

Interface Between Igbo Theology and Christianity

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Edited by

Akuma-Kalu Njoku and Elochukwu Uzukwu

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P U B L I S H I N G

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INTRODUCTION

AKUMA-KALU NJOKU AND ELOCHUKWU UZUKWU

There are commonalities and differences between the indigenous Igbo pattern of “speaking about God”, spirits and deities and the Christian God-talk. This became evident to Igbo intellectuals and Igbophiles during an international and interdisciplinary conference on the *Interface between Igbo Theology and Christianity*, held in Owerri, Nigeria, July 5-7, 2012. The conference offered scholars a context to share from their various disciplines perspectives for understanding Igbo theological imaginations vis-à-vis Christianity. This book, the fruit of the multidisciplinary conversation, provides scholarly discussions on the interactions of Christianity and Igbo traditional religion in the postcolonial era. It suggests that the fundamental tenets of traditional Igbo religion and Christianity may not be too far from each other. The book contains an edited version of the papers presented at that international conference.

Interface between Igbo Theology and Christianity provides evidence of new scholarly thinking about the dynamic convergence of Christianity and Igbo religion taking place in the Igbo culture area. Today, the majority of Igbo people practice various versions of Christianity. One of the intellectual assumptions of this book is that in the dynamic and rapidly changing African world, the cultural traditions of the Igbo, while rapidly changing at every level, retain resilience and the distinguishing marks that make the traditions recognizable as Igbo.¹ Contributors therefore explore how to enhance the capacity of Igbo Christians to be truly Igbo and truly Christian. It is hoped that this book will become a blueprint for deep dialogue among the Igbo in the city or rural setting, in the clan or community life context and in the Christian parish setting. The traditions of Igbo people who live in predominantly Christian states of Nigeria are

¹ Though perhaps dated, the points made about the Igbo receptivity to change by Ottenberg still remain relevant: Simon Ottenberg, "Ibo Receptivity to Change," in *Continuity and change in African cultures*, ed. W.R. Bascom, M.J. Herskovits, and National Research Council (U.S.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

taken into account in their religious development. This is central to the effective interfaith dialogue that this book intends to generate and encourage.

This book offers concepts, themes, issues, and case studies with deep ethnographic details, some of which do not exist anywhere else in print. It is, therefore, a major statement about how modern Igbo scholars, social scientists, philosophers, theologians, liturgists, and active pastors and parish priests, understand the intersection of Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity in postcolonial Nigeria. The book will provide guidance for community-based organizations and donor NGOs engaged in the struggle to find viable means to develop mutual respect and trust among Christian denominations and between them and Igbo Traditional Religion. Policymakers at the national and regional government levels will find the book useful in exploring the role that religion, community religious groups and institutions play in Igboland. Another primary audience for this book is the Igbo undergraduate and graduate students, seminarians, liturgists, theologians, philosophers, research scholars, and all interested in religion in Igboland. The book will also be very useful to pastors, parish priests, practitioners, and development or planning specialists as they carry out their responsibilities in the Igbo speaking states. In the greater Nigerian and West African region, students of comparative religion, society and culture will find this book useful in drawing appropriate lessons on Igbo society and religion in the postcolonial era. The book will certainly appeal to numerous communities that would like to share similar local experiences and collective memories, but do not have the channel to talk about themselves in scholarly writings.

Organization of the Book

The book begins by raising preliminary questions about the interface between Igbo religious history and traditions and Christianity (Part One). The historical and theoretical foundations for understanding religion in Igboland, for appreciating the theology of Igbo religion and exploring the interface with Christianity are outlined. The keynote address by Francis Cardinal Arinze, and the essays of Okere, Ejizu, Jell-Bahlsen and Njoku provide the foundation for the ideas running through this book.

Francis Cardinal Arinze's keynote address explains, on the one hand, the openness of the Catholic Church to and its respect for all religions and cultures (Chapter One). The insightful comment on Christian mission to Igboland captured the focus of the international Igbo conference and the thrust of this book. He asserts that the arrival of missionaries was certainly

