposition that the original Scroll of beliefs, known sometimes as Scriptures, Was one of imperfection, the hidden conclusion of which has merely laid in wait in the wings, presumably to see how humans doom themselves in advance with the worship of false gods—until the emergence of Absolute Truth, ideally signaled by the appearance of a charismatic preacher.

Soyinka's linguistic exaggeration and ideological supposition about the passion of religious zealots should be taken in consideration. The failure of these individuals is that they have no interest in interfaith and ecumenical dialogue to improve relationship between the religions: "All too often they lead directly to the gallows, to beheadings, to death under a hail of stones. In numerous parts of the world today the Scroll of Faith is indistinguishable from the Roll-call of Death."⁹⁴ Yet, Paul Copan has expressed a competing position that "institutionalized pluralism and diversity in society can have the effect of excluding and eliminating traditional religion from the conversation."⁹⁵ He adds, "Properly understood, we actually need more religion, not less. But we need the right kind of religious values, not simply anything that calls itself religious (think Jim Jones, David Koresh, and jihadists)."⁹⁶ It is evident that Copan believes that some religions are not promoting the "right values" conducive to the welfare of humanity and a democratic life in the present or future.

By stating that Christianity provided the foundation for morality and has positively influenced Western civilization and other cultures, Copan is proclaiming Christian exceptionalism and triumphalism, and ultimately, the superiority of Christianity over other religions.⁹⁷ To put it another way, unlike the religious critic Wole Soyinka, the Christian philosopher Paul Copan has no problem affirming the divine inspiration and credibility of the Bible or accept the Bible as the “infallible Word of God.”

On the contrary, Soyinka has not only problematized the human disposition to total submission to the sacred text of a particular religion, he has also interrogated the hermeneutical paradigms and interpretive lens by which the preacher or the guardian of the faith interprets the text, uncovers its meaning, and communicates the message to the devotees.

What humanity has reaped from these Scrolls of Faith, pulled down from nowhere in the firmament by those who have been considered sages, prophets, messiahs etc. is one that has manifested itself historically as inimical to human inclusiveness and social cohesion. Yet such Scrolls continue to be advertised as documents that deserve human adulation, treated with reverence even by non-believers. Not even though disputes over the interpretation of their tenets—and even history—such as their coming-in-being—have spilled over millennia, continue till today, and have never ceased to foment strife of an increasingly virulent nature.”

Soyinka discards the very notion of “Scriptural infallibility” and the “historical reliability” of sacred texts, as maintained by adherents of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and thinkers on the theological right. Such belief is seen as a threat to the doctrine of radical humanism and religious relativism: “It is such scrolls, treasured as infallibility made flesh, that make the creed of humanism not only a necessary counter but a human imperative.” For the Nigerian religious critic, the theological doctrines of conservative religions are at stake with the values and principles of humanism. The practice of religious intolerance and bigotry makes the co-existence of religion in society an uncomfortable issue, and “dooms the very enthronement of civilized forms of interaction, while opening thoroughfares of blood and destruction.” African philosopher Kwasi Wiredu has articulated a critical position parallel to that of Soyinka about the nature of truth, dogmatism, and scriptural authority:

The concept of absolute truth appears to have a tendency to facilitate dogmatism and fanaticism which lead, in religion and politics, to authoritarianism and, more generally, to oppression. Indeed, if human beings were always consistent, the doctrine of absolute truth should lead to total skepticism rather than to dogmatism...

It is a fact, nevertheless, that in matters of truth and falsity, drastic persecution is hardly conceivable without pretensions to absolute truth on the part of the persecutions...Dogmatism, obversely, consists not just in expressing one's opinions with positive conviction but in the unwillingness or refusal to offer evidence for them or to consider objections with a view to revising them.⁹⁸

When truth is not conceived as opinion, as Wiredu maintains, the possibility for religious antagonism and interfaith discontent is inexorable. For example, Bernard Lewis in *Islam and the West* reflects the ambivalent nature of these three faiths: "Traditional Christianity and Islam differed from Judaism and agreed with each other in that both claimed to possess not only universal but exclusive truths. Each claimed to be the sole custodian of God's final revelation to mankind. Neither admitted salvation outside its own creed."⁹⁹ Consequently, religion in general is perceived as a transnational and cross-cultural conundrum. Soyinka places nonprogressive faiths among the global problems that defer human solidarity and progress. In the lecture, he advises his humanist audience: "The subject of Religion is one that must be brought openly to the table with other national and global concerns—poverty, social welfare, corruption, shelter, soil erosion, hunger, disease, environment degradation and all other societal mandates."

