A Comparative Study of Olódùmarè, the Yorùbá Supreme Being and the Judeo-Christian God

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Abstract

This comparative study of Olódùmarè in Yorùbá thought and the Judeo-Christian God reviews the reasons why these two deities from different cultures are so often equated, when they are not necessarily so. This paper uses a philosophical-theological method of inquiry that is apt in giving a concise clarification of theological interface between the two religious and cultural beliefs. It is not the intention of this paper to argue that the Yoruba concept of Olódùmarè is superior to the Christian concept of God. Rather, it is argued that they are not necessarily the same. Finally, the essay establishes that the Yorùbá before the advent of Christianity had a philosophical concept of the existence of Olódùmarè, the Creator of everything that is in the primordial existence and the material world.

> *"Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnifying the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity."*[1]

Introduction

There is a prevalent belief among the Yorùbá that Olódùmarè the Yorùbá Supreme Being is the same as the Judeo-Christian God. The idea of equating Christian God with Olódùmarè originated principally from the intellectual works of Bishop Àjàyí Crowther, who translated the Bible into Yorùbá, and Professor E. Bọ́lájí Ìdòwú, a liberal theologian whose book *Olódùmarè: God*

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973).

in Yorùbá Belief has contributed to this doctrine. Is it true that the Christian God is the same as Olódùmarè the Supreme Being? Do they share the same universal power and authority over all the created beings, from the metaphysical-primordial existence to the physical plane where human beings are dominant? In other words, do they share attributes, namely omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, etc., that have become definitive theological characteristics of a being called God? My research findings, using a philosophical-theological method, suggest some elements of similarity, which lead to the conclusion that, in essence, they are not necessarily the same. This method has also established the claim that before the introduction of foreign religions in Yorùbáland the people had a philosophical concept of the existence of Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being.

Essential Definitions and Clarifications

Let me begin with some definitions, terms, names, and concepts for the purpose of clarity: (1) Olódùmarè: the Supreme Being, (2) God, (3) theology, (4) natural theology and (5) philosophical theology.

(1) Olódùmarè: the Supreme Being

Some prominent Yorùbá scholars in the field of religion and theology, namely J. Olumide Lucas, E. Bọ́lájí Ìdòwú, and J. Ọmọ́sadé Awólàlú, will be our guides in defining the name Olódùmarè, also known as Ọlọ́run, the Supreme Being, or simply the Deity. According to Ìdòwú:

> What the Yorùbá have in mind when they speak the name Olódùmarè, call upon the Deity in prayers, or approach Him in worship, is expressed by all the descriptions taken together. The name Olódùmarè has always carried with it the idea of One with Whom man may enter into covenant or communion in any place and at any time, one who is supreme, superlatively great, incomparable and unsurpassable in majesty, excellence in attributes, stable, unchanging, constant, reliable.[2]

Lucas, in his book *The Religion of the Yorùbás*, writes that Ọlọ́run in Yorùbá traditional thought has a refined characterization. "He is credited with omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence."[3] Awólàlú is of the view that Olódùmarè is the Supreme Being, having numerous attributes some of which are mentioned by Lucas. He adds that the Deity is "the Creator, the Ruler of

2. E. Bọ́lájí Ìdòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1962), 36.

3. J. Olúmidé Lucas, *The Religion of the Yorùbás* (Lagos: CMS Bookshop, 1948), 34.

the universe and the Determiner of destiny."[4] In a nutshell, the Yorùbá idea of Ọlọ́run or Olódùmarè can be defined as the supreme source of everything that exists, both metaphysically and empirically or otherwise. He is the Supreme Being or the Deity, the eternal, the creative Genius, the Being of beings, the Foundation of morals and principle of justice, the One and the only Supreme and the Absolute who controls everything in existence.

(2) God

According to Van A. Harvey's *A Handbook of Theological Terms*, "God is, in Christian Theology both a proper name and an abstract noun for deity."[5] This implies that God is conceived in anthropomorphic and metaphysical absoluteness in power and authority. Writing in the same vein, John Macquarrie conceives of God in relation to the cosmos and argues that "God cannot be conceived apart from the world, for it is of his essence (letting-be) to create; God is affected by the world as well as affecting it, or creation entails risk and vulnerability; God is in time and history, as well as above them."[6] God properly conceived and defined from this perspective becomes squarely the mental work and attitude of existential beings because without beings, God cannot be known outside the context of human existence. This means that the understanding of God by humans is an expression of his relationship, which is bilateral. It is a relationship that is both mutually beneficial to the Infinite and finite beings that believe in him with reverence and awe, in worship and adoration.

(3) Theology

We have come to a field that is so diverse due to human conceptions of God, the Deity and how to communicate its various and diffused perspectives reasonably enough to its communities of faith. Macquarrie, in my view, has given a comprehensive and less ambiguous definition of theology. According to him, "Theology may be defined as the study which, through participation in and reflection upon religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available."[7]

Theology is human creative activity to express the inner content of religious faith in God and to hand on the same anywhere such belief is considered

4. J. Ọmọ́sadé Awólálú, *Yorùbá Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1979), 18.

5. Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1964), 105.

6. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology, Second Edition* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 121.

7. Macquarrie, 1.

relevant to people's individual and corporate existence. It is no surprise therefore to hear of different kinds of theology, e.g., Systematic theology, Symbolic theology, Christian theology, African theology, Black theology, Biblical theology, Natural theology, Philosophical theology. These theologies are defined within the ambit of the theological interest of their respective practitioners. Whichever way any of these theologies is defined it must have a general component of God and an idea of how human discourse of the Deity may be communicated in the language that people understand.

