

## **MYSTICISM: SOURCE AND SUMMIT OF RELIGION**

**Innocent Ikechukwu Enweh**

University of Nigeria, Nsukka

### **Abstract**

Mysticism is the overwhelming experience of the “unseen” as sacred and ineffable, otherwise known in Christian terms as consciousness of divine presence. It is a state of belief which animates the life of the subject of the experience and constitutes the ground of explanation and meaning of his experience. This paper, adopting descriptive, analytic and hermeneutical methods, addresses the problem of the nature of religion and mysticism, and argues that mystical experience is the origin and finality of religion. Every religion, the paper maintains, results from the appropriation and articulation of this experience in rituals, doctrines and prayers and is directed toward the manifestation of the said experience in the life of its adherents. The paper concludes by observing that the interpretative nature of the articulated foundational experience of religion accounts for religious diversity and provides motif for possible conflict. The susceptibility of religious diversity to conflict increases or diminishes to the extent adherents seek mystical experience in the here and now rather than focus on eschatological mechanisms

### **Introduction**

The problem of consciousness of a relation with the transcendent has constituted serious difficulty in discussing the phenomenon of religion. This is simply because it involves showing how the experience comes about and the nature of the experience within which this relation takes place. Studies in the phenomenon of religion have come up with surprising revelations about the nature of religion (Friedrich Schleiermacher, 1958; Rudolf Otto, 1958; Van der Leeuw, 1938; Mircea Eliade, 1958; Henri Bergson, 1977). From the point of view of approach to religion, scholars have identified two dominant ones, namely, the detached approach and a committed approach. Alister E. McGrath (2011, p.426) referring to the work done by Anthony Giddens (1989) points out that the detached approach claims that religion is not:

- (a) to be identified with monotheism;
- (b) to be identified with moral prescriptions;
- (c) unnecessarily concerned with explanations of the world;
- (d) to be identified with the supernatural.

While these conclusions about religion are drawn from the standpoint of philosophy and social sciences, it has been argued that a committed approach would help give account of the origins and functions of religions from a perspective that is Christian rather than hanker after theories about religion in general (A. E. McGrath, 2011). Discussions on the origin of religion from the perspective of the detached approach have tended to centre on the idea of religion as a human invention (Ludwig Feuerbach, 1957; James H. Leuba, 1921; Sigmund Freud, 2009). Another approach has been to give account of the origin of religion from the point of view of the analysis of the experience of religious multiplicity and plurality (John Hick, 1983; Arvind Sharma, 1995). Here two perspectives present themselves: The first position gives account of the origin of religion in terms of transition from primitive animism to various forms of monotheism in the high religions. For this view there is a movement from plurality to unity of form. The second position envisages religious multiplicity as corruption of the original and more unified religious life. In other words, multiplicity of religion is a sign of corruption of religion. These positions on religion are quite satisfying since they leave unresolved a number of questions. The need to provide interpretative approach to the question of the origin of religion has given rise to the position of this paper, namely, to seek the explanation for the origin of religion in the very essence of religion. The essence of religion lies responding to divine presence. It is living in divine milieu. It is living in a universe where love is king and the world is its vassal. It is perpetuation of encounter with the divine or the transcendent. As a response to the epiphany of divine love, it consists in staying in a loving relationship in which the whole of reality is seen in the perspective of the divine, that is, as an object of love as admiration and care. In other words, there is something mystical about the origin of religion.

The position of this paper, invariably, is a rejection of the idea that religion is pure human contrivance. That the divine continually manifests itself in creation is undeniable. The unveiling of the transcendent presence of God is a divine act. It is God who freely chooses to disclose his being to man in order to draw man to himself. To encounter divine self-disclosure is what mysticism is all about, whereas religion is about living in consciousness of this self disclosure of God. This means that mysticism precedes religion, even though it is in mysticism that religion is perfected. While mysticism or encounter of divine self disclosure is in moments, religion is in degrees. Religion consists in perpetuating and prolonging this consciousness of divine presence in various but related forms. It is engaging in communication with the divine, a communication initiated by the divine in its disclosiveness. In exploring how religion originates from mystical experience, this paper adopts descriptive, analytic and hermeneutical methods. Using the descriptive method, the paper presents a cursory account of the understanding of religion in philosophy and the social sciences, intertwining it with an analytic approach that permits the author to show from the use of the