“not the beginning of the religious, cultural and linguistic history of the Igbo people.” Rather missionaries encountered Igbo people “who have a rich and proud past and patrimony.” On the other hand, the Cardinal presents the limited scope of inculturation theology as understood by the official Roman Church. The director of the Whelan Research Academy, Msgr. T. Okere introduces, in Chapter Two, the complexity of Igbo religious beliefs and practices. He notes the initial misunderstandings, as well as the absence of dialogue, between Igbo elders and the Christian missionaries. That scenario led to the ambiguous focus of evangelization on children (education). His essay “The Interface between Igbo Theology and Christianity: A Paradox?” captures the challenge of this book. To unravel the “paradox”, Igbo Christian theologians of inculturation need to ponder on the Christian roots of the term “theology”, the ambiguity of assigning that term to the indigenous Igbo religious God-talk, and the irony of Igbo Christians engaging in Igbo theology (ITR or Christian) that is more or less a monologue. Ejizu (Chapter Three) and Jell-Bahlsen (Chapter Four) underscore the fact that the foundations for the discourse on “interface” depend on the survival of the Igbo as a people anchored on the overarching ethos of the Igbo. The prolegomenon for the study of any theology among the Igbo is rooted in Igbo ethical vision, law and order. This is why *Ofo na-Ogu* and *Mmanwu* for Ejizu capture ethics and “law and order”. Take away these key aspects of the indigenous culture of the Igbo and one is totally out of touch with the Igbo. In the same vein, Jell-Bahlsen, from ethnographic data, argues that *Omenala* (laws of the Land) must be understood in all their ramifications, and be fully applied or reinstated in modern Igbo society for the society to survive. *Omenala* and *Ofo na-Ogu* proclaim the foundations of Igbo ethics. *Mmanwu* ensures the protection of the same ethical principles, law and order. These capture fundamental Igbo values of always searching for “another point of view”, preferring *equilibrium* in contradistinction from a predilection for extremes that dog contemporary Igbo societies. Njoku (Chapter Five) concludes this section by not only stressing the foundational position of *Ogu* in the Igbo approach to reality. He provides ethnographic detail as a window to the practice of *itu ugu ututu* (Igbo Morning Prayer) that gives stronger grounding to the methodological requirements proposed by Ejizu and Jell-Bahlsen. The texts provided by Kalu on “Igbo Affirmations, Shrine Incantations, and Libations” are indeed “Indicators of Igbo Religion, Theology, and Divine Purpose.” The affirmations, kola nut communions, and libations are enacted to reveal Igbo thoughts about the universe, creation, and the divine. They also reveal ideas about life on earth and hereafter; they articulate Igbo cardinal doctrines (*oluokwukwe*

Igbo) and divine purpose (*isi uma Chineke*). Material objects such as the palm frond (*omu*), symbols like the chalky clay (*nzu*), kola-nut (*oji*), and the drinking gourd (*iko agbo*) reveal the divine. In addition, Kalu makes an altogether original contribution to this book by sharing his experience of the famous *Ibin Ukpabi* oracle of Arochukwu. The pilgrimage he made into the Dark Chamber Presence of *Chukwu Abiama* was for him breathtaking. It set the stage for reevaluating Igbo doctrines and practices, and of gaining insight into Igbo religious, ethical and theological imagination.

After laying the foundations for the conversation or dialogue between Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR) and Christianity in Part One, Part Two charts the way towards evolving deep dialogue, with practical consequences, between Igbo religious cultures and Christianity. Uzukwu and Mbonu present theoretical and practical discourse of the encounter between Igbo religious world and Christianity. Uzukwu (Chapter Six) enthuses over the “Distance-Nearness, Absence-Presence” of God in Igbo and West African religions. Rather than interpret the self-effacement of *Chukwu* as weakening religion or divine-human communication, the distance rather provides a template for appreciating the health-destiny focused agenda of West African religions: the intentionality of religion and religious practices is the realization of individual and communal destiny. As a way to inculturation theology Uzukwu reinterprets the theories of the nearness-distance, presence-absence of God, and reevaluates the relational and pneumatological West African Christian reception of the Triune God that he connects to the “history of God” in the Old Testament (Hebrew monotheism). In addition, he draws attention to crucial theological insights carried over from West African traditional religions into Christianity that have relevance for religions as such: the multiplicity of deities and spirits that are not in competition with God in the West African religious universe challenges and disarms religious militancy. Inculturation learns from West African religions that religions mediate the harmonious interrelationship among religious persons. In Chapter Seven Caroline N. Mbonu, a Catholic nun, provides a firsthand ethnographic detail on “The Religious Culture of Women in Igbo Society.” Authentic inculturation ensures similar roles of power for women ensuring gender balance and the liberation of women within the practice of Christianity. Mbonu focuses primarily on Etche traditions and culture that she connects with the Biblical and Christian perspective. Igbo religion is first and foremost the belief in or worship of *Chukwu*, which is consistent with the Christian God. In the tradition *Chukwu* is represented neither in andromorphic nor in gynomorphic terms. Consequently, there hardly exists any gender discrimination in the realm

of religion and worship: A female divinity is served by a male priest and vice versa. Women participated in all the essentials of the religious culture. In Etcheland, women's religious culture, practiced in the *mgbala/usoekwu* (hearth), grounds life. In this space, the offspring is imbued with the essential human abilities to engage the world. The presence of an altar of *Chi* in the *mgbala* sacralizes this female sphere. Many Christian women in Igboland continue the tradition of a circumscribed hallowed space within the homestead: they erect altars of the Blessed Virgin, Our Lady of Perpetual Help or that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in their homes. In both the indigenous and Christian settings, families gather around the altar for prayer and reflection. The presence of home altars suggests one area of interface between Igbo religious traditions and Christianity. Mbonu draws from the works of biblical scholars as well as African theologians to show that the fundamental women religious culture in Igbo tradition share kindred spirit with women religious culture in the Bible and Christianity.

In Part Three contributors propose what we call inter- and intra-cultural dialogue as a way of reconciling the old and the new in contemporary Igbo society; in a sense, a way of recapturing Igbo identity. Ijezie, in Chapter Eight, argues from the study of Hebrew and Igbo notions of the human person that have similarities that the recent Igbo translation of the Catholic Mass texts must involve not only linguistics but profound philosophical, theological anthropological work. The elements that come together to make the person, as soul, heart, mind, thought, feeling, passion, etc., are better grasped from intercultural influences. Ijezie insists that while the original Igbo mode of representing these entities has much affinity with the Hebrew thought patterns, the influence of contemporary Western Greco-Latin thought has somewhat beclouded the original linguistic formulation to the extent that the Igbo Christian language remains deficient in most of its expressions of personal identity. By engaging in the intercultural conversation between Hebrew and Igbo anthropologies, Ijezie lays the foundation for the necessary inter- and intra-cultural conversation among Igbo linguists and ecclesiastics involved in the translation of their liturgical texts.