(4) Natural theology

Natural theology, according to Harvey, "refers to the effort to construct a doctrine of God without appeal to faith or special revelation but on the basis of reason and experience alone."[8] Charles Hartshorne defines natural theology as "a theory of divinity appealing to 'natural reason' — that is, critical consideration of the most general ideas and ideals necessary to interpret life and reality."[9] Macquarrie explains that natural theology's goal is "to supply rational proof of the reality of those matters with which theology deals."[10]

The defining element of natural theology and its investigative method is to validate the truth and reality of a religious proposition while remaining within the bounds of reason and empirical evidence. This is what led to various ontological, cosmological, and teleological arguments for the existence of God. But rather than proving the existence of God, it has promoted skepticism and in most cases outright atheism. Hartshorne once told a story of his encounter with Rudolf Bultmann, an Existentialist and New Testament theologian, when he asked him this question: "What is the difference between the God of philosophy and the God of religion? His reply, which pleased me greatly, was, if I recall correctly, approximately this: 'The God of philosophy is anyone's God, the God of religion is your God and mine'. I should generalize a bit more widely, and say, the God of philosophy, or at least of metaphysics, is any creature's God, the God of religion is the God of humanity, or more concretely, our God now."[11]

The view of Hartshorne as expressed above, which is probably in consonance with Bultmann, will generate a lot of debate. I am not convinced that philosophy has a God; rather, philosophy properly understood, as both Hartshorne and Bultmann were aware, uses reason and empirical methods

8. Harvey, 158.

9. Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology of Our Time* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company, 1967), x.

10. Macquarrie, 13.

11. Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers. 1961), 132.

of inquiry to validate the reality of the God of religion just as it does with science, history, technology, ethics, and others. The danger of philosophical inquiry is that it does not have a limit. It keeps asking for more evidence until one is completely exhausted with a compendium of reasons. The foregoing explains why over the years natural theology engaged the intellectual world in matters related to God of religion to the extent that it ended up losing its disciples and its prominence in philosophical circles. What has become a concomitant of natural theology is philosophy of religion as it is being taught in colleges, liberal seminaries, and universities.

(5) Philosophical theology

Philosophical theology seeks to make religious beliefs more reasonable without necessarily involving deductive and inductive reasoning to prove its contents of faith like natural theology. Macquarrie aptly expresses the definition and nature of philosophical theology. According to him, philosophical theology is "descriptive rather than deductive, but it performs the same function of providing a link between secular thought and theology proper. It lays bare the fundamental concepts of theology and investigates the conditions that make any theology possible. In doing this it also provides a defense of theology against its detractors, by showing that theology can claim to have foundations in the universal structures of human existence and experience."[12] To elucidate more on philosophical theology Macquarrie writes: "Philosophical theology seeks to show us what is the logic of theological discourse, or perhaps to show us whether it has a coherent logic at all. Only when these matters have been explored can we judge about the claims of theology, and have some reliable grounds for assessing whether it does in fact speak of matters that are of paramount importance for human life, or whether it is a tissue of confusions and errors, or whether it is baseless and illusory, like the pseudo-science of astrology."[13]

There are two major issues that we have to note in this discourse, namely, that philosophical theology is descriptive, and that its aim is to present theological beliefs in a logical and coherent language. When theological or religious propositions are presented in this manner, they become reasonable and persuasive. In other words, philosophical theology is the arsenal with which to propagate the contents of religious belief because of its relevance to human existential experience of faith and values.

From the foregoing, how does the indigenous Yorùbá theology of the Deity fit into these grandiose definitions and method of philosophical theology

12. Macquarrie, 39.
13. Ibid., 43–4.

espoused in Western scholarship? This question will be answered as the discourse progresses. But let me say that the comparative study of the Deity as conceived in traditional Yorùbá thought and its counterpart in Western theological tradition necessitates using a common theological method to make the comparison justifiable. I want to stress that all theologies, it seems to me, are grounded in assumptions or suppositions and if that is the case, using a common method of philosophical theology is the most appropriate way to explain any given theological conundrum. For instance, the work of Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*,[14] is a revolutionary approach, which elucidates the content of theological doctrine using a philosophical vehicle of reason to respond to a changing concept of religious Deity and the paradoxes in the religious assumptions.

Yorùbá Theology of Olódùmarè

Let me say from the onset that I have deliberately avoided giving any linguistic analysis of the name Olódùmarè because it has been done by Ìdòwú, Awólàlú, and Odùyọ̀yè, among others. Besides, this intellectual exercise is convoluted and does not advance the goal of presenting the theology of the Deity in language that is lucid, clear, and coherent. The theology of Olódùmarè or Ọlọ́run or any other name by which the Supreme Being is conceived in Yorùbá is shrouded in several myths. This is understandable because the origin of the Deity is a mystery. If that be the case, which I think it is, it is therefore important to present the one that is most relevant to philosophical theology.

The starting point is that Olódùmarè is a self-existent Being and the foundation of all that exists. Ìdòwú makes this more explicit: "Someone who has made a careful study of all the material which our sources afford will have no hesitation in asserting that Olódùmarè is the origin and ground of all that is. [...] From all the evidence, which we gathered from the traditions, the Yorùbá have never, strictly speaking, really thought further back than Olódùmarè, the Deity."[15]

The assumption that Olódùmarè is the source of existence of all things is the basis of this theology. The Yorùbás' indisputable faith in this religious canon, one could argue, is shrouded in mystery, but that is the nature of all theologies. This Deity does not hide himself in mystery, according to the Yorùbá belief; he makes himself known in nature, traditions, revelation, and human conscience, the seat of human moral values. It is through his

14. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

15. Ìdòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, 18.

revelation in different mediums the Yorùbá conceive of him as omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, etc. Awólàlú adds that the Yorùbá know that the Supreme Being "is the Creator, the Ruler of the universe and the Determiner of destiny. The kingdom of this world is a theocratic one in which the Supreme Being is Himself the Head, while the divinities that have no existence apart from Him are His intermediaries and functionaries."[16]