words “igo” and “uka” in designating man’s intercourse with the divine, how the word “religio” fails to give an accurate account of the mode of life that it represents as a universal human experience. The hermeneutical approach follows from the result of the analytic to depict the essence of religion as sacred communication, a relationship of communion. At the peak of achieving this communication lies mysticism, that is the experience of divine self manifestation. To practice religion means to enter this circle of mysticism and to remain therein. The paper concludes by showing that what accounts for religious diversity derives, not directly from man’s experience of God (mysticism) but from the manner in which the experience is interpreted and appropriated by others. The chief concern of adherents of any religion should be to relive the experience of God in the here and now, rather than waiting till the hereafter.

### **Evolution in the Understanding of Religion**

It has been remarked by Alister E. McGrath (2011, p.424) that the expansion of Christianity to other cultural areas, other than Palestine, has contributed to a large extent in the development of the relations between Christianity and other religions. By eighteenth century there was increased theological discussion on the issues concerning the relationship of Christianity to other faith systems: Mystery religion, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and African Indigenous Religions. In the past, of course some had written with a view to accommodate other religions. According to McGrath (2011),

Peter Abalard (1079-1142) wrote of “pagan saints” such as Job, Noah, and Enoch. Gregory VII (died 1085) conceded that there was a possibility that Muslims who obeyed the Qur’an might find salvation in the bosom of Abraham. Thomas Aquinas, who was well aware of the importance of Jewish and Islamic philosophies at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century, developed the notion of ‘implicit faith’ and ‘the baptism of desire’ for those who have not yet heard the gospel, but would have embraced it if they had (pp.424-425).

With the rapid spread of Christianity in Western Europe, a set of uniformly Christian societies was created such that there was little or no experience of religious diversity. Perhaps, medieval Spain where Christianity, Islam and Judaism co-existed, though not always peacefully, could be an exception. The consequence of this virtually unitary cultural experience of religion was that theology for quite a long time developed without real thought about the need to take other religions into consideration. Two factors have been observed to have contributed to the growing change of perception with regard to other religions. The first factor is colonization which brought Christian Europe into contact with other religions in South East Asia and Africa. The second factor is the phenomenon of immigration to the west from regions in which Hinduism and Islam had been culturally dominant. As McGrath remarks, the presence of these

religions in the West raised the question of how Christianity understood these faith communities (2011, p.425). In attempt to tackle this question, it became necessary to explore the nature of religion, seeking to understand the essence of religion, if any, and the origin of religion in order to determine what their legitimate relationship should be. This has not been an easy task, although, the enquiry has yielded startling results. With certain philosophy and social science delving into the experience of religion in order to determine its nature and origin, one finds the tendency to consider religion as a human invention that embodies man's aspirations, needs and fears.

When Anthony Giddens (1979) denied religion of transcendental object, he was promoting the naturalist explanation of the nature of religion. Gerardus Van der Leeuw argues that religion is concerned with the natural experienced environment. Taking up the concept of the "sacred" which is associated with religion, Van der Leeuw in Joseph Dabney Batis (1969, p.80) argued that "The 'sacred' is what has been placed within boundaries, the exceptional (Latin – sanctus); its powerfulness creates for it a place of its own." His analysis shows that the sacred, therefore, "means neither completely moral nor, without further qualification, even desirable or praiseworthy. On the contrary, sacredness and even impurity may be identical: in any event the potent is dangerous. Lisa Tagliaferri (2017) exemplifies this ambiguity in the construction of the sacred in her analysis of the social standing of the "homo sacer" (pp.32-33). The 'sacred,' the 'tabu' carries a prohibition with it, namely, it demands keeping one's distance; a don't approach. According to this view, the introduction of God into religion was a later development. It was "power" that came first. At first, things were invested with power and where power is acknowledged as overwhelming or exceedingly great whatever is related to it is believed to be affected by it. It is this that leads to fetishism; everything is seen to be a power bearer. Fetishism in turn could lead to idolatry (idol), such that amulets also are containers of power, though in pocket size. Men sacrificed to their forge, hammer and anvil, a pointer to the belief that objects were invested with power. What Van der Leeuw is describing here is akin to the phenomenon in the social life referred to as 'igoukwu' among the Uvuru people of Nsukka area in the North of Igbo land. 'Igoukwu' ('worship' of the legs) was an important element in traditional Onwaito (third month) festival when gifts were laid at the feet of errand boys and girls in appreciation of their effectiveness and good will in running errands for elders in the course of the preceding year. The impression here is that power is invested in those legs and they need to be appreciated if they have to keep performing effectively in carrying the bearers of the message. Of course it should not be forgotten that legs (ukwu) refers to the messenger and not literally the physical and bodily legs of individual persons. So the semblance of the ceremony of 'igoukwu' with religious rite does not in any way constitute a religious act.