In Chapter Nine, Maduawuchi Stan Ogbonna makes the point that Igbo elite, in order to fulfil their leadership role as Igbo and Christian leaders must return to their roots so as to be "Truly Igbo, Truly and Christian". There is no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane in traditional Igbo cosmology. What we call religion today was part and parcel of everyday life. Hence people of traditional Igbo society lived a consonant life, in the presence of the ubiquitous Supreme Being, *Chukwu*, considered

so close to the people that the Igbo people speak of *Chukwu* in anthropomorphic terms. *Chukwu* directs and controls the universe he created. Christian missionaries did not know much about Igbo culture and traditional religion. They did not respect those ancestral human values that enabled Igbo to sustain consonant existence through the ages. Ogbonna argues that today Igbo intelligentsia must provide leadership in integrating the positive Christian and Igbo values. The exercise will lead to the emergence of Igbo people who are genuinely Igbo and truly Christian.

In Chapter Ten, “Shadows of the Good Things to Come”, Jones Ugochukwu Odili expresses optimism about the intra- and inter-cultural conversation that will lead to genuine inculturation among the Igbo. He moves from field experience to search for the ways in which God is addressing the Igbo through their religious culture. He studies the practice of confession and repentance among the Igbo, and concludes that within the ritual imperatives of the Igbo religious world, one encounters the Self-revelation of God. After a brief comparison with conversion and repentance in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, Odili concludes that God has made Godself manifest in the Igbo (African) experience. The African theologians need only to discover, exploit and harness the numerous “shadows of good things to come”, the vehicles of transcendence, native to their cultural regions for fuller reception of the Gospel in their context.

Iwu Ikwubuzo explores in Chapter Eleven the interface between the religious and cultural traditions that mutually exist in the Igbo artist enhancing rather than limiting the creativity of the artist. In “Elements Of Traditional & Christian Religions In Written Igbo Poetry” Iwu studies the Christian eschatological views reflected in Chukwuemeka Obienyem’s poem, “Be Mmụọ” and contrasts it with Igbo traditional notion of after-life embodied in Joseph Maduekwe’s poem, “Na Ngwuru Nna m Ha”. Highlighting the meshing of Christian and Igbo theological notions in the poems, Iwu concludes that the incorporation of the religious beliefs by the poets did not impede their creativity. While the two Igbo poets manifest profound influence of Igbo traditional and Christian religions in their poems, they nevertheless exercise their creative skills in the way they present the religious motifs.

Finally, in the “African Origins of Judaism”, Sidney L. Davis Jr., in Chapter Twelve addresses the question of the Jewish, Hebrew or Israelite identity or origins of indigenous African people groups such as the Kayla/Agau of East Africa, the Luba of Central Africa, the Igbo of West Africa, the Lemba of South Africa and other people groups from Africa or the African Diaspora. Since the introduction of the Bible by European and

American missionaries to enslaved and colonized Africans the speculation about the “lost tribes of Israel” loomed large in the imagination of the colonizing agents due to the similarity of traditions, cultural practices, moral and ethical precepts of Africans to “Jewish” precepts and practices as found in the Hebrew Scriptures. This in turn has resulted in the phenomenon of Hebrew or Israelite identity being claimed by various African people groups. Drawing from history, linguistics and material anthropology, Davies turns the Africa-Israel hypothesis on its head by proposing that what we find as evidence of Hebrew identity in Africa is instead evidence of the African origins of these so-called “Hebrewisms” and other “Jewish” cultural identifiers that find themselves in the Hebrew Bible narratives.

The international Conference that brought together Igbo scholars from diverse fields has enabled Igbo and Igbophiles to articulate their perception of the interface between the theologies of Igbo Traditional Religion and Igbo theory and practice of Christianity. The two religions rather than being antagonists appear in practice to be bedfellows. Interdisciplinary conversation rather than producing a cacophony succeeds in producing a symphony. Indeed the conversation indicates great things to come in providing firm and lasting structures to the dynamic Igbo worldvision. Scholarly work by Igbo in multidisciplinary perspective secures the Igbo worldvision for the good not only of the Igbo but of all humanity. For the Igbo religious imagination that ensured harmonious relationship between men and women, humans and nature, when enmeshed with Christianity that gives priority to the human through education and life enhancing ritual performance, would ensure the protection and advancement of the marginalized and provide abundant life for Igbo and all humans who come from *Chukwu* (God).