The Yorùbá have a mythological tripartite theocratic structure of existence. The first is the abode of the Supreme Deity, otherwise known as the world of the 'highest Good'; the second is the cosmos of rational, intelligent, spiritual, and existential beings,; while the third is the universe where humans and other natural beings/things coexist with one another. The most concise and explicit explanation of this theological phenomenal world is what is presented to us in the concept of human destiny. Although Ìdòwú argues that the oral traditions of the Yorùbá are not very clear about the nature of being in the pre-existent life, he however explains that in the oral sayings of the people there is sufficient evidence to show the foundation of Yorùbá theology encapsulated in the concept and philosophy of human destiny. "The general picture, therefore, is of a complete 'person' kneeling before Olódùmarè to choose or receive. When the rite before Olódùmarè is complete, the person starts on his way into the world. He arrives at the gates between heaven and earth, and encounters the *On'íbodè* — 'The Gate-Keeper' — to whom he must answer some questions before he passes through."[17]

Questions that the 'person' coming to the world may answer touch on the reason why he has chosen to leave the theocratic world for the universe of beings/things that are naturally polarized with both good and evil. But the beauty of the choice of the individual to come to the world is the prerogative of a being to exercise his free will and be held responsible or accountable for it. The theological explanation of the rational being or person in pre-existence must be understood beyond its local content of the explanation of the origin of the Yorùbá. It seems to me that it explains the existence of the individual in the universal context. This explains human geographical locations on earth. That is, Africans in Africa, Chinese in China, Indians in India, British in Britain, Americans in America, etc. Olódùmarè has never given preference in terms of love or affection to any particular race. It is a practical demonstration of his all-inclusiveness in the proposition of Yorùbá theological canon of his benevolence or all-goodness. The Deity does not co-exist with any son. He has no son with whom he is "well pleased" who will be used as an atonement for universal sin. That is not part of the Yorùbá theology of Olódùmarè.

16. Awólàlú, 18.
17. Ìdòwú, 174.

In other words, soteriology is not in tandem with the Yorùbá theology of the Supreme Deity.

Furthermore, the demythologizing of the being of man espouses his missions and accomplishments. It explicates the mantras of existence and the transcendent nature of humans to challenge natural forces both seen and unseen and become transformed within the vicissitudes of existence and rules the universe as they deem it. Reinhold Niebuhr makes it more explicit. "The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form, allowing them some, but not too much, latitude. The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world."[18]

Niebuhr is probably right to think of man as a child of nature, but beyond that rationalistic view of man and his relationship with nature, the underlying factor from the Yorùbá theology of God and man is that it is not man's disobedience that led him to his precarious situation in the universe. In other words, the concept of universal sin in biblical theology is alien to the relationship between the Deity and man. For man to choose voluntarily to come and live on earth implies losing his infinite being in the theocratic existence, trading it for a finite existence where death is a fact of that existence.

The Supreme Being does not require any form of worship in any confined environment known as shrines or any place of worship. Olódùmarè, the Supreme Deity, does not ask for any form of animal or human sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. What man did in the pre-existent life was a rational choice to carve a world of his own within the prerogative power of the Supreme Being and to exercise his governance in a symbolic manner to mirror his limited authority after that of the infinite theocratic setup in the supersensible world.

Olódùmarè and His Divinities

The Yorùbá pantheon deities are theologically complex because of the myths pertaining to their existence, the uncertainty of their numbers, and their individual functions. The general belief as contained in the traditions is that Olódùmarè created the divinities to serve as his ministers or messengers. The divinities do not have a separate existence, neither are they independent outside the purview of the Supreme Deity. According to Awólàlú, "The actual number of the divinities is not easily determinable; it has variously been estimated to be 200, 201, 400, 460, 600, 601, 1,700 or even more."[19] Jacob K.

18. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: Human Nature*, Volume I (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 3.

19. Awolalu, 20.

Olúpọ̀nà has argued that Ile-Ife, the mythical home of human existence and the cradle of Yorùbá civilization, has 201 gods.[20] One can imagine how numerous the divinities are in all Yorùbáland, bearing in mind the large number of their towns and villages in Nigeria. What moral and logical reasons for Olódùmarè to have created many divinities? One may not be able to answer this question for the Supreme Being but one can only suggest a probable reason which is based on the growing population of the Yorùbá and the need for the deities to address all their needs. The intention here, however, is not to dwell on the moral or logical reasons why the mushroom of divinities were created by the Deity, but to present within the context of philosophical theology six of the principal and most relevant gods to the contemporary intellectual space: Òrìṣà-ńlá, Odùduwà, Ẹ̀là, Ọ̀rúnmìlà, Ògún, and Èṣù. They are so designated because of their significance in the affairs of the Yorùbá. This will become more vivid as we discuss each of them

(1) Òrìṣà-ńlá

Òrìṣà-ńlá is otherwise called Ọbàtálá, the arch-divinity, because of his position in the hierarchy of beings. Parrinder explains, "The most important of the Yorùbá *òrìṣà* is Òrìṣàlá (Òrìṣà-ńlá, the great god). He is also called Ọbàtálá, 'king who is great' or king in white clothing."[21] Similarly Ìdòwú writes: "According to our oral traditions, Òrìṣà-ńlá is very ancient. He was the very first to receive a definite characterization, and that will explain why he is described by some of our elders as the image or symbol of Olódùmarè on earth. Yorùbá theology also calls him the off-spring of Olódùmarè in the sense that he derived immediately from him and that the attributes of Olódùmarè are revealed through him."[22]

Òrìṣà-ńlá is generally conceived as a sculpture divinity because in Yorùbá oral traditions Olódùmarè saddled him with the molding of human forms. After he had made human forms Olódùmarè put life into them, reserving this metaphysical ability to himself. The import of this myth is that Olódùmarè is the giver of life and no other being has the secret knowledge to impart life to humans. The Deity remains de facto the creator of human beings. Besides, humans remain a special breed in the hand of the Supreme Being because all other animals in the universe were not created in the same manner. The essences of life, i.e., intelligence, transcendence, creativity, spirituality, etc., became the special lot of human beings. All these carry with them responsibility

20. See Jacob K. Olúpọ̀nà, *City of 201 Gods: Ile-Ife in Time, Space, and the Imagination* (London: University of California Press, 2011).

21. Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion* (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 27.

22. Ìdòwú, 71.

and accountability because humans are answerable to the Supreme Being since they did not create themselves.

The mythical Yorùbá ontology of humans in which Òrìṣà-ńlá is seen as sculptor divinity implies, therefore, that any human defects or physically challenged individuals can be blamed on Òrìṣà-ńlá and not the Supreme Deity. That is why, for instance, albinos or hunchbacks are regarded as *ẹni òrìṣà*, the votaries of the *òrìṣà*. They are so-called in order to protect them. It is believed that if they are not considered as the votaries of the *òrìṣà* there is tendency to harm or kill them but being a special creation of the *òrìṣà* anyone who causes any harm to them will be visited with the wrath of Òrìṣà-ńlá. The moral protection of the physically challenged beings as exemplified in the theology of Òrìṣà-ńlá is an indication of the sanctity which the Yorùbá attribute to human life.

Òrìṣà-ńlá also mirrors the symbolic attribute of the holiness of the Supreme Deity because he is associated with white clothing or objects. His devotees dress in white robes, which signifies purity of mind and closeness to the Deity.

(2) Odùduwà

In the theological discourse on this deity one is confronted with two mythical traditions of his existence and accomplishments. There is one that presents him as a messenger of the Supreme Deity who usurped the responsibility of Òrìṣà-ńlá in the creation of the universe and subsequently metamorphosed as a historical founder of the Yorùbá and first god-king of Ile-Ife, the cradle home of Yorùbá civilization. Kọ́lá Abímbọ́lá writes:

> It was the wish of Olódùmarè, the High Deity of the Yorùbá, to create dry land ... He therefore sent 400 Òrìṣà to perform this important task. Olódùmarè gave the Òrìṣà a parcel of dust from Heaven. He also gave them a chameleon and a hen. This hen had five fingers on each foot. Ọbàtálá was charged with the sacred duty of creating dry land from water, and it was to him that Olódùmarè gave all the items mentioned above. The Òrìṣà descended to Òkè-Àrà ("mountain of wonders" which is near to what would later be known as Ilé-Ifẹ̀) with the aid of the iron chain supplied by Ògún. While on top of the mountain, Ọbàtálá drank too much palm-wine and went to sleep. His younger brother, Oduduwa, then acquired the implements given to Ọbàtálá by Olódùmarè, and created dry land from the primordial water. He sprinkled the sacred dust on the water, and wherever a grain of sand touched became solid. He then set free the hen, and the hen scratched the ground in all directions. Miraculously, the

> land started to expand and expand. Odùduwà then set free the chameleon to feel the solidity of the earth. The place where dry land was created from water, and from where the land expanded, is called Ife. The verb "fe" means, "to expand". Odùduwà later became king of Ile-Ife ... As a matter of fact, the Yorùbá believe that all vegetation, all animals, birds and humans originated from Ilé-Ifẹ̀, therefore the cradle of mankind and all creation.[23]

I have quoted Abimbola at length because of its mythical and historic content, which I consider significant. What do we make theologically of this myth? The driving force behind this myth, it seems to me, is that the Yorùbá had their traditional belief of the origin of human existence and other creation before the advent of other religions. That Islam, Christianity, and all other religious beliefs have no knowledge about the world better than the Yorùbá. The belief in Oduduwa as a deity who transformed himself as a king provides the basis for the human sense of self-governance rather than the theocratic system in the primordial existence. The politics of institutional monarchy evident in the myth is key to the way and manner the Yorùbá structure their corporate life. This form of institutional monarchy is indigenous, with no foreign content. But the institution has no independent originality without being grounded in Olódùmarè, the Supreme Deity. The monarchical structure of the Yorùbá system of governance is a caricature of that of Olódùmarè in the supersensible world. The emphasis in this theology is that human beings are not masters of themselves and the universe where they reside. The knowledge to govern or rule over their corporate existence is derived from the Ground of beings, Olódùmarè.

(3) Ẹ̀là

This deity appears obscured in contemporary literature of Yorùbá theology. But Ìdòwú is of the view that "The name Ẹ̀là means 'Safety' or 'One who keeps in safety'; 'Preservation' or 'Preserver,' 'Salvation' or 'Saviour.'"[24] In terms of the ministerial post assigned to him by Olódùmarè, Ela is the "Prime Minister" who has the wizardry of governing over a very turbulent society of beings. Ìdòwú further explains that "Ela is the spirit of truth, rightness, and amicable living, working on earth to create and promote order, happiness, and understanding among the inhabitants of the earth."[25] As the promoter of peace and good neighborliness, Ela is "opposed to the evil works of Esu and

23. Kola Abimbola, *Yoruba Culture: A Philosophical Account* (Birmingham: Iroko Academic Publishers, 2005), 120–21.

24. Ìdòwú, 106.

25. Ibid., 103.

engages himself in obstructing him or undoing his evil deeds in the way a superior would."[26]

(4) Ọ̀rúnmìlà

In Yorùbá traditional social life, Ọ̀rúnmìlà appears very close to the people because it is believed that Olódùmarè gave him the oracle of wisdom and knowledge with which to know the mystery of the world and the secret behind human success and failure. There is hardly an occasion in everyday life that does not warrant a consultation with Ọ̀rúnmìlà's Ifá oracle, to learn what is in store. As Awólàlú aptly notes, "As one who lives in and sees both heaven and earth, he is believed to be in position to plead with Olódùmarè on behalf of man so that unpleasant circumstances may be averted or rectified."[27] The belief of the Yorùbá about their individual and corporate existence is that everyone must always be on guard because you never can tell what can befall you from time to time, hence the need to ask Ọ̀rúnmìlà through Ifá divination. That is why the Yorùbá say, *bí òní ti rí, ọ̀la lè má rí bẹ́ẹ̀, ìdí nìyí tí babaláwo fi ń dá'fá lójojúmọ́*, meaning, because of uncertainty in life that is why the man of secret knowledge consults his *Ifa* oracle daily. This self-consciousness of man and the need to make himself relevant in the universe is corroborated by Niebuhr, who argues, "The truth is that man is tempted by the basic insecurity of human existence to make him doubly secured and by the insignificance of his place in the total scheme of life to prove his significance."[28] Olódùmarè was aware of all this but when man used his freewill and chose to come to live on earth, a provision to find his way in the wilderness of existence became imperative. So Ọ̀rúnmìlà and his Ifá oracle became the errand deity to handle the insatiable need of the Yorùbá. It needs to be made clear here that from Yorùbá traditions and my knowledge of the theology of the people the presentation and interpretation of Ifá itself as a deity in the theocratic structure of Yorùbá cosmology are misleading. It is indeed just as theologically absurd to equate the Ifá oracle with Olódùmarè, Ọbàtálá, Esu, as to substitute Ọ̀rúnmìlà with Ifá.[29]