Soyinka's clarion call for the absolute abandonment of religious certainties, and religious exclusivism has its foundation in his deliberate embrace of inclusive cultural relativism and general cultural diversity. It will perhaps be constructive for our conversation to explore his thought on the sensitive issue of cultural relativism in the Geneva Lectures Series he delivered in December 10, 2008 in Geneva.

Soyinka's goal in the lecture was to help his spectators avoid the "trap" of cultural relativism, as the lecture is rightly entitled "The Avoidable Trap of Cultural Relativism." Soyinka is neither a blind cultural relativist nor a fierce defender of unconditional cultural diversity. He understands the potential pitfalls and shattering consequences of inclusive cultural relativism and general cultural diversity on human life, societies, and civilizations.

First, Soyinka provides a sophisticated definition of cultural diversity as to the willingness to open up to foreign cultures and acknowledge "the richness of man's creative existence and palpable manifestations of his inner sensibilities, his aesthetic impulses and sometimes even his spiritual intuitions." Secondly, cultural relativism entails "expressions of solidarity among, cultures, an affirmation of the right to differing expressions of cultural production, social mores and values." At this junction, both proposed definitions seem to sustain Soyinka's program of generous tolerance and challenge the arrogance of faith and religious imperialism. It promotes the politics of responsibility and relationality.

The implementation of these concrete ideas into practical cultural life and the human experience is very promising and can hypothetically lead to more tolerance and respect for people, their culture and religion. Cultural diversity and cultural relativism seem to hold the promise to bar rituals of exclusion which precondition and divide the human race and cultures hierarchically, racially, and in an opposing binary category: the good and the bad, the civilized and the barbarian, Christian and pagan, western and non-western, etc.

Hitherto, Soyinka forewarns his Genevan audience about the strictures and liabilities of cultures and societies that deliberately proclaim cultural relativism and an all-inclusive environment without restriction:

Human society is shaped as much by climatic conditions—whose diversity also cannot be denied—as by history—including the origins of such societies, and the experience of external encounters. Cultural relativism claims to imbue us with a respect for these differences. In practice however, it asks us accept such barbarisms as “honor killing” as justified by tradition, or dictatorship, even of the most brutal kind, as sanctified by a people’s antecedent or ongoing experience, largely under duress, conveniently labelled political culture. It endorses the rights to discriminate between sexes, between races, and to accept the stratification of citizens on grounds of religious beliefs, color of skin or gender.

Following this commentary, he moves forward to discuss two momentous events in modern history: the apartheid culture of South Africa and the triumph of Hitlerism in Western Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. His projected and desired goal is to alert about the perils in accepting an all-encompassing worldview. Cultural relativism is certainly a trap when it is used to profit those in power and influence.

A trap of course, a cunning device meant to lure the unwary into the counterfeit face of mutual tolerance of, and respect between cultures, that is, breed an attitude that legitimizes any form of conduct, as long as it can be attributed to cultural usage. It is a cynical design disguised as a mechanism for the promotion of the virtues of Diversity, deployed mostly by men in a position of power and their apologists. We encountered it, for instance, among the justifications for the creation of Bantustans.

Humanity is of course diverse. So, logically, are the products of his hand and mind, and sensibilities—culture above all else. Is it however possible to conceive of the relativity of one member of the human species to another? That would be to endorse the Nazi doctrine of racial selectivity and thus, of disposable humanity.

The innate properties of each human unit, what collectivity defines us as social beings in contrast to the rest of the anima world, cannot be relative—not if we accept that all sentient beings, despite their diversity, meet at a common destination known as humanity, and that all its members are indeed born with such innate properties.

In the next phase of the lecture, Soyinka emphasizes the significance of social responsibility and mutual accountability; he also comments on how to vitiate the negative effects of cultural relativism especially when it infringes on individual and collective freedom and defers the common good:

What circumstances of birth, upbringing, opportunities and environment make of each is a different matter, but cannot be considered fundamental to the worth and validity of each individual, and thus to his or her entitlements from, and responsibility to the rest of society, in the pursuit of self-development and social relationships. The issue comes down, as always, to a contest between power and freedom, or human volition, and the desire of the former to encroach upon, and dominate the latter. Thus is laid that red herring, cultural relativism, evoked to make a hierarchical distinction between spaces of power and spaces of freedom. Part of our social responsibility is to come to the defense of the latter. Freedom, above all else, is guaranteed by a plurality of choices...