PART ONE:

**CHALLENGING THE PROJECT –
INTERFACE BETWEEN THE THEOLOGY
OF IGBO INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS
AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY**

CHRISTIANITY MEETS IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION¹

FRANCIS CARDINAL ARINZE

Timely and praiseworthy initiative

This international conference is timely. It is praiseworthy. It is fitting that scholars of international renown gather together to reflect on the interface between Igbo theology and Christianity. Theologians, philosophers, liturgy experts, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, psychologists and other scholars, mainly Igbo, have gathered together to listen to one another and to share views on the relationship between Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity, especially in their theological articulation. In view of the fact that in less than two hundred years of Christian missionary effort, most followers of Igbo Traditional Religion have become Christians, but that nevertheless this traditional religion still retains quite a number of believers, and considering particularly that the social and religious context in which most Igbo Christians live today is heavily influenced by elements of Igbo Traditional Religion, the topic chosen for this convention is of great relevance.

Deep gratitude is due to all those who in any way have made this encounter possible. The organizing committee, those who have sacrificed time, talent and treasure to put all this together, those who have planned, organized, revised, travelled to Owerri, and of course those who have undergone the discipline of preparing the lectures, all deserve to know that we are all grateful to them. The Whelan Research Academy which hosts this convention is equally to be thanked.

It is fitting, and it is no coincidence, that this conference is being held in Owerri, the home city of the annual Odenigbo Lecture. The Odenigbo event is an encouraging initiative of linguistic consciousness which is an integral part of cultural identity. Can a person who cannot express himself

¹ Keynote address given in the International Interdisciplinary Conference, *The Interface of Igbo Theology and Christianity*, Owerri, 6 July, 2012.

or herself in the mother tongue, or who stumbles and falls and calls on words from other languages to supplement his or her deplorable poverty of self-expression in the mother tongue, not be suspected of lack of sufficient self-respect and self-acceptance? Thank you very much, Amarachi Obinna, for your leadership in this direction!

This international colloquium could be seen as a manifestation of love, esteem and respect for Igbo religious and cultural heritage. The studies are being presented and discussed in a climate of honest and courageous inquiry in a free and open market of interdisciplinary mutual listening and sharing. This is healthy.

Another encouraging consideration is that the participants come from various Christian religious families -- Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian or otherwise -- or simply from renowned academic institutions without a particular religious affinity. All join in the common effort to piece together a vision and a statement of Igbo theology as objectively as possible. This cannot but be positive because scientific objectivity is not afraid of exposure and examination in the public square. And such objective study is indispensable for authentic inculturation of the Christian message.

The Igbo deserve this study. And they need it. A people who do not know or understand their past, cannot properly understand their present. And if they do not care enough about their patrimony, then whatever they may be building now is likely to rest on shaky cultural and religious foundations. This convention can help bring together studies and efforts made in the past decades, give credit to the pioneers and indicate possible avenues for the future.

Igbo Traditional Religion should be taken seriously

The religious culture which held sway in Igboland before the arrival of the Christian missionaries deserves close study and respect.

Basic to this religion is a belief in one God who is Creator and giver of life and who is generally believed to dwell in a rather transcendent distance from humans.

Very common is belief in spirits, both non-human spirits and human spirits who are the ancestors. Some non-human spirits are believed to be wicked or at least unpredictable, while others are thought to be kind and benevolent. These good spirits and the ancestors receive most of the happy offerings.

Because of the belief in the spirit world, prayer and sacrifice figure very much in Igbo Traditional Religion. A consequence is that the idea of the priesthood is also strong.

Human beings are expected in their lives to be attentive to the moral laws of right and wrong, as expressed by customs, directives from the ancestors and moral taboos. To ignore them would be to court trouble from the ancestors or from the spirits.

Religion is regarded as a normal part of life. A secularistic mentality, which would live as if God and the spirits and the ancestors did not exist, was unthinkable. Indeed major milestones in life were marked with religious beliefs and practices at birth, puberty, marriage, sickness, death and burial. Indeed, even the building of a new house, the undertaking of a long journey and the taking of social titles were occasions for religious rites. And there was also the belief that one's state of life after death is dependent on one's performance in this world, as well as on the carrying out of funeral rites.

Without suggesting that the average person in a Nigerian university today, or the business person in Lagos, or in Ariaria market in Aba, or in Nkwo Nnewi, or the member of parliament in a State capital or in Abuja, is necessarily practising this Igbo Traditional Religion in its pristine state today, there is no denying that this religious patrimony is impressive, that together with its accompanying culture it continues to influence even converted Christians, and that it is worthy of respect and serious study today.

Expectations from this Symposium

Different people may have differing expectations from this international conference. Would anyone just want to study Igbo theology and religion with the aim of keeping it alive and well and preserving it unstained as something that the Igbo should be proud about? Or would some academician just want to keep Igbo Traditional Religion as far as possible in its pristine state for the sake of study?

More likely is the hope of studying a meeting between Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity. The Christian theologian knows that he or she cannot understand a person properly without being well informed on that person's religion and culture. And because for the Igbo, as for most Africans south of the Sahara, religion and culture are so closely related that at times it is hard to tell when and where religion finishes and culture begins, and the same word may be used for religion, customs and culture, therefore a serious study of Igbo theology and religion is called for.

The Christian evangelizer sees it as necessary to understand the Igbo, to respect them and to pay tribute to what their traditional religion and culture possess that is good, true, beautiful and holy. Only when the

Christian takes this background seriously will it be possible to present to the Igbo the Christian message in full consciousness of their religious and cultural context, since they do not come from a religious or cultural void. Then the pedagogical presentation of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ will be better grounded. It will be less difficult to discern elements of the traditional religion and culture which Christianity could adopt, or adapt, or retouch, and elements which are so diametrically opposed to the Christian faith that they have to be rejected. Greater care will then be exercised in approaching ambiguous or unclear practices. Is title taking, for example, to be understood as merely social, or is it essentially religious and irretrievably tied to the worship of the spirits or the ancestors? Inculturation has to be based on good scientific study of cultural and religious elements and not on *a priori* acceptance or rejection of not-well-studied and not-properly-understood practices.