(5) Ògún

Ògún is conceived in Yorùbá theology as god of iron, war, peace, and justice. The Yorùbá oral traditions present Ògún as one of the deities sent to create the earth; and on their journey they encountered a difficult terrain and the deity was called upon to clear the way for them, which he did. To the Yorùbá,

26. Ibid.
27. Awólàlú, 23.
28. Niebuhr, 192.
29. See Abimbola, 66.

ÒGún plays a vital role in human existence. Awólàlú explains, "He is believed to be the divinity of iron and of war and pre-eminently the tutelary divinity of hunters, the blacksmiths, the goldsmiths, the barbers, the butchers and (in modern time) the mechanics, the lorry and taxi-drivers — indeed all workers in iron and steel."[30] Properly designated in concrete terms, Ògún is the god of modern science and technology. Ògún must not be construed as a metal like iron and steel which are mere instruments of the deity. All the manufacturing industries are a product of Ògún. The monetary instruments and all forms of money produced in naira, dollars, pounds sterling, euros, etc., are made possible by Ògún. All housing, hospitality, and infrastructural industries belong to the genius of Ògún. The shrines, synagogues, temples, churches, mosques, and all sacred places of worship owe their existence and sustainability to Ògún. Human beings cannot survive without the presence of Ògún and his instruments on the planet earth.

In the Yorùbá social and political system Ògún is seen as a deity of justice. Awólàlú writes:

> It is also believed that Ògún stands for absolute justice so he is called upon to witness a covenant or pact between two persons or groups of people. At present, when a Yorùbá who is an adherent of the traditional religion is brought to the law court, he is asked to swear on Ògún (represented by a piece of iron) instead of on the Bible or the Quran. This he does by kissing a piece of iron as he declares he will "speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." The Yorùbá believe very strongly that anybody who swears falsely or breaks a covenant, to which Ògún is a witness, cannot escape severe judgment, which normally results in ghastly accidents.[31]

From the forgoing, the principle of absolute justice remains the domain of the deity. For social cohesion and transparent justice Ògún remains a deity the Yorùbá trust in their daily transactions.

The presence of Ògún in the cosmological and theological proposition of Yorùbá belief is a manifestation of Olódùmarè's manifold phenomenon in materialistic and spiritual dimensions to make human existence purposeful and meaningful. The mythologemic personality of Ògún represents the characterization of, in a graphic form, the nature of human existence that is constantly becoming.

A curious researcher will probably ask if these divinities actually exist and whether what the Yorùbá believe about them is really true. If they exist, one

30. Awólàlú, 32.
31. Ibid., 33.

might ask, why is their society still backward? The question whether the belief is true or not is not predicated on economic and social development. Rather it is grounded in the cultural values of the people and it is reasonably worthy of their belief.

(6) Èṣù

Esu remains the most complex divinity in the Yorùbá theology of beings. Ìdòwú writes, "What we gather from our sources is that Èṣù is primarily a 'special relations officer' between heaven and earth, the inspector-general who reports regularly to Olódùmarè on the deeds of the divinities and men, and checks and makes reports on the correctness of worship in general and sacrifices in particular."[32] Some of the most recent works on Èṣù are found in Kọ́lá Abímbọ́lá, Jacob K. Olúpọ̀nà, and Tóyìn Fálọlá's *Èṣù: Yorùbá God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers* in which 20 prominent scholars have given their perspectives on this deity. In all, Èṣù Ẹlẹ́gbá, Ẹlẹ́gbárá, etc., are the names and indicators of the power of the deity and the awe, fear, and respect the worshippers have for him. The characterization of Esu as both good and evil is what makes him to be loved and hated by the Yorùbá. The dualistic nature of the deity symbolizes human coloration of moral virtues. Morally and theologically, "Èṣù exists only mythically for the purpose of explaining the Yorùbá exigencies and vicissitudes of life. It is in this regard that Èṣù has become a phenomenon of existence."[33] Èṣù, like all the other divinities in Yorùbá belief, has no relevance outside the theological, moral, and philosophical propositions of humans.

The most crucial question is how does one understand this complex theology of Olódùmarè with numerous divinities? Is this theology polytheistic or monotheistic? Ìdòwú argues that the theology is monotheistic because there is only one Supreme Deity who manifests himself in different forms and functions through several mediums. It is therefore appropriate to consider it a monotheistic theology, or as Ìdòwú suggests, a "Diffused Monotheism." He explains: "For the purpose of a descriptive label, we would like to suggest such a startling thing as 'Diffused Monotheism' this has the advantage of showing that the religion is monotheism, though it is a monotheism in which the good Deity delegates certain portions of His authority to certain divine functionaries who work as they are commissioned by Him. For a proper name we unhesitatingly say that there can be none other but *'Olódùmarèism.'*"[34]

32. Ìdòwú, 80.

33. Ṣẹ́gun Ògúngbèmí, "Èṣù: The Phenomenon of Existence." In Toyin Falola (ed.) *Èṣù: Yorùbá God, Power and the Imaginative Frontiers*, Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2013, 86.

34. Ìdòwú, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*, 204.