Soyinka prioritizes human rights and freedom over cultural relativism: “We have to address those societies and states which either fail to recognize this, or elect to evoke entitlement of cultural relativism in order to undermine or dismiss the universalist entitlement of human rights.” To move the conversation forward, Soyinka turns our attention to the principles of generous tolerance of the Yoruba religious system; he recommends that we extract wisdom from the Ifa divination system in order that we might be able to ameliorate the human condition in the world and enhance communication between the religions:

Our repositories of exclusive spiritual truths can learn from this ancient, unassuming faith of our forebears. Ifa is tolerance. Ifa takes issue with any religion or faith that denies tolerance a place in its worship. Ifa embodies the principle of the constant, spiritual quest, one to which the notion of apostasy is unthinkable...Tolerance is perhaps the most relevant, the most sorely in demand in our global dilemma...Tolerance, in its own right, is at the heart of Ifa, a virtue worth cultivating as a foundational principle of humanistic faith—the catechism of the secular deities, a spirit of accommodativeness...¹⁰⁰

Adama & Naomi Doubmia in *The Way of the Elders* provides a balancing commentary to Soyinka's declaration:

Beliefs of many faiths have swept through our land. The African spiritual approach allows for the integration of different religious practices with its own. Many among us maintain our traditional beliefs and feel comfortable accommodating ideas from other faiths. Any tradition where Spirit is at the heart of its practice finds its home in Africa.¹⁰¹

The philosophy of generous tolerance is intertwined with the religious ideology and culture of the Yoruba people, and African humanism. Soyinka redirects our attention to the nature of truth in Yoruba moral vision:

The Yoruba understanding of the nature of truth is indeed echoed by the Verdict texts from yet another ancient world, the Indian, which declares:

Wise is the one who recognizes that Truth is One and one only, but wiser still the one who accepts that Truth is called by many names, and approached from myriad routes.

Its equivalent will be encountered in the well-known pronouncement of an African sage, known as the Sage of Bandiagara, of Mali:

There exists your truth, there is my truth and there—the Truth.¹⁰²

To complement his stated thesis, he takes us to the world of the Yoruba gods themselves who have modelled a divine attitude of "spiritual accommodativeness":

The accommodative spirit of the Yoruba gods remains the eternal bequest to a world that is riven by the spirit of intolerance, of xenophobia and suspicion. This spirit of accommodation, this habit of ecumenical embrace is not limited to the domestic front or to internal social regulations...To understand the instructional value of this in relation to other religions, one has only to recollect that, for some religions, even today, the interpretation of their scriptures in relation to human inventiveness is toward foreclosure, so that modern innovations in the technological and cultural fields are simply never permitted...Authority for the exclusionist approach to new phenomena is always extracted from or attributed to their scriptures—the Bible, the Koran, or the Torah.¹⁰³

Ifa's tenets are governed by a frank acknowledgement of the fact that the definition of truth is a goal that is constantly being sought by humanity, that existence itself is a passage to Ultimate Truth, and that claimants to possession of the definitiveness of knowledge are, in fact the greatest obstacles to the attainment of truth. Acceptance of the elastic nature of knowledge remains Ifa's abiding virtue, a lesson that is implanted in the Yoruba mind by the infinitely expansible of the gods themselves. Is it any surprise that in Orisa religion, the concept of infallibility in doctrinal matters, or Revelation as the last word, does not exist? If emphasizes for us the perpetual elasticity of knowledge¹⁰⁴

To recapitulate his argument, Soyinka urges us to interrogate claims of "absolutes—not merely for the culture under the scrutiny but for the scrutinizing size which, even without so declaring, has already positioned itself on legitimate critical grounds, often presumed higher." In his autobiography *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years - A Memoir 1946-65*, he introduces various expressions to signify the uncertainty and improbability of (absolute) truth such as "half-truth," "doctored truth," "selective truth," "annotated truth."¹⁰⁵ Further, he encourages us to defy networks of power that sustain ostentatious cultural relativists and publicists of cultural diversity who are less concerned to foresee their snares on human society:

The very phenomenon of power and its exertion over others is very much part of the discourse, and it assists in clarifying one's position to a large extent, power being a craving that sometimes manifests itself in a need to impose conformity, to dictate, or to intrude in matters of choice that stress the singularity of the human entity.¹⁰⁶

Soyinka consents with many critical thinkers that cultural relativism "is not the talismanic mantra for the resolution of the human predicament—indeed, it is only the beginning of a complex, ethically rigorous exercise, not its terminus."¹⁰⁷ As Sam Harris has concluded in his insightful analysis about the demon of relativism, "Moral relativism, when used as a rationale for tolerance of diversity, is self-contradictory."¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, moral relativism and cultural relativism are compatible with the principles of humanism.

