

TOWARDS AN AUTHENTIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY: MODELS FROM AFRICAN COMMUNALISM

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Abstract

This article tried to establish how an authentic religious community ought to be, by adopting the values of African communalism as a basis.

I. Introduction

Community living is an essential aspect of the life a religious, which is lived out according to the proper norms of an institute of consecrated life. Communal way of living is not a strange pattern of life but from time immemorial has been lived by the Africans. Africans share life in common, celebrate together, and also share certain things in common, such as farmland, streams, shrines, market, habitation, etc.

This article adopts a deductive method based on some presuppositions of the African sense of community life. In doing this, it seeks to explore the values of African community life and apply them to the community life of the consecrated religious. Though the African community has its disvalues but our interest is on the values or its positive aspects worthy of emulation.

In this article, we shall seek to understand the meaning of community, religious community, African communalism, the values of community in African Culture, and how these values can contribute to the building of an authentic religious community. The application of religious community here does not imply a Christian community but rather the community of the consecrated men and women within the Catholic Church.

II. Meaning of Communalism

According to Iroegbu, "By communalism we understand a theory of a just society in which the community is the foundation of political life, and in which the autonomy of the members of the community is assured."¹ The basic element in this definition is that there is a unity of two poles: community and individuality. Both are not contrasted to each other. Contrarily, both are brought into a relationship of mutuality and functional co-existence.

Two basic concepts are involved: *foundation* which community provides, and *autonomy* which individuality enjoys. To bring the relationships to a sharper focus, we shall conceptually articulate the meanings of community and individuality which brings them together.

III. Community

According to the general meaning of community as defined by the New International Webster's Dictionary, is the people who reside in one locality and are subject to the same laws, and who have the same interest.

In the New Dictionary of Theology, community is also described in terms of a family, in the sense that the relationships between members of the community are basically personal in character rather than impersonal. On the other hand, it is unlike a family in the sense that the association between members of the community is based on free choice rather than common ancestry.¹

A community is made up of human beings, different individual families who together form a one larger family. That is why the very word "community" designates a group of people united together. Unity or communion is a very important word to the concept 'community'. It is an essential attribute of community living. Kasper noted that communion (*koinonia*) in its original sense in Greek, does not mean community but participation (*participatio*). The verb '*koinoneo*' means 'to share, to participate, to have something in common'.¹ Thus, this participation is taking part in the joys and sorrows, problems, needs, worries, fears, successes and failures, etc, of one another within the community.

IV. Biblical Background of Community

According to Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology (CPD), the term community does not formally appear in the Bible, although there are many terms for assembly, convocation, association, meeting, people of God, household of God, etc. The NT names Jesus' disciples as 'Church' and 'synagogue'. Hence when readers examine the notion and reality of community in the Bible, they must take special care to examine the specific how and why ancient Jews and Christians assembled together, which will be different from modern associations.¹

[a.] Community in the Old Testament

The notion of community in the OT was rooted in the idea of belonging to a large extended family. Individual households included parents, their married children, wives and offspring, slaves and servants, all under one house. One's primary identity rested in this family, with its extended relationships to tribe or clan. This notion implies the sharing of wealth of the family (e.g., wells, fields, animals, etc.), its network of support and defense, its honour and respect. Ideal marriages were between cousins, thus cementing the network of trust and support, wealth and power, among families and tribes. One's basic nation of community then was that of kinship, with its rich and overlapping strands of shared identity, trust, honour, and support.¹

[b.] Community in the New Testament

In the New Testament, people belonged to groups outside the family network, which are properly understood as fictive families. The community of Jesus' disciples describes itself as a (fictive) family.¹ With his blood relatives standing outside a house, Jesus turns to those inside listening to his teaching and considered them as real

members of his immediate family (Mark 3:34-35). Consequently, Paul spoke of himself as the “father” of the community (1Cor 4:14-15) and his co-workers as “brothers” (1 Cor1:11; Phil 2:25). Similarly, Paul identifies the members of the Church as kin (1 Thess 4:6; 1 Cor5:11). He expects the community members to extend the same respect, support, and indulgence to fictive kin as to blood kin (cf. 1 Cor 8:11, 13; Rom 14: 10-15). At Corinth Stephanus’ whole household joined the Church (1 Cor 1:16; Acts 16:15) and that kinship group became (fictive) kin with others in the household of God.