Regarding this international conference, therefore, there are varying and great expectations.

Attitude of the Catholic Church towards other religions and cultures

The attitude of the Catholic Church towards people of other religions and cultures who embrace the faith has been one of openness. The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (earlier called “de Propaganda Fide”), in sending its first missionaries to Indochina (today we would say Vietnam and around) in 1627, admonished them to respect the cultures and traditions of those peoples and to reject only which is diametrically opposed to the Christian faith.

In 1951 Pope Pius XII wrote in his Encyclical Letter on Catholic missionary work, *Evangelii Praecones*,

The Church from the beginning down to our own time has always followed this wise practice: let not the Gospel, on being introduced into any new land, destroy or extinguish whatever its people possess that is naturally good, just or beautiful. For the Church, when she calls people to a higher culture and a better way of life under the inspiration of the Christian religion, does not act like one who recklessly cuts down and uproots a thriving forest. No, she grafts a good scion upon the wild stock that it may bear a crop of more delicious fruit (*Evangelii Praecones*, in AAS 43 (1951) 521).

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) is very explicit. Stressing the characteristic of universality, the Council says:

The Church or People of God takes nothing away from the temporal welfare of any people by establishing that kingdom. Rather does she foster and take to herself, insofar as they are good, the ability, resources, and customs of each people. Taking them to herself, she purifies, strengthens, and ennobles them. The Church in this is mindful that she must harvest with that King to whom the nations were given for an inheritance (cf Ps 2:8) and into whose city they bring gifts and presents (*Lumen Gentium*, 13).

Speaking of the missionary activity of the Church, the Council specifies further:

Whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God, this activity frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker, who overthrows the devil's domain and wards off the manifold malice of vice. And so whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, is not lost. More than that, it is healed, ennobled and perfected for the glory of God, the shame of the devil, and the bliss of men (*Ad Gentes*, 9).

Writing on dialogue with people of other religions, Blessed Pope John Paul II says:

In Christ, God calls all peoples to himself and he wishes to share with them the fullness of his revelation and love. He does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain 'gaps, insufficiencies and errors' (*Redemptoris Missio*, 55; see also *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 53).

In his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation after the 1994 African Synod, the same Pope John Paul II shows respect for African Traditional Religion. "With regard to African traditional religion", he writes,

a serene and prudent dialogue will be able, on the one hand, to protect Catholics from negative influences which condition the way of life of many of them and, on the other hand, to foster the assimilation of positive values such as belief in a Supreme Being who is Eternal, Creator, Provident and Just Judge, values which are readily harmonized with the content of the faith....The adherents of African traditional religion should therefore be treated with great respect and esteem, and all inaccurate and disrespectful language should be avoided. For this purpose, suitable courses in African traditional religion should be given in houses of formation for priests and religious (*Ecclesia in Africa*, 67).

A close examination of this attitude of the Church shows that it is indeed reasonable. We must admit that not all missionaries all through the centuries have always followed this directive. But there is no doubt about its wisdom or about the stand of the Church. After all, the date of the arrival of the first Christian missionaries in Igboland is not the beginning of the religious, cultural and linguistic history of the Igbo people. The missionary meets a people who have a rich and proud past and patrimony. He does not have to cut down the thriving forest which he meets on arrival. He tries to understand it, to learn its parts. Only then will he be able to discern how best to bring to the people the saving message of Jesus Christ, the one and only Saviour of all humanity (cf Jn 4:42). This is the Saviour of the world into whose city the nations all come bringing their characteristic gifts. The three Magi from the East already preceded them, symbolized them and represented them all.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not precipitate a religious or cultural operation wipe-out of the past. The missionary is not a reckless iconoclast. Unless a people to be evangelized know where they come from, what their religious and cultural heritage held as precious and worthy and what their ancestors have taught them to abhor, they cannot be sure foundation members of the Christian faith. Grace builds on nature. It does not destroy it. This introduces us to a fuller consideration on inculturation.

Inculturation

The Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ is for all peoples, cultures and languages. The Gospel should be at home among each people, and each people should be at home in the Church.

When the Gospel arrives among a people, the missionaries bring those people the riches of the Catholic faith and tradition and the experiences of other nations along the corridors of history. Gradually from the customs and traditions of the local people, from their wisdom, their arts and their sciences, these local Churches borrow some elements that lead to the glory of God the Creator and to the living of the Christian life.

“If this goal is to be achieved”, says the Second Vatican Council,

theological investigation must necessarily be stirred up in each major socio-cultural area, as it is called. In this way, under the light of the tradition of the universal Church, a fresh scrutiny will be brought to bear on the deeds and words which God has made known, which have been consigned to Sacred Scripture, and which have been unfolded by the Church Fathers and the teaching authority of the Church (*Ad Gentes*, 22).