Soyinka articulates his strong conviction and devotion to the tenets and objectives of radical humanism:

1. "Society is built on the practical, unavoidable principle of co-existence."
2. Radical humanism is committed to "human inclusiveness and social cohesion."
3. "Humanism requires a new tactical language, and what language requires a drastic shift in emphasis."
4. "We must take on the duty of telling the enemy openly: it is spiritual fulfillment that you seek but—Power. Control. Power in its crudest form."

5. “Humanism requires developing a distinct philosophy of transformative aggression.”
6. “There comes a time when our humanity accepts that there must be an end to an attitude that is best captured in that Yoruba expression: *F’itiju k’arun*. Literally that means—contracting a disease through politeness. Translated yet again, this time into the fashionable language of social morbidity that mistakes sophistry for sophistication, it reads simply: *Political Correctness*.”
1. Radical humanism is committed to “The elevation of humanity, the enhancement of its productive potential, or the harmonization of its relationship with power and authority.”¹⁰⁹

In the closing words in the Geneva Lectures Series, Wole Soyinka calls for immediate action to end the savagery and barbarity of religion:

The ultimate purpose remains: to dent the sanctimonious self-righteousness of those who question our right to volition and human dignity. Collectively, we must eradicate the enclaves of religious atavism with human alternatives, new vistas of the world, new insights into history, new propositions of human relationships—of gender, race, beliefs, classes and identifies.

Above all, however—ACT! That imperative is upon us, will it or not. Act in a resolute manner that demonstrates that humanity is not so supine that it will absorb obscene affronts to its defining right of dignified existence.

Elsewhere in *Climate of Fear*, Soyinka’s rhetorical appeal is hasty and aggressive:

We have a duty therefore to use every opportunity to disseminate efforts that counteract such moments of divisiveness and retrogression...Still lacking, however, is a manifest global commitment, especially a sustained and dynamic reciprocity from rival cultures and religions...The globe needs to be saturated, almost on a daily basis, with such encounters...There is nothing in the least delicate about the slaughter of innocents. We all subscribe to the lofty notions contained in the Universal Declaration of Human rights but, for some reason, become suddenly coy and selective when it comes to defending what is obviously the most elementary of these rights, which is *the right to life*.¹¹⁰

Moreover, Soyinka establishes a close connection between democratic freedom and generous tolerance, which sustains human dignity and sustainable development:

We consider also a dispensation that enables all humanity to breathe freely, to associate freely, to think freely, and to believe or not to believe without a threat to their existence and without discrimination in their social rights. Implicit in that freedom of association is, difficult as it may be to accept, the right of collective dissociation.¹¹¹

Conclusion

To bring our analysis to an end, we should reiterate that the Yoruba religious framework provides the resources to heal the world, cultivate friendship, and to live a life marked by human solidarity, comradeship, interdependence, and relationality:

We aim to cultivate a spiritual ingenuity recognizing synchronicity, coincidence, and the messages all around us. We strive to know ourselves and our special roles in the universe... We surrender to the ebb and flow of life, and cultivate an ability to both yield to and direct the life force. We strive to maintain harmony with the rhythms of the universe... As we are all connected, it is essential to realize that our spiritual progression is both an individual and a communal effort. We work to create healing and regenerative energy. We look within, and we also, importantly, look outside of ourselves, taking responsibility for the effects of our actions on everything around us. We explore our relations with family, friends, community, earth, and spirits.¹¹²

The gist of Soyinka's message of radical theistic humanism and generous tolerance—enclosed within the Yoruba religious world and ethical values—is “the belief in eventual tolerance and mutual generosity of sufficient strength to transcend historic memory.”¹¹³ Secondly, Soyinka gives primacy to the moral vision of African traditional religions and spirituality because of their susceptibility to accommodate other faiths and competing ideologies resulting in a spirit of tolerance, liberalism, charity, and religious pluralism.¹¹⁴ We must remind ourselves that “religion provides society is not just high-mindedness, but also a concern with the quality of life—a goal more ennobling than the simple accretion of power and possessions.”¹¹⁵ Based on Soyinka's reasoning, African spirituality and African theistic humanism in particular animate optimism, grace, and openness toward a more promising future for all people and for all faith:

Sources of conflict between nations and among peoples exist in the struggle for economic or natural resources as much as in the tendency toward the tyrannical temper of ideas, be these secular or theological. For the latter, the problem does not really lie with Christianity or with Islam, Judaism, or Hinduism, etc., but with the irredentist strain that appears to have afflicted these world religions, unlike the order of the Orisa. We need to remove the veil over these invisible religions and ask again: why is it that the Orisa has never, in all these centuries, spawned an irredentist strain. Orisa separates the regulation of community from spirit communion even while maintaining a mythological structure that weaves together both the living community and the unseen world. But that world of the spirit does not assume any competitive posture whatsoever over the pragmatic claims of the real world... Volition, not submission, sums it up... If the humanity were not, the deities would not be. Humanity, not deity, is the begetter of metaphysics.

The essay has argued unlike Western humanism, Soyinka's radical humanism is theistic and deeply informed by Yoruba cosmology and the principle of inclusive tolerance of the Orisa. Soyinka projected that only through our embrace of the values and wisdom of the Orisa would we be able to eradicate religious violence, terrorism, and imperialism in the twenty-first century global culture. Soyinka's radical theistic humanism, which promotes unqualified tolerance and challenges claims of absolutes and certainties of the religious brand, is an adequate alternative to foster human solidarity and build optimistic and democratic societies in this present world. If violence is the engine of religious banditry and fundamentalism, open-mindedness is the fuel of radical theistic humanism. Soyinka views African spirituality and African humanism as a liberative presence in the modern world against the arrogance of faith and religious imperialism.

Bibliography

Berstein, Richard J. *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*. Maldon: Polity Press, 2002.

Carnois, Bernard. *The Coherence of Kant's Doctrine of Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Copan, Paul. *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011.

Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.

- Dennett, Daniel C. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006.
- Doubmia, Adama, and Naomi Doubia. *The Way of the Elders: West African Spirituality & Tradition*. Saint Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 2004.
- Gyekye, Kwame. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Philadelphia, 1987.
- . *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Gordon, Lewis. *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. New York: Free Press, 2010.
- . *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005.
- Hitchens, Christopher. *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve, 2007.
- Idowu, E. Bolaji. *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*. Ikeja: Longman, Nigeria, 1982.
- . *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1975.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Lewis, Bernard. *Islam and the West*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. *Tales of Faith: Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa*. London: The Athlone Press, 1997.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Mbiti, John. *African Religions & Philosophy*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1990.

- Netland, Harold. *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press 2001.
- Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997.
- Olupona, Jacob K. *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Schwartz, Regina M. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *West African Christianity. The Religious Impact*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998.
- Senghor, Leopold Sedar. "Negritude: A Humanism in the Twentieth Century." In Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (eds). *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.195-202,
- Soyinka, Wole. *Ake: The Years of Childhood*. New York: Vintage International Edition, 1981.
- . *Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay."* New York: Vintage International Edition, 1989.
- . *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years: A Memoir 1946-65*. London: Minerva, 1994.
- . *You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir*. New York: Random House, 2006.
- . *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.
- . *Climate of Fear: The Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanized World*. New York: Random House, 2004.
- . *Of Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.
- . *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- . *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

- . *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- . *Death and the King's Horseman: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Contents Criticism*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.
- . "Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Patters." In Richard Olaniyan (ed). *African History and Culture*. Ibadan: Longman, 1982. 237-49.
- . "Psychopaths of Faith vs. The Muse of Irreverence." *New Perspectives Quarterly* 23: 2 (2006): 13-16.
- . "Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition." *Transition* 48 (1975): 38-44.
- . "Wole Soyinka's International Humanist Award Acceptance Speech." The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). 12 August, 2014. <http://iheu.org/wole-soyinkas-international-humanist-award-acceptance-speech-full-text/>
- . "Wole Soyinka: 'If religion was taken away I'd be happy.'" *The Telegraph*. 12 Oct 2012. Accessed July 6, 2012. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/9600954/Wole-Soyinka-If-religion-was-taken-away-Id-be-happy.html>.
- Tillich, Paul. *The Essential Tillich*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999.
- . *Systematic Theology. Volume 1: Reason and Revelation Being and God*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1973.
- Townes, Emilie M. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006.
- Williams, Jones R. "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture." In Anthony B. Pinn (ed). *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism*. New York: New York University Press, 2001. 25-54.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. *Philosophy and an African Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- . *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Zacharias, Ravi. *Can Man Live Without God?* La Porte: Thomas Nelson Publisher, 2004.