Assuming that religion stems from the adulation of power as Van der Leeuw presents it, and that the Roman concept “religio” originally signified nothing more than tabu (J. D. Bettis, 1969, p.83) – that is, that which is removed and withdrawn from us because of its sacred quality – what becomes of the view (Garry E. Kessler, 1999, p.24) of Balbus, a Roman Stoic, who considers that the word religion derives from *relegere*, referring to carefulness as opposed to being neglectful in worship. Again, Lactantius, an early Christian writer is mentioned to have thought that *religio* “derived from the Latin *religare*; meaning ‘to bind.’ Here we have differing senses of the word “religio”: while the first evokes awe, attention and pure observation, the second refers to being careful, and the third evokes a sense of obligation, duty and responsibility. In all these, what is certain is that the word refers to cognitive and moral state of a personal subject. This cognitive and moral state is obviously a natural state. Perhaps this explains why some thinkers maintain that religion is natural to man or even pure human contrivance. Some of these thinkers include Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud expressed interest in finding out the origin of man’s faith in a Divine Being which exercises so enormous power that “it overwhelms Reason and Science” (p.194). In *L’avenird’une illusion*, Freud presents a devastating conception of religion as an illusion (2009, p.79). He clarifies the concept of illusion by remarking that an illusion is not necessarily false, that is unrealizable or in contradiction with reality. He uses the example of a young girl who chooses to believe that she will be married to a prince. There is nothing in reality to prove that the belief is true or false. One is not bound to believe the truth of such claim since it cannot be demonstrated, yet it is irrefutable (2009, p.80-82). This is what religion is like for Freud. Corroborating his view in *Totem et Tabou*, Freud insisted that God is a mere father-figure. It is the desire for a father in the face of man’s powerlessness that led to the invention of God. Man in his infantilism conjures god to play the protective role of a father to him in the face of rivalry among men, hostility of nature and the inevitability of fate. God, a cosmic father figure is a psychological protective device deployed by man to erase the fear of nature, reconcile himself to fate and compensate for the pains and suffering involved in being part of culture. As subjects of a higher command, both the individual and the society find in the idea of God a reason for living in peace and harmony (2009, pp.54-59). While one admits the human element in the making of religion, it is difficult to accept that religion is merely a human invention. It is perhaps in an attempt to save religion from being reduced to naturalistic explanations that Henri Bergson (1977) insisted on making a distinction between static (natural) religion and dynamic (mystical) religion. In the opinion of Henri Bergson (1979, pp.118-119) religion is a dimension of myth making which according to him plays a social role and is at the same time at the service of the individual. Explaining myth making, he underscored the

affinity of instinct with intelligence so as to argue for the affinity of the human species with the animal world. According to him, nature favours instinct for the life of the community whereas intelligence is put at the disposal of the individual to make for initiative, independence and liberty. When intelligence threatens to break up social cohesion, a counterpoise is needed which is provided by a virtuality of instinct or “the residue of instinct which survives on the fringe of intelligence.” Since the intelligence works by representation of reality, this residue of instinct calls up imaginary representations to counter that of the intelligence, and through the agency of the intelligence itself, it succeeds in “counteracting the work of intelligence.” In this way Bergson concludes that religion is “defensive reaction of nature against the dissolvent power of the intelligence” (1979, p.122). It is “a defensive reaction of nature against the representation, by intelligence, of the inevitability of death” (1979, p.131). Bergson considers that the primary role of religion is that of social preservation. Concerning the attribution of supernatural causality to physical events, Bergson explains that the idea of “mystic” causality is used by the primitive to give supernatural explanation to the human significance of a given effect rather than the brute physical fact. It is the importance of the event to the affected individual that is at issue. He observes that although scientific thinking rejects this manner of reasoning, it persists even among civilized men.