Social relations in the community of the disciples mirrored the pattern of relations in the family. Ideally all members of this fictive family were to be treated with due honor, support, and protection as members of the same household. Hence the sharing of fellowship (*koinonia*) characterized them.¹

Greek and Hebrew widows were both supported (Act6:1-6). Non - elite members should be treated with respect (1 Cor 12:24-25). Acts of the Apostles describes the community sharing resources like a true family (2:44; 4:34) such is the ideal. Although fellowship characterizes Christian social relations, we should not imagine an egalitarian or communistic group.

The same social structures and classifications found in the family characterized the Christian community as well, and family structures were definitely not egalitarian.

[V] RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

From its biblical foundation, religious community was formed out of a way of life. This way of life was motivated and sprang up from the close followership of the Apostles with Christ their master (cf. Acts 2: 42-47). The community that was formed lived together in unison and shared fraternal love.

Religious community takes its model not only from the early Christian community formed around the Apostles but, from the Trinity. The Trinity is the source, the foundation, point of departure, the end and strength of every religious community. Hence, religious community could be referred to as “a people brought into unity from the Unity of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (cf. LG 4).

Religious community is that community which brings together people from different continents, nationalities and races as superb foretastes and anticipations of the Kingdom of God here on earth.¹ It is made up of people of different family background and formation who came to live together for the sake of the Kingdom of God. It therefore means that person and community are correlative concepts. To be a true person is to be a member of a genuine community.

Religious community is a family of God on mission. According to *Perfecta Caritatis*, it is a community gathered together as a true family in the Lord’s name who enjoys his presence through the love of God which is poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit (no 15).

The religious community as noted by Kaitholil is an association of persons who want to pursue sanctity. Since it is made up of persons, it is an organism and not a

mechanism. It has a supernatural motive, and therefore, ought to be fulfilled through the communion of thoughts, of hearts, of works, of prayer, etc.¹

[VI] AFRICAN COMMUNALISM

According to Bell (cited by Faniran), two separate ideas inform the African worldview: unanimism and communalism. In line with Paul Hountondji's definition of unanimism, Bell explains that it refers to the illusion that all men and women in Africa speak with one voice and share the same opinion about all fundamental issues. He traces its root to Placid Tempels idea that all Bantu-speaking Africans believe in a unified spiritual force and therefore have a shared view of the world to which the idea of the individual as a separate being from the bonding force is foreign.¹

For the place of the individual in the community, Mbiti says that;

“In traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create or produce the individual; for the individual depends on the corporate group... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the group happens to the individual. The individual can only say ‘I am; because we are, and since we are, therefore, I am’. This is the cardinal point in understanding of the African view of man.¹

In line with Mbiti's position, Menkiti (cited by Faniran) insists on the fact that the individual's identity is simply part of “a thoroughly fused collective ‘we’ and that as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be”. In addition, Menkiti maintains that personhood is something which has to be achieved, and is not given simply because one is born of human seed.¹

The African communalism entails a tense relationship between the individual and the community. Gyekye (cited by Faniran) sums it up thus:

The fact that the African people express appreciation for both communal and individualistic values means that for them, these two seemingly opposed concepts can co-exist, however precariously. Their idea is that the individual cannot develop outside the framework of the community as a whole cannot dispense with the talents and initiative of its individual members either. The interaction between the individual and the community (or group) is therefore considered basic to the development of the individual's personality as well as to the overall success and well-being of the community.¹

Nkafu (cited by Faniran) calls this tensed relationship between the individual and the community, 'the vital union' and defines it in philosophical terms as "a vision of totality in which beings, while perceived as distinct, are nevertheless ontologically and intimately related with each other."¹

However, there are signs that Africans communalism is fast giving way to Western individualism. African culture under the impact of modernization is disappearing, leaving its remnant in villages not yet contaminated by modernization.

Africans generally have their traditional communal way of life. It is a way of life whereby one needs the other members of the community for existence and to have meaning in life. Communalism is one of the utmost cultural values of Africans and it reveals the individual as part of the community. It is a concept that portrays African community spirit.¹ African communalism is not a speculative concept but the traditional way of life of the Africans.