- ¹ Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 46
- ² Qtd in Carnois, *The Coherence of Kant's Doctrine of Freedom*, 86.
- ³ Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, 13.
- ⁴ Cited in Berstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, 23.
- ⁵ Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, 19-20.
- ⁶ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 239.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 239-40.
- ⁸ Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, 2.
- ⁹ Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 4, 19.
- ¹⁰ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 6-7.
- ¹¹ Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 27.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 230
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 230-1.
- ¹⁴ Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, 3.
- ¹⁵ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 286.
- ¹⁶ Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 26-7.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 110.
- ²⁰ Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 122.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 124.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30-1.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48-51.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.
- ²⁸ Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent*, 144.
- ²⁹ Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 10.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 100.
- ³¹ Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*, 41-2.
- ³² Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. 20.
- ³³ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 238.
- ³⁴ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* 200.

-
- ³⁵ Soyinka, "Psychopaths of Faith vs. The Muse of Irreverence," 13.
- ³⁶ Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 188.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 63-4.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 64.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 85.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 64.
- ⁴² Ibid., 83.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 84-86.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 87.
- ⁴⁵ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 16.
- ⁴⁶ Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 136-7.
- ⁴⁷ Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, 25.
- ⁴⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 1.
- ⁴⁹ Idowu, *Olddumare — God in Yoruba Belief*, 5.
- ⁵⁰ Senghor, "Negritude: Humanism of the Twentieth Century," in Olaniyan and Quayson (eds), *African Literature*, 196.
- ⁵¹ Senghor, "Negritude: Humanism of the Twentieth Century," 197-8.
- ⁵² Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 104.
- ⁵³ Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 158.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 147-8, 150-1.
- ⁵⁵ Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 221.
- ⁵⁶ Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 131.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Qtd in Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* 198. The statement is originated from Regina Schwartz.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 220.
- ⁶¹ Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 134-5.
- ⁶² Ibid., 168.
- ⁶³ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 246.
- ⁶⁴ Senghor, "Negritude: Humanism of the Twentieth Century," 198, 199, 202.
- ⁶⁵ Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 193.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 194.
- ⁶⁷ Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*, 48.
- ⁶⁸ Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 136.
- ⁶⁹ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 239.
- ⁷⁰ Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 136.
- ⁷¹ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 239.

-
- ⁷² Soyinka, *Of Africa*, xi-xii.
- ⁷³ Mudimbe, *Tales of Faith*, 152-4.
- ⁷⁴ Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*, 49-52.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ⁷⁶ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 302.
- ⁷⁷ Olupona, *African Religions: A Very Short Introduction*, 89.
- ⁷⁸ Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*, 227-8, 236.
- ⁷⁹ Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage*, 302.
- ⁸⁰ Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*, 52.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*
- ⁸³ Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness*, 59-60.
- ⁸⁴ Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 121.
- ⁸⁵ Ngũgĩ, wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 87.
- ⁸⁶ Williams, "Religious Humanism," in Anthony Pinn (ed), *By These Hands*, 33-4.
- ⁸⁷ Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity*, 158-9.
- ⁸⁸ Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 143.
- ⁸⁹ Gordon, *An Introduction to Africana Philosophy*, 186.
- ⁹⁰ Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 143-4.
- ⁹¹ Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 98.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, 99-104.
- ⁹⁴ Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 155-6.
- ⁹⁵ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* 199.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁹⁸ Wiredu, *Philosophy and an African Culture*, 122-3.
- ⁹⁹ Lewis, *Islam and the West*, 175.
- ¹⁰⁰ Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 164-5.
- ¹⁰¹ Adama & Naomi Doubmia, *The Way of the Elders*, 158.
- ¹⁰² Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 151-2.
- ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 152-3.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 155-6.
- ¹⁰⁵ Soyinka, *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years*, x.
- ¹⁰⁶ Soyinka, *Of Africa*, 177.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁸ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 179.
- ¹⁰⁹ Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent*, 115.

-
- ¹¹⁰ Soyinka, *Climate of Fear*, 85-6.
¹¹¹ Soyinka, *The Open Sore of a Continent*, 142.
¹¹² Adama & Naomi Doubmia, *The Way of the Elders*, 156-7.
¹¹³ Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, 77.
¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.
¹¹⁵ Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 246.