Bergson rejects the view that it is fear inspired by nature in such cases as great catastrophes (earthquakes, floods, tornados) that gave birth to religion. Religion did not initially begin as belief in deities. It grew from reaction against fear of those things which were thought to contain elements of personality without being persons. The gods of mythology grew out of them through a process of enrichment. Some according to him have attributed the origin of religion to magic. But Bergson, proceeding by way of reconstitution and introspection explored man’s rational reaction to his perception of things, arguing that even though there may be some affinity between religion and magic, they are rather contemporaneous. Static and outer religion is “infra-intellectual” (1979, p.186) and “a defense reaction of nature against what might be depressing for the individual, and dissolvent for society, in the exercise of intelligence” (1979, p.205). In sum, religion is the lullaby of life, a counterfeit of “reality as actually perceived” (1979, p.216)

In his treatment of dynamic religion, Bergson argues that like static religion, mysticism ensures for the soul the serenity and security it needs. He distances mysticism from static religion by showing that mysticism ultimately aims at establishing a contact, and in consequence “partial coincidence with the creative effort which life itself manifests. This effort is of God, if it is not God himself” (1979, p.220). In the mind of Bergson, this type of experience was foreign to static religion and this explains why it was neither attained in Greek thought nor in ancient religions. He finds in the experience of Christian mystics what he calls pure mysticism. This is what he describes in terms of dynamic religion.

The problem with this analysis of the origin of religion is however that while it establishes the specific difference between static and dynamic religion, it does not seem to have clarified the common denominator in the two forms of religion. In other words, the question of the essence and object of religion is not quite precise. Or could it be assumed that they change as religion evolves? Bergson, however, does not make any room for the development of religion from the static to the dynamic. The problem gets even more complicated when one reckons with the fact that his understanding of religion does not tally with the senses of religion portrayed in the etymological definition mentioned above.

H. G. Liddell and R. Scott (1996) furnish us with the different senses of the word religion in Greek. The Greek word *hēthreskeia* primarily means religious worship, cult, ritual; this includes service of God and worshipping of angels (Col. 2:18). The word is also used in vulgar and bad sense to mean superstition. A second sense of the word *threskeia* is worship. The third sense of the word *threskeia* means “to be a devotee; religious observances” (p.806). Scholars have observed that the word *threskeia* appears seven times in the Scripture and only in one instance (James 1:27) is the word mentioned with good connotation. The instance with good connotation uses the word with special qualification: it speaks of *threskeia kithara kai amiantos*, pure undefiled religion. This form of religion is a way of life that is freely chosen rather than the working of vital impulse or instinct that provides support in moments of need as Bergson has argued. It does appear then that the origin of religion lies in something much more profound than biological and social explanations can offer. But what is strange about discussion on religion till date is that it is largely dominated by western conception. It does appear that the word “religion” itself does not clearly represent what indigenous African spiritual experience is all about. Whether the word derives from “relegere” or “religare”, the fact is that the experience which the word is meant to describe is far from what typical Igbo man understands his relationship with the supernatural or the divinities to be.

Among the Igbo people of southern Nigeria, the word used for designating man’s relationship and intercourse with the God and the divine is “igo.” *Igo* is a polysemous word both in its sacred and profane usage. The expression “igofo” means to address or speak to “ofo,” or prayer. “Igomuo” would mean to address the spirit. “Igonna” would mean to speak (reverently) to the ancestor. “Igo ego” means to deny. “Igonari means to betray, that is, to deny someone. “Igoishi’ onweonye” means to speak up in defense of oneself. From these different usages of the word it is obvious that “igo” is locutionary act; it is a speech act. The word “igo” has its cognate “igòogò”, that is, to be in laws. Igo is a speech act that establishes a relationship. This relationship, in the context in which it is used here is a sacred one, what the west refers to as religion. When man sits before God, his primary aim is to address him (God) verbally as a man does with his fellow men. It is not about sacrifice or oblation, nor about responsibility and duty or contemplation. A man comes before his God to present a state of affairs.

This may involve expression of appreciation, gratitude, thanks, proclamation of one's innocence in order to plead for vindication or demand for protection and guide.