It needs to be underscored that the model of existence from the primordial life was originally Oneness of the Deity and as time went on the Being-in-itself decided to form a multiplicity of beings from where the concept of family and corporate existence developed. There is hardly, in my opinion, a resounding joy and happiness in a monotonous life. Plurality and multiplicity add values to any form of existence including that of Olódùmarè. And perhaps that is what is inherent in the Yorùbá theology of *Olódùmarèism*. It is this rich theological doctrine of Olódùmarè that the missionaries and their followers did not aptly comprehend before they erroneously labeled the religious belief of the Yorùbá polytheistic. The Yorùbá theological discourse on Olódùmarè is all-engaging because it is not just about the Deity alone but pragmatically about humans and the phenomenon of existence.

Having presented the theology of Olódùmarè and his functionaries in Yorùbá religious belief, let us consider how Christians conceive their God and see whether it is the same Deity that is worshipped by both traditional Yorùbá and Christians.

The Judeo-Christian God

The theological proposition on which the Judeo-Christian God is conceived is predicated on his act in history in the life of the Israelites, culminating in the universality of his love towards all humans through the sacrifice of his son, Jesus Christ. The proclamation of a "God who acts in history"[35] resonated in the prophetic and evangelistic works of prophets in the Old Testament and of the apostles in the New Testament, leading to massive evangelistic engagements of missionaries worldwide. But what do I mean by "God who acts in human history"? How does he act in history and for what purpose? And more importantly why does God have to act in the history of mankind and particularly through the Israelites or the Jews? What is the need of his presence in the affairs of humans? These are some of the issues that are germane in this theological doctrine of God who acts in human history. Judeo-Christian theology presents, in a nutshell, three distinctive theological traditions that will be discussed here: primitive Mosaic theology, primitive Hellenistic/Protestant theology, and Existentialist theology. I have used the word "primitive" to qualify the first two theologies not in a pejorative sense but only in relation to new development of human understanding in the theological, philosophical, and scientific world of modern man. Rudolf Bultmann puts it more vividly: "The contrast between the ancient world-view of the Bible and the modern

35. Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1977), 164–187.

view is the contrast between two ways of thinking, the mythological and the scientific."[36] It is this contrast that makes the first two theologies primitive in relation to the third. Let me discuss these three theologies.

(i) Primitive Mosaic theology presents both polytheistic and monotheistic constructs of God as Elohim, denoting several gods "or when used in the plural of majesty for 'God' or 'deity'," and Yahweh, meaning Jehovah which in the Old Testament (OT) denotes one God.[37] In both names, God is seen as a creative genius who created the world out of nothing. After creating all that is, He created man in his own image (Genesis 1:26) and made him steward and ruler of all creation. Thus man is appointed the dominant authority over the universe. In a similar OT tradition, Genesis 2:7–5 gives another account of God's creativity, which ushered in the beginning of human corporate existence and the marital institution as demonstrated in Adam and Eve. It becomes important to note that the conscripted pastoral life that Adam and Eve lived made them not to have creative knowledge or transcendence to enhance their corporate life. Adam and Eve had a restricted freedom with abundant unalloyed loyalty to their God. In Genesis 3, the robust relationship that existed between God and Adam turned sour when his wife ate the forbidden fruit and gave him to eat as well, which Yahweh had instructed Adam not to eat and warned that the day he ate it death would become an inevitable reality for him. This singular disobedience led to their condemnation and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve did not lose everything as they were forced out of the blissful Garden of Eden; they gained their freedom from servitude and knowledge of good and evil that prepared them for challenges in the new environment. They, however, became theologically stigmatized with what is doctrinally called the original sin or a generic sin that has been a theological debate in Christianity. The theological presupposition is that the Adamic sin became a preparatory formula and justification for God to reconcile man to himself. In this theological discourse, God in his infinite grace and mercy took decisive action in human history to redeem man and made him accountable, not only to himself and humanity alone, but also and above all, to his Creator. This primitive Mosaic metaphysical-mythological theology forms the basis of the eschatological hope for human eternal redemption as explicated by the Catholic Church and the majority of Christian denominations. To achieve this theological objective, God who acts in human history, as detailed in the Pentateuch, called Abram who later became known as Abraham, a wealthy landowner with abundant cattle (Gen. 13:2), to leave his

36. Bultmann, 38.

37. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), 94.

home base in Ur for an undisclosed destination. What God needed from him was faith and obedience and in return he would receive abundant blessing in terms of wealth, heirs, and land. The land of Canaan was the place that would be given to him and his descendants. His children would be uncountable like the sand of the sea. Abraham had faith and his wife who was barren became pregnant and gave birth to a son called Isaac who became a test of faith. He was asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham did not hesitate to obey God's command and as he was about to sacrifice Isaac, a ram was given as a substitute and the young Isaac was spared an untimely death.

Isaac married Rebecca and they had two children, Esau and Jacob. Thus Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob became patriarchs of the Jewish nation and from them emerged a dynasty, the house of King David, the Lion of Judah. I have simply given a brief chronological Biblical history that depicted the actions of God in history without discussing the polemics involved in that history. The conception of God acting in history in relation to the story of Abraham has indeed portrayed Yahweh in a despicable manner, as solely responsible for historical tragedy in Palestine and the Middle East even until today. For God to singularly choose Abraham among all men in his time as a favored individual became a perennial problem in human history. That is, the principle of the favoritism of Yahweh as witnessed in the OT with its attendant consequences in history continues to exacerbate human misery. The existence of Abraham in human religious history is an existence of paradoxical tragedy. If one relates the claim of Prophet Mohammad, the founder of Islam who traced his ancestry to Abraham and, the experience of violence in many parts of the world traceable to this patriarchal family from time immemorial, it becomes worrisome, if the claim can be justifiably regarded, as coming from the heirs of Abraham and his creator, Yahweh, who is All-Powerful, All-Knowing and All-Good.