Inculturation is therefore “the incarnation of the Gospel in autonomous cultures and at the same time the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church” (John Paul II: *Slavorum Apostoli*, 21). Authentic inculturation indicates that there is an intimate transformation of cultural values by their integration into Christianity and also the implantation of Christianity into the different cultures. “By inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures, and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 52).

On the one hand the penetration of the Gospel into a given socio-cultural milieu “gives inner fruitfulness to the spiritual qualities and gifts proper to each people...strengthens these qualities, perfects them and restores them in Christ”. On the other hand, the Church assimilates these values, when they are compatible with the Gospel “to deepen understanding of Christ’s message and give it more effective expression in the liturgy and in many different aspects of life of the community of believers” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 58).

The mystery of the Incarnation offers a model, an image to inculturation. The Son of God took on human nature in a particular culture. The Gospel takes on all that is good, noble or true in a culture. Some elements it assumes. Others it purifies and elevates. And some elements have to be rejected (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 13, 17; *Ad Gentes*, 9).

It is easier to enunciate the principles of inculturation than to carry out the task itself. Inculturation is rather demanding on the local Church. The Holy Scripture and the liturgical texts will first have to be translated into the language of the area. On behalf of the local Church, the Bishops of the area have to organize interdisciplinary studies on specific cultural elements. Theologians, philosophers, historians, anthropologists, biblicists, musicologists, literature experts and other scholars whose special fields may be indicated, have first to study the matter together, especially if it regards liturgical matters. The Bishops will then have to take the recommendations of the experts and work on them according to Church laws. If it is a question of introducing a liturgical change, they will have to vote by two-thirds majority in favour and then refer the matter to Rome (cf *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 40; *Ad Gentes*, 22; *Varietates Legitimae*, 28-30, 63-69; *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 395-399).

When it is a question of relating a belief or practice in Igbo Traditional Religion to a tenet of Christianity, then the Christian theologian needs to be indeed well grounded in Christian theology, as well as well informed on Igbo beliefs. This demand on the Christian theologian is our next consideration.

The Role of the Christian Theologian

If a Catholic theologian intends to engage in the comparison or confrontation just mentioned, then it is first required that the person carry out theology in the accepted way in the Catholic Church. In March 2012 the International Theological Commission published a document, *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria*. It spells out what characterizes Catholic theology and gives it, in and through its many forms, a clear sense of identity in its engagement with the world of today. It mentions three characteristics: such theological reflection has to arise from attentive listening to the word of God in Holy Scripture and Church tradition; Catholic theology has to situate itself consciously and faithfully in the communion of the Church; and it is oriented to the service of God in the world, offering divine truth to the men and women of today in an intelligible form.

The uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the Word of God made man, and the definitive nature of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, have to be borne in mind. "By this revelation, then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man is made clear to us in Christ, who is the Mediator and at the same time the fullness of all revelation" (*Dei Verbum*, 2). The Second Vatican Council continues and emphasizes the definitive nature of the Christian dispensation: "After speaking in many places and varied ways through the prophets, God 'last of all in these days has spoken to us by his Son' (Heb 1:1-2)...The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away, and we now await no further public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf 1 Tim 6:14; Tit 2:13)" (*Dei Verbum*, 4; cf also *Dominus Iesus*, 5).

While many elements of convergence are to be found between Igbo traditional beliefs and some elements of the Christian faith, Christianity is not, as it were, to be regarded as a later edition of the Igbo Traditional Religion. The Christian faith is based on God's positive revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. It presents us with truths which human reason alone could never have reached unaided.

The Christian theologian will also be on guard not to see agreement at any cost where indeed it may not actually exist, and not to read Christian beliefs into elements of Igbo Traditional Religion where there is no sure basis. At the same time, respect towards what the Igbo could reach through their traditional religion is needed, while an unsympathetic and superior-culture mentality is to be avoided.

Since Christianity is not an abstract philosophy but a way of life lived by actual followers of Jesus Christ, the Christian theologian cannot avoid bringing in the Church in the reflection between Igbo Traditional Religion and Christianity. The Christian theologian should help the followers of Igbo Traditional Religion to realize that what their ancestors were looking for before dawn has at midday sunshine been revealed by Jesus Christ and offered to all humanity in the Church, which is his Mystical Body, his mystical extension in the world. That is why *Dominus Jesus* declares: “The Church is the ‘universal sacrament of salvation’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 48), since united always in a mysterious way to the Saviour Jesus Christ, her Head, and subordinated to him, she has, in God’s plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being” (*Dominus Jesus*, 20).

The role of the Catholic theologian is of great importance in helping the local Church to bring the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Igbo in their concrete religious and cultural context.

Distinguished brothers and sisters in Christ, this international convention has great importance. Academicians, theologians and evangelizers will ask themselves what next after these conversations. For better meeting between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the traditional religion and culture of the Igbo, these discussions will be of considerable service. Let me close with the memorable remark of Blessed Pope John Paul II: “The synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith...A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought out, not faithfully lived out” (Letter to Cardinal Casaroli establishing the Pontifical Council for Culture, 20 May, 1982, in *Insegnamenti* 1982, V/2, p. 1777).