Behind the speech act, 'igo,' lies a conviction that one is engaged in a dialogue in which the other is expected to respond positively or negatively, by approval or disapproval. In other words, one is not just before a mere object, but in the presence of a rational subject capable of free acts. It is not about manipulating the forces of nature or cosmic powers. Such manipulation belongs to the sphere of what the West identifies as magic, but which the indigenous Igbo refer to as "igwoogwu." The word "igwo" means different things in different situations: in culinary terms it means "to prepare" – igwoabacha (to prepare traditional salad); in the domain of building and construction it means "to mix" – igwo concrete; in the area of medicine and health it means "to heal," "to restore health"; in the field of language it means (in some dialect) to tell lies, as in "igwongwo"; in the field of magic and occultism it means "to make" as in "making of charms" or "to contrive a spell" – igwoogwu. Underlying the meaning of "igwo" is the idea of contrivance, a kind of art; be it in bringing about health, manipulating of language, fabricating of materials or generating of forces. Since "ogwu" (medicine or charm) is made from leaves, herbs, roots and, or tree barks and sap, it means that "igwoogwu" has to do with exploiting and manipulating the potency inherent in these natural elements to bring about some effect, positive or negative, healthy or lethal. This paper considers magic or the contriving of forces an activity entirely different and opposed to mysticism and religion. The problem with understanding indigenous Igbo/African spirituality arises with the fact that man in attempt to control his environment does rely, besides on God, on his own ability to manipulate forces in nature. Achieving oneself is not just dependent on God. Man sometimes needs to battle against supernatural forces if he is to achieve himself. It is here that his relationship with the supernatural world gets mixed up. Sometimes, he fails to delineate clearly the sphere of *sacred communication* (religion) with the supernatural from that of *contending against the supernatural* (magic). The former, in its institutional form is the domain of the priest (ezemuo or atama), whereas the later is the domain of the traditional medicine man (dibia or ebia).

From the foregoing, it appears that limiting the understanding of man's relationship with God or supernatural beings to Western conception represented by the word "religion" would tantamount to reductionism. That the intercourse of man with the divine is primarily to be understood as speech act is seen again in the word used for designating *Christianity*. It is called "uka", that is, discuss and Christians are referred to as "ndiuka", meaning "people of discuss." The worship they offer to God is referred to as "ikauka," literally meaning *discussing*. The Christian place of worship is called "ulouka", house of discuss. It is not surprising that the indigenes experienced Christianity in linguistic terms. Christianity came as a message in the form of preaching, sermon, homily,



catechesis in which the story of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is recounted. It presented itself as narrative of the experience of the risen Lord; a narrative that invites one into personal encounter with the risen Lord in the witnessing community. The expression “ikauka” which is used for religious worship or service incontestably links what the west calls religion to speech act; it is an address, a sacred conversation. The experience called religion is about engaging in dialogue with God. It is a dialogue which opens the individual up to the dimension of the absolute and transcendent. This opening up is not a quest, but a response. It is a response to an experience, mystical experience

### **Mysticism and Religion**

The idea of God as an a priori category and the argument that religion is natural to man is facing challenges from Kant’s philosophy and the experience of contemporary atheists. It does appear that experience plays a lot of role in the development of the idea of God and of religion. God has been described as the absolute; that is, he surpasses the limits of human understanding. He is also the mysterious in the sense that he lies outside what can be thought, and thus being himself the utterly and “wholly other”, to use the expression of Rudof Otto (1978, p.141). If God is the absolute, the mysterious and wholly other, then man’s knowledge of him, relative as it may be, must have to depend on his self-disclosure. It is this self disclosure of God that is described here in terms of mystical experience. Given the relative nature of man’s knowledge and love, this self disclosure of God will have to be apprehended in degrees. It is this fact that will explain the difference between religion in its pristine and incipient states and religion as it is known in “historical religions” like Judaism, Christianity, etc.

Some may object to the idea that religion presupposes mystical experience and that there is no religion without prior divine manifestation. One might state one’s objection in these or similar words, “We know the founder of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Who is the founder of African Indigenous Religion? How can one justify the claim that the founders of African Indigenous Religions had experience of divine disclosure before instituting these religions? It is to be noted that religion is not just about knowledge but essentially a relationship; it involves a life-giving and life renewing relationship. The impartation of self would only be possible with an agent that is capable of feeling and of personal presence. It presupposes personal subjects capable of engaging in an interpersonal relationship. The naturalistic explanation of the origin of religion which defends the view that men have worshipped natural objects – the sun or the moon, trees, mountains is quite mistaken. There may be resemblance with religion in these vulgarized, trivialized views and perversions of the concept of religion, but they are not religion.