(ii) Primitive Hellenistic/Protestant Theology is based on the agenda of God to consummate his redemptive plan in human history. The New Testament (NT) provides this theological discourse. Here we are presented with a Triune conception of God. That is, God the Father (the Creator), God the Son (the Savior), and God the Holy Spirit (the Comforter) acting in the history of man. This looks like a polytheistic theology but according to traditional church doctrine, it is purely monotheistic because it is the same Godhead displaying his manifold natural being in mysterious ways that human cognition cannot fully comprehend. In the Hellenistic tradition, God the father sent his son to be born in human form as related by the birth narratives of Jesus in two of the synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke. Matthew 1:18–25 and Luke 1:26–35 record how the pregnancy of Mary, who was betrothed to Joseph, was the act of the Holy Spirit. The curious researcher wonders, why the

Triune God would engage in such an immoral act of impregnating someone's wife so as to bring salvation to all mankind? Could God not have used a more moral method to achieve his redemptive objective? After all, man never asked God to create him. To subject the process of his redemptive drama to ridicule as shown in the birth narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke is theologically, morally, and doctrinally embarrassing. Be that as it may, perhaps we may need to consider the inherent intention the birth narratives in terms of faith and human salvation. John, one of the closest disciples of Jesus, did not bother to write about his birth narrative; so also Paul, one of the frontline Apostles who propagated the gospel of Jesus Christ. If the birth narrative of Jesus was that important they would have written significantly on it. But to a contemporary mind the best way to understand the intent of the birth narrative of Jesus is to demythologize it. Bultmann, in his book, *Kerygma and Myth*, demythologizes the miraculous conception of Jesus by a virgin within the context of what it means to a believer.

The ministry of Jesus is the hallmark of God's action in history. John 3:16 is a proclamation and demonstration of God's love. Theologically, God's love the most revolutionary in human history because it sets man free from the bondage of sin, fear, and self-alienation from his Creator. But the gift of love that God has given to the world is predicated on acceptance by the individual to make salvation a reality for him or her. It is a life of faith and obedience to the teaching and preaching of Jesus. Hellenist Christianity, which became the foundation of Protestantism, took the Kerygma, the proclamation "of the early Christian community to the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth [...]. The content of this proclamation was that the age of fulfillment promised by the prophets had come, that it had reached its climax in the life, death and resurrection of Christ."[38] The dynamics of the redemptive message as contained in the Kerygma became a missionary tool that promoted the witness to the faith of those who believe.

(iii) Existentialist theology

The advancement of science and technology in the twentieth century provided some verifiable knowledge. Bultmann reiterates: "The science of today is no longer the same as it was in the nineteenth century, and to be sure, all the results of science are relative, and no world-view of yesterday or today or tomorrow is definitive. The main point, however, is not the concrete results of scientific research and the contents of a world-view, but the method of thinking from which world-views follow."[39]

38. Harvey, 138–139.
39. Bultmann, 37.

The new way of theological thinking therefore has to adapt to the modern worldview if it is to be relevant to the needs of man. Bultmann argues: "For the world-view of the Scripture is mythological and is therefore unacceptable to modern man whose thinking has been shaped by science and is therefore is no longer mythological. Modern man always makes use of technical means, which are the result of science. In case of illness modern man has recourse to physicians, to medical science. In the case of economic and political affairs, he makes use of the results of psychological, social, economic and political sciences, and so on. Nobody reckons with direct intervention by transcendent powers."[40]

It is not only science and technology that have reshaped the human worldview, but more fundamentally philosophy. It has always made it more difficult to accept some of the biblical doctrines about God without moral or epistemological justification. Using a philosophical apparatus of reasoning, Friedrich Nietzsche argues, "From the start, the Christian faith is a sacrifice: a sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of the spirit; at the same time, enslavement and self-mockery, self mutilation."[41] For a modern mind to have faith in God and serve him with his entire life, his soul and with his material and spiritual wealth is nothing but religious slavery. When will he have time for himself and family if he does all that for the sake of pleasing God? Furthermore, to a curious mind it is theologically and doctrinally absurd to believe that a God was hanged on the cross. Nietzsche notes: "Modern men, obtuse to all Christian nomenclature, no longer feel the gruesome superlative that struck a classical taste in the paradoxical formula 'god on the cross.'"[42] That God died on the cross for all human races is theologically nonsensical. So, a new theology is needed to explicate the mysterious nature of God who acts in human history, taking cognizance of philosophical and scientific orientations of modern men and women. Existentialist theology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has taken a bold step to engage modern men and women with a new hermeneutics of the Kerygma in order to make it meaningful and reasonable. It is in this regard that Bultmann introduces the demythologizing of the primitive theology of God. According to Bultmann, "To de-mythologize is to deny that the message of the Scripture and of the Church is bound to an ancient world-view which is obsolete."[43] In other words, the mythological components of the proclamation of the biblical doctrine of God

40. Ibid., 36.

41. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* Walter Kaufmann (trans.) (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 60.

42. Ibid., 36.

43. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 36. See also Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, 3.

who acts in history for the emancipation of mankind through Jesus Christ, need to employ the existentialist theological method of de-mythologizing, to make the message existentially relevant. Schubert Ogden explains: "By saying that God acts to redeem mankind *only* in the history of Jesus Christ, he subjects God's action as the Redeemer to the objectifying categories of space and time and thus mythologizes it.... The claim 'only in Jesus Christ' must be interpreted to mean, not that God acts to redeem only in the history of Jesus and in no other history, but that the only God who redeems any history — *he in fact redeems every history* — is the God whose redemptive action is decisively re-presented in the word that Jesus speaks and is."[44]

What Ogden is saying is that Bultmann is limiting God's decisive act in history to only through Jesus Christ and such a theology is unacceptable to the principle of the universality of God who acts in all human history. But the question is: does God have to act through Jesus to redeem mankind in all different human histories? While one might agree with Ogden on the universality of God, who acts in history, it may not necessarily be the case that it must be through Jesus. Rather, it could be the case that a God who acts in history is to be properly construed to mean one who acts inclusively, through Jesus as well as through the deities, prophets, priests, and ancestors.