According to Onwubiko,

"communalism in Africa is a system that is both suprasensible and material in its terms of reference. Both are found in a society that is believed by the Africans to be originally 'god-made' because it transcends the people who live in it now, and it is 'manmade' because it cannot be culturally understood independent of those who live in it now. Therefore, the authentic African is known and identified in, by and through his community. The community is the custodian of the individual; hence he must go where the community goes."¹

The implication is that community is vital in the life of the African, and therefore, cannot live in isolation. Life loses its meaning for the African once he/she isolates himself/herself from the community. It is the community that gives the African his/her identity.

Whoever has no identity does not have a history. The interrelatedness that exists in African communalism entails that no individual person can make it or survive all alone. One's survival depends on the survival of the community from where one draws his/her vital force. Therefore, the individual and community are correlated.

In the traditional African setting, there is no place for individualism. Ejizu noted the frequent use of the first person plural 'we', 'ours' in everyday speech of the African.¹ The idea of community among Africans, according to Iroegbu, 'is basically a spirit of communing'. It underlies the ideas of sociability, exchange, inter-subjectivity and reciprocity. In the community, the members relate to one another in a communal fashion of fraternity, hospitality and care. In Igbo land, we live the basic community called the *Umunna* (kindred). The *Umunna* can today shift from the kindred to the national and the continental. A nation is a political *Umunna*.¹

The *Umunna* (community) constitutes the basis (fulcrum) of interpersonal relationships. From it the individual draws his life-force. To it, he contributes his individual talents. From the *Umunna*, the individual receives what B. Dudley calls the “mental furniture” of his entire life. Though, this can evolve with contacts with other communities and ideologies.¹

The community is also operational not only in the sense of being the receiver of the individual’s actions and possessions, but also in its function of provision for the individual. In the Church, legitimate diversity is a fact of life, and has been adopted as a fundamental principle in various documents of the Second Vatican Council. Subsidiarity is predicated on dedication to the welfare of the members and dignity of the individual. As Pope Pius XII pointed out;

“...the ultimate purpose of the Church Law is ‘the Salvation of souls,’ or the promotion of the conditions necessary for persons to respond in faith to Christ’s call in their lives. Co-responsibility, on the other hand, emphasizes the contribution each is called to make in building up the Church at various levels. Each person contributes to the welfare of the whole Body of Christ, whether at the most local level, in its world-wide aspect, or any place on the continuum in between.”¹

VII. RESUME: AFRICAN COMMUNALISM THE SURE BASIS FOR ENSURING AUTHENTIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

As Africans, we have our core values which are deeply communalistic in nature. As a people, we also have our history. In Africa, emphasis on communal activities is dominant. Since they are community minded people their activities are often animated by the spirit of team work. Similarly, the Church is fundamentally a community of people who share the same values and live these out individually and in community. Anytime people gather together for a common purpose, some type of structure or organized interaction develops, even informally. More formal expression of these interactions is developed to protect the rights and freedoms of people within the group.¹ The Religious community exists to praise God, develop the Christian life among its members, and to proclaim the Gospel of Christ and his liberating, healing presence to a sinful world. This they do through their respective apostolates.

Nevertheless, Placid Tempels (cited by Faniran) noted that all bantu-speaking Africans believe in a unified spiritual force and therefore have a shared view of the world to which the idea of the individual as a separate being from the bonding force is foreign.¹

However, to put these principles into practice, there is the urgent need for all to attempt a rediscovering of the values of African communalism in order to deepen our religious sharing in the Communities. Already, an increasing number of theologians and canon lawyers are recommending the ‘communal’ or ‘communion model’ of the

Church. This sees the people of God as a community of persons, hierarchically structured but equal in responsibility for the life and mission of the Church itself.

This model has deep roots in the tradition of the Church. It was also one of the most influential ways of thinking about the Church at the time of the Second Vatican Council. It equally provides a basis for the reform of Catholic life which the Council mandated.

VII. CONCLUSION

Therefore, this work seeks to posit in line with Iroegbu, 'a community-individual relationship, not Western atomism, not (Old) Russian communism, but a balanced integration of the values that both the society and the individual present, [but] for the full flourishing of the human person'.¹ Only such a religious community would succeed in modeling itself after the early Christian community where the Gospel was preached, the Sacraments celebrated and Christians lived in a community of love and concern for one another.

This kind of community lays emphasis on the effective transmission of the Gospel values. Such communities enhance the mission of the Church within the local milieu and provides basis for full participation by all members in the very life of the Church itself.

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END NOTES