H. D. Lewis (1974) made a point when he remarked that “no entity or process in sub-human nature can be of any account for religion except as the scene or

medium of activities or experience of other agents” (p.84-85). J. Obi Oguejior in B. U. Ukwuije (2010) reasons along the same line of thought when he wrote: “The sky, earth, wind, thunder, rivers, hills, etc., are taken as abodes or symbols of deities” (p.104). As J. S. Mbiti (1979) rightly pointed out, natural elements could be the place for the manifestation of the presence of divinity or mystical power. It would be difficult to explain away encounter with such supernatural reality on the basis of the psychological conditions of the one who experiences it as some thinkers have tried to do. In African (Igbo) Indigenous Religion, the seer, prophet and oracles have matchless role to play. These are primary media of discernment of the will of God, of divinities and spirits. It is believed that messages could be communicated in dreams and possession. It would be trivializing religion to think that one wakes up one day and begins to bow to trees and rivers as if they were gods. Since oracles are taken to be mouthpieces of divinities and spirits, for diviners are considered called by God, it is not the case that man performed blindly any religious ritual (sacrifice, prayer, worship). Discernment always preceded the performance of religious rites. This discernment is achieved through the aid of human intermediaries such as diviners, seers and priests.

The concept of intermediary and mediation is very important in African Indigenous Religion. J. S. Mbiti (1997) did observe that mediation is an element in social behaviour which has been transferred into the religious sphere. In principle, it is the superior who mediates on behalf of the “inferior” or subordinate in rank, status or age. It would be contradictory to imagine that men would see trees, rivers, stones as playing intermediary role between them and God. It is wrong then to imagine that Africans at any point in time had trees and rivers as object of religion. Prior to institution of African (Igbo) Indigenous Religion was an encounter with God, the divine by an individual or group of persons or community. Understanding this encounter might call for interpretation, the role of which belongs to a seer or diviner, ever before instituting the religion and its form of priesthood. Lack of written or oral account of the history of the religion does not vitiate the fact of priority of mystical experience to religion as man’s response to an encounter.

Mystical experience takes place only where the divine intervenes. Man has no natural capacity to reach the absolute. It is in encountering the self manifestation of the divine that man, experientially, apprehends something of the divine. Mysticism consists in this experiential relationship. The Buddhist, Fritjof Capra, describes this experience in terms of a feeling of wholeness of being; an “aliveness of mind and body as a unity (2017, p.16). The experience involves a sense of belongingness to the totality of the universe. Religion begins when the individual after articulating his experience structures the rest of his life in light of this experience and proposes the same structure to others who responds by appropriating the said experience in the forms of narratives (myth) and doctrines, rituals, and principles of life. Religion is appropriation of

mystical experience such that the pattern of the experience of the mystic becomes the pattern of the life of his community of followers. The mystical experience consists in personal encounter of loving relationship with the divine, the transcendent and wholly other.

### **The Circle of Mysticism**

While it is agreed that the craving for absolute truth is natural to man, for some, this quest is centre of meaning of life such that they go a long way to attain it, whereas for the generality of people, it is preoccupation with practical things that is important. The truth however is that devotion to Reality has taken many forms and expressions. While many would admit that they have not been able to come face to face with what could be regarded as the Reality behind the veil, or what the philosopher refers to as the Absolute and the theologian calls God, a few who identify themselves as mystics claim to have succeeded where most have failed. As pioneers of spiritual world, they furnish us with discoveries against which we have no reliable claims. Their experiences challenge us to scrutinize the basis of all possible human experience. But keeping pace with them would require purging oneself of the usual habits of thought and interpretation of experiences. Somehow, it calls for threading a path similar to that of the philosopher. Little wonder it has been suggested by some that religious experience, like philosophy begins with wonder. But it is not exactly the same since it is basically a response.

H. D. Lewis (1974) makes it clear that wonder here should not be understood in the sense of ordinary day to day usage: wondering at the starry heavens or the dance of molecules. According to him, the nature of wonder that is meant when religious experience is at stake is akin to artistic or poetic experience. But they are quite distinct from one another and the former is much deeper and more profound. This point of the distinction between wonder associated with religion and that of poetry and art is well articulated by Lewis in these words:

The wonder which is basic to religion, and in which it begins, comes with the realization, usually sharp and disrupting, that all existence as we know it stands in a relation of dependence to some absolute or unconditioned being of which we can know nothing directly beyond this intuition of its unconditioned nature as the source of all other reality (1974, p.124).