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THE INTERFACE OF IGBO THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIANITY

MSGR THEOPHILUS OKERE

In many of our interviews with the chiefs, we were badly treated. No sooner did we leave the compound, than hundreds of young men and grown up boys would come and beg of us not to abandon them on account of the insolence of their chiefs. Those young fellows have invariably done everything they possibly could do for us.¹

These sentiments of the then Father Shanahan to Superior General Neville, indicate the rejection by Igbo elders of attempts to convert them by the direct preaching of the missionaries and the latter's option for the young and therefore for the school as the preferred option and instrument of evangelization. This rebuff by our elders can be likened to St Paul's all too frequent experiences in the Acts of the Apostles—at the Areopagus, at Lystra and at Corinth, at the hands of the Jews generally but also at the hands of the gentile population. The rebuff also marks the moment of the missing, crucial encounter between Igbo theology represented by its adult practitioners and exponents on the one hand and Christianity as propounded by the missionaries on the other. The twain never met.

Today, in discussing the title, the Interface of Igbo theology and Christianity, we are, in a way, trying to establish the dialogue that never took place but that might have been a hundred years old in Owerri this year, as we celebrate the centenary of the coming of the Catholic faith in this ecclesiastical Province.

If the missionaries and our fathers had done then what we are attempting to do now, even if some of the incongruities and differences might have become clearer, at least some of the areas of agreement would

¹ A quotation from a handwritten letter of then Fr. Shanahan to Superior General Fr. Neville, written from Catholic Mission Calabar, dated September 20th 1912. Archives of the CSSP Paris, Boite 192, Chemise VI, Dossier B. Now published in the *Owerri Centenary, Original Archival Documents*. Edited and Translated by Msgr. Theophilus Okere, ISBN 978-8066-91-7, Assumpta Press Owerri, 2012.

by now have been grafted together, reinforcing each other and giving the mustard tree of the new faith a stronger basis, a larger, sturdier trunk and a deeper tap root.

That we are establishing such a dialogue at all today, even if somewhat late in the day, is in a way paradoxical, due to the option that negated the initial dialogue: The school it is that, as a *felix culpa*, a happy fault, while distracting the missionaries from confronting adult faith with adult faith, has made it possible for the children of those insolent chiefs who rebuffed them to now re-open the dialogue of the two faiths, the old and the new. But this dialogue might be likened to a dialogue of the living and the dead and indeed, it may be too much of a monologue, with Igbo Christians talking or even arguing among themselves.

One can of course still wonder how a genuine dialogue could have taken place between the two religions either then or now. For, to be itself, dialogue would require admitting first, that the other party is a worthy interlocutor with a possibly defensible position. To admit a dialogue is already to concede that one might have something to learn, that the other side might be partly right, that one might find oneself in a position to give some ground if the argument is reasonable not to say overwhelming. The whole idea of Plato's dialectics, and basically, Aquinas makes the same point by his methodology of *videtur quod*², is that in dialoguing, in giving and taking, in conceding some and winning some, we, together arrive at a point or a truth slightly higher or fuller. This might make it easier to understand how dialogue became well-nigh impossible between two protagonists, the one arrogant from the superiority position of a proselytizing possessor of the whole truth, the other adamant and unyielding in the possession of his one ancestral heritage.

The title, *Igbo Theology* is in itself a paradox and the two words, unlikely bedfellows. Virtually all *Igbo Theology*, i.e. theology of Igbo Traditional Religion, is necessarily carried on, not by its protagonists, that is, its practitioners who are both mostly illiterate and a vanishing minority, but by its antagonists—educated Christians and academia, especially Christian theologians, who cannot be expected to have more faith in the conclusions they arrive at than they had in their initial faith based premises.

When it comes to Christian theology itself, we insist that for it to be genuine it must be undertaken from within, by really believing Christians and even if it be critical, still it should emanate from a believing *bona fide*

² *Videtur quod*: literally, "it would seem that".

Christian. Karl Marx or Nietzsche could hardly be writing credible Christian theology!

Christian theologians can and often do exercise a lot of empathy for the point of view of traditional religion. They can even be talking like an insider, but only like an insider. They cannot talk from inside that religion sincerely and credibly if they are genuine Christians. Sympathy alone, even deep sympathy for the tenets of a religion, cannot replace genuine belief in that religion. How objective and how fair can a Christian theologian be, without the sympathy, that is, the bias of an insider? How can a Christian theologian be fair to heathenism³ without himself becoming to some extent a heathen? Suspension of assent or an *epoche* or just giving the benefit of the doubt is really no substitute for the dead seriousness, and the spirit of “it is our own cause” (*nostra res agitur*)⁴ that can only belong to an insider arguing his own cause.

Is an Igbo Christian theologian writing the theology of traditional religion not still as much an outsider as an American cultural anthropologist writing about the Trobriand Islanders?

There is also paradox in the use of the term “Igbo theology” in relation to traditional religion. The concept of theology is, strictly speaking, a Christian invention. The Jews were fixated on the word of God in their Bible just as the Moslems would come to regard theology as coextensive with the Koran. The Greeks had first their theogony and then their ontology. But theology as such, they did not have, except perhaps in Aristotle’s First Philosophy which he also called “Theology”. It was Origen’s efforts in the Alexandrian catechetical school to understand and articulate the revelation recorded in the Christian Bible that came to mark the birth of theology as we now know it, a systematic and reasoned “justification of God’s ways to man”⁵, or even more ambitiously, a discourse on the nature, the attributes and the acts and relations of God to

³ “Heathenisms” a name for the religion of those who live and worship in the “heath” or wilderness, (equivalent to the German “Heide”,) just as “paganism” is applied to the Religion of those who live and worship in the *pagus* or the countryside, both names pejoratively used and now mercifully less in use today to depict non-Christians much as many Muslims use the word “infidel” for non-Muslims.