Is Olódùmarè, the Supreme Deity the Same as the Judeo-Christian God?

Having discussed the Christian belief in God, his attributes, and how he has acted in human history, can we equate him with the Yorùbá concept of Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being? In other words, is the Yorùbá concept of Olódùmarè the same as the Christian God? Or is the Christian God the same as that of the Yorùbá? There are striking similarities in both beliefs as well as dissimilarities. The two theologies of the Divine Beings present them as invincible and yet active in human history in terms of similarity of attributes and creativity. According to oral and written traditions of the Yorùbá, Olódùmarè is holy; so also the Christian God in the Bible. Other attributes common to both deities are omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience, among others. In both Christianity and Yorùbá indigenous religion, there is only one universal God who created heaven and earth. To the Christians, he is called Yahweh and to the Yorùbá, he is Olódùmarè, the Supreme Being. With regard to their creativity the narratives of human creation and the universe are not similar. In one of the Yorùbá mythologies of creation, as already explained, Olódùmarè entrusted the making of human form to Òrìṣà-ńlá and after he

44. Ogden, 173.

had completed the assignment Olódùmarè went to put life into it and he or she became a living human being having consciousness and conscience.

The Christian God in Genesis 2:7 is similarly depicted as a potter who molded human form by himself and breathed into its nostrils, bringing about a living soul. We also have in Genesis 1:26 the creation of male and female in God's own image rather than God acting as a potter. Let me explain the two theological terms of "make" and "create." To make in this theological context means to produce something from a material substance, while to create is a speech act that brings forth something out of nothing. The idea of creativity as conceived and used here has to do with the practical demonstration of the ingenuous ability of production that has become the hallmark of not only the divine beings but also of human beings.

The theological concept of Godhead, i.e. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, manifesting and acting in human history, seems to suggest polytheism rather than monotheism. A similar case can be made against Olódùmarè who has a legion of ministerial agents, e.g., Ọbàtálá (otherwise known as Òrìṣà-ńlá), Ògún, Ela, etc., who are saddled with specific responsibilities in human history. It is theologically inappropriate to consider the two religions as polytheistic because the understanding here is that it is only one God or Supreme Being manifesting his power and authority in the universe of humans as he sees fit. From this theological expression one can speak of both religions as monotheistic. Ìdòwú, however, calls the religion of the Yorùbá Diffused Monotheism. There has never been any occasion on which the Christian God or Olódùmarè deliberately created a permanent vacuum without relating either directly or indirectly with human beings. That is why in Christianity Jesus Christ became the link between God and man. And in Yorùbá theology Èṣù, Ẹ̀là, and all other divinities serve as linkages with Olódùmarè. But this does not mean that the Supreme Being cannot be reached directly by individuals or community when the need arises. Given all the similarities between the two deities discussed above, can one say that they are the same? We may not be able to make a valid deduction without knowing their dissimilarities. The Christian theology of the generic Adamic sin, the preference and choice of a race, the Israelites over and above other races in the world, the birth narrative of Jesus, the sacrifice of God the Son on the cross for the universal salvation of all humans, do not make moral and intellectual sense in the Yorùbá theology of Olódùmarè.

Consider the incessant conflicts, violence, wars, and senseless killings of innocent men and women, including children, encouraged and authorized by the God of Christianity, for instance, in 1 Samuel 15, where Saul was asked to go and destroy all the Amalekites, including animals. God in the OT made the Israelites to be warmongers rather than peace lovers of their neighbors. It

is also true that when the Israelites disobeyed him they were punished and on different occasions taken into captivity. Such action in human history cannot be traced to Olódùmare. The Christian God acting in human history in the New Testament (NT) chose to send his Son to die for the sin of mankind and only through him can the reconciliation between him and man be resolved. And anyone who does not come through the Son, Jesus Christ, will be thrown to hell fire on the Day of Judgment. This belief forms the basis of the NT theology of grace and redemption. The examples given in the biblical theology that present God as acting in human history explicate the divergence between the Yorùbá theology of Olódùmarè and the God of Christianity. In the Yorùbá theology of Olódùmarè we have a perfect moral Deity who cannot be associated with impiety as seen in the Christian God. We have a Universalist Deity who is concerned with a democratic structure of the universe depicting the way humans should relate with one another and be happy. Of course, considering Olódùmarè's activities in the cosmos of humans and the mode of his operations in the theocratic pantheon as we have seen, it is morally and logically improper to equate him with the Christian God. Byang Kato, a conservative Christian theologian, got it wrong when he argued, "If any religion is as good as the other, why should one try to tell somebody to accept one way rather than the other? Yet that is the constant theme of the Bible — warning men to repent and accept the new and the living Way."[45] Kato believes that it is pseudo-theology to equate the Christian God with the Yorùbá Deity because the Yorùbá have no clear idea or concept of the Supreme Deity, hence they do not worship him.[46] Kato, of course, being a conservative theologian and someone not versed in Yorùbá theology of God, in my opinion, is absolutely wrong. From the foregoing, it is indisputable that the Yorùbá have had the concept of Olódùmarè the Supreme Being from time immemorial.

Conclusion

I began with a proposition that Olódùmarè; the Supreme Being in Yorùbá, may have some similarities in terms of attributes and creativity with the Christian God; however, they are not necessarily the same. I have identified areas of authentic sameness but also dissimilarities, which make it compelling to reject the notion that the two Deities are the same. The examples given to prove that they are not the same on moral and logical grounds are not exhaustive. I have also argued that the Yorùbá concept of God was not in consequence of their interaction with other cultures. In both theologies man

45. Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 104.

46. Ibid., 35.

becomes a common confluence between Olódùmarè and the Christian God who acted in human history. In other words, the whole theology of God in Yorùbá belief or in Christianity is about man's metaphysical invention of a Superior Being or God hence without man the theology has no relevance or significance. It is from this perspective that the Yorùbá belief in Olódùmarè and the Christian belief in God have a converging purpose and meaning.

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