If religion is to be appreciated for what it really is, that is, differentiating it from art and philosophy as such, and underscoring the transcendent nature of its object, the association of its origin with wonder would have to give way to the idea of response to mystical experience. Religion draws from being-in-consciousness of divine presence. The idea being that it is God or the deity that intervenes in human history and stirs man to respond to him in the practices which have come to be identified as religious life. Worship, sacrifices, prayers,

ritual practices are all forms of prolongation and perpetuation of the initial experience of intimate and loving presence.

Mystical experience, therefore, precedes the foundation of any religion worth the name. One may wonder where the difference between Christianity and other religions lies. The difference lies in degree of perfection. The factor of its founder besides, the experience of divinity as it were is structured by personal and socio-cultural factors. The categories through which uncultivated mind receives divine manifestation would certainly be different from those of cultivated minds. The former would be less thematic in the articulation of the experience whereas the latter would show far reaching insight and comprehensiveness. Lack of clarity in the representation of the experience in objective manner lends itself to misinterpretation and error. Mystical experience is such that it brings the individual face to face with the full dimensions of her humanity rather than deify her. It is not world-negating and solipsistic. It is rather seeing the world in the perspective of God or the Absolute such that nature and spirit form a continuum. It could be described as infused since it is a divine act in the soul, transforming the individual or community and leading it into a new itinerary of life. It is not perfection of the soul or the community, but empowerment. It is a stirring into action experienced in the tranquility of one's being-in-consciousness.

Mysticism in this sense is a divine event of self-disclosure associated with purity of heart understood as simplicity and singularity of well meaning purpose and intention. A life without admixture is the milieu of mystical experience. When God presents himself to a soul or person, the energy of God makes the individual being expansive, opening her up to that inclusiveness of disposition that makes loving service of neighbor possible. Egoism gives way to alterity and subjectivity is replaced by objectivity. Religion begins when the subject of such depth experience or his follower prolongs this experience through ceremonies, doctrine and pattern of behaviour that is structured after the experience. What has been generally known as acquired mysticism is nothing but man's attempt to replicate the mystical experience which is possible only at the instance of God; an experience that is foundational to the religion of one's affiliation. The understanding of the experience operates on the basis of the principle of analogy. God would never be present to finite creature as he is; he reveals himself according to the mode of the receiver. In interpreting this experience to others the subjective elements of the individual's history and temperament come into play. The result is that one's interpretation is coloured by limitations of the subject of mystical experience. Religion is a living and dynamic interpretation of the mystical experience. The adherents of a given religion opens up to the depth experience of its founder by deploying rites, laws and doctrines that enhance the prolongation of the experience in a human way. Given the individual differences in the personality of religious founders, it is no surprise that they come up with interpretation of their experiences that

sometimes conflict with those of others. The source of conflict is not the mystical experience but the interpretation of the experience. The experience is always divinely brought about, though circumscribed to the history and personality of the individual mystic. If adherents of any religion genuinely strive to replicate the experience, in the here and now, which is essential to the purpose of religion, there would hardly be conflicts among religions. Every religion is first and foremost instituted to ensure man's well being in this world as warrant for an enduring wellbeing in the hereafter. The quest for this well being is brought about through those religious acts that are constitutive of what is called acquired mysticism. These acts in turn presuppose openness to loving relationship with others demonstrated in good works.

### **Conclusion**

Taking a close look at the analyses of the nature and origin of religion in philosophical and social science literatures, this paper has argued that Igbo conception of man's spiritual experience represented by the West as "religion" clarifies the nature and origin of the phenomenon. From the analysis of the word "igo" and "uka" the paper presents an understanding of religion that is dialogic. It is a speech act in response to an experience. That experience is mystical. In other words, it is the experience of the divine, a deep intuition of God or divine manifestation that awakens man to this dialogic (vocal or mental) response in order to sustain and perpetuate the said experience. This depth experience that occasions a response on the part of man is always personal. In and through the experience the divine presence flows into human milieu and man's response (religion) is a flow back into the source of the experience. Every religion is a result of mystical experience such that it could be said that mysticism is prior to religion, yet religion is incomplete if it does not eventuate in mysticism. Sacred communication or religion is nothing other than abiding in that experience which provides the spiritual tenor of human life. When the structure of the life of a mystic is adopted as a platform for interpretation and meaning of the life of any group or community, it becomes their religion. As individuals or groups open up and pattern their lives accordingly, they replicate the initial experience and gear up for divine manifestation in their own lives. This replication is interpretative. It is in this that is rooted the differences and possible contradictions that make for conflict. Mysticism is one but its appropriations are many. There is unity of experience in mysticism, since it is the same transcendent order, but there is diversity of interpretation or appropriation in religion or sacred communication. In mysticism man, at first, is passive whereas in religion, or sacred communication, man is active. It is only in activity that conflict is possible.