⁴ *Nostra res agitur* :it is our own cause; it is about us; this touches us ourselves.

⁵ “Justification of God’s ways to man” A quote from the beginning of John Milton’s epic poem- Paradise Lost: “Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste brought death into the world and all our woes sing heavenly muse.... , to justify God’s ways to man” Paradise Lost, Book 1

humans, a faith seeking to be understood, *fides quaerens intellectum*⁶ a phrase coming from Augustine of Hippo which is to be taken up later by Anselm of Canterbury and several others. In Leibniz it takes on the form of a process, a *theodicaea* (a theodicy) or a Justification of God, echoing again Milton's program of "the justification of God's ways to man." Thus Theology is, strictly speaking, a human effort to understand faith, a work of human reason on the data about God's nature and work as it manifests both in nature and in Revelation. But it was Augustine and the Middle Ages who really shaped theology as we now have it, by a relentless application of Greek logic and metaphysical philosophy, among other elements of Greek culture, on Revelation especially as the Bible has shaped it. Thus, the possibility of theology has come to depend on the premise that God and his world and ways are amenable to human logic and reason, to the possibility of reason augmenting or at least re-formatting the barebones of the Bible into a system that integrates all available information on God and his nature and his dealings with humans. Theology so defined is so intimately Christian that it sounds like an oxymoron to talk of Igbo Theology.

But beyond mere paradox, we must seek the areas of real difference and areas of real convergence between the two religions. We can first of all look at the self-understanding of each religion and from there try to specify both their areas of difference and the areas of meeting and convergence.

Igbo Religion: Specifics

Though some talk in respect of our traditional Igbo religion in terms of "fetishism"⁷ or "animism" and of the "worship of the gods", perhaps a misidentification of the object of worship as well as a misapplication of the concept of worship to what the Igbo do with their "gods", the proper Igbo expression for it is *Ize muo*,⁸ which might better be interpreted as

⁶ "Fides quaerens intellectum": Faith needing or seeking understanding – a phrase that comes from Augustine, through Anselm and the Scholastics right up to Leibniz as a summary job definition of theology.

⁷ For too long we have heard and read repeatedly the disdainful clichés used in respect of our traditional religion in the inappropriate terms of "fetishism" or "animism," the first suggesting idolatry since idols are *feticiao* - man made, the second suggesting a belief that everything has a spirit or soul in it. Both terms are wrongly applied to Igbo or any African Traditional religion and have no justification or excuse other than some combination of racism and ignorance.

⁸ *Ize muo* - worship of gods, literally dodging or avoiding the spirits

dodging the gods and their bullets. The overwhelming sentiment *via-à-vis* the spirits, the gods, was fear not love and not faith. (How dare you not to believe?) Fear of the unknown since we don't know them! Fear of their rash and dangerous unpredictability! Fear of their mad logic! The gods are better known for the harm they can do than for the good they confer, better known for their threats; and we do not know always by what things their wrath could be provoked. They are generally perceived as dangerous and are dodged or avoided at best and such acts as are called worship of them are often really no more serious or religious than acts of placating, tricking, or even bribing and corrupting them. Still they are associated with God, *Chineke*, God the creator, as they are all simultaneously invoked in Morning Prayer. Some gods like the Sun (*Anyanwu*) and the Thunder (*Amadioha*) are supposedly his sons and messengers. *Offor* is *Offor Chukwu*, very directly and intimately associated, both in its meaning and its authority with *Chukwu*. The pantheon of Igbo traditional religion consists of *Chukwu or Chineke*, the local nature and personified spirits (gods) and the ancestors now spirits but with paternal, affinal links to the community.

Why do the Igbo lump them all together at prayer and libations? Is it that they are all mysterious, invisible forces, more powerful than man and to be feared or that they are unpredictable. Or are they all honorable just for being spirits? What motivates worship, sacrifice or prayer to them? But in all this the Igbo draw a sharp distinction between God and the gods, between the acknowledged maker of all and author of life itself which is our greatest gift and good and these other associated creature gods, messengers and ambassadors and the deified ancestors.

In Igbo Traditional Religion (ITR)⁹ the more prominent elements include worship in the form of prayer and libations, sacrifice for various purposes, in different forms and with various objects. Beliefs and worldview include God, the gods and the spirits and ancestors and their intercourse with humans, destiny, reincarnation and the paradise of the ancestors—*Ala muo*¹⁰. Religion and morality go hand in hand. *Ala*, the goddess of the land, that is land as both soil and society, is also guardian of morality which is oriented towards preserving life, the just peace and progress of society. Taboos ensure basic morality; *iru ala*¹¹ or *aruru ala* is an offence, a sin that upsets the land as society.

⁹ ITR stands for Igbo Traditional Religion.

¹⁰ *Ala muo* – land of the spirits; *Ala* – the goddess of the land

¹¹ *Iru ala* – desecrating the land, *Aruru ala* – desecration of the land, an abomination