---

## References

- Bergson, H (1977). *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Translated by R. Ashley and Cloudesley Breerton With the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Capra, F (2017). *Mystics and Scientists in the Twenty-First Century: Science and Spirituality Revisited*, 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Mystics and Scientists Conference Horsley Park, Surrey. Pdf
- Dinham, A & Shaw, M (2017). Religious Liberty through Religious Education: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief, *Religions* 8, 119; doi:10.3390/rel8070119; [www.mdpi.com/journal/religions](http://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions)
- Feuerbach, L (1957). *The Essence of Christianity*, Harper & Row Publishers
- Freud, S (2009). *L'Avenir D'une Illusion*, Paris : Flammarion
- Hick, J (1983). *The Philosophy of Religion*, New Jersey: Upper Saddle River, Gary E. Kessler, (1999), *Philosophy of Religion: Toward A Global Perspective*, Albany, N.Y: Wadsworth Publishing Company
- Leuba, J. H (1921). The Meaning of "Religion" and the Place of Mysticism in Religious Life, *The Journal of Philosophy: Vol. 18. No. 3:57-67*
- Lewis, H. D (1959). *Our Experience of God*, Great Britain, Collins
- Liddell, H. G and Scott, R (1996). *Greek-English Lexicon* With a Revised Supplement, Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Mbiti, J. S (1997). *African Religions and Philosophy*, Second Edition, Ibadan: Heineman
- Mayse, E. D (2015). Beyond Letters : The Question of Language in the Teachings of Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch, *Doctoral Dissertation*. Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:Hul.InstRepos:17463960>
- McGinn, B (2015). Mysticism and the Reformation: A Brief Survey, *Acta Theologica* 35 (2):50-65, DOI
- McGrath, A. E (2011). *Christian Theology. An Introduction*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Oxford: Willey Blackwell.
- Oguejiofor, J. Obi (2010). The Resilient Paradigm: Impact of African World View on African Christianity, Bede Uche Okwuije C.S.Sp (Ed.), *God, Bible, Bible and African Traditional Religion*, Acts of SIST

- International Missiological Symposium 2009, Enugu: SNAAP Press Ltd.
- Otto, R (1978 reprint). *The Idea of the Holy*, London: Oxford University Press.
- Personal Interview with Michael Nwabueze on 9 August, 2017 on the subject of “igoukwu” in Uvuru, UzoUwani Local Government Area of Enugu State. M. Nwabueze is an indigenous catholic priest from the area.
- Schleiermacher, F (1958). *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Dispersers*, New York: Harper & Row, Joseph Dabney Bettis. (1969), *Phenomenology of Religion, Eight Modern Description of the Essence of Religion*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers
- Sharma, A (1995). *The Philosophy of Religion and Advaita Vedanta: A Comparative Study in Religions and Reason*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, Gary E. Kessler, (1999), *Philosophy of Religion: Toward A Global Perspective*, Albany, N.Y: Wadsworth Publishing Company
- Smith, W. C (1962, 1963). *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Fortress Press, Gary E. Kessler, (1999), *Philosophy of Religion: Toward A Global Perspective*, Albany, NY: Wadsworth Publishing Comp.
- Taglaferri, L (2017). *Lyrical Mysticism: The Writing and Reception of Catherine of Siena*, A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The State University of New York.
- Tarlow, P (2017). *The Interaction of Religion and Terrorism*, *International Journal of Safety and Security in Terrorism/Hospitality*, pp. 11-13, pdf
- Van der Leeuw, G (1938). *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner, London: Allen & Unwin Ltd, Joseph Dabney Bettis. (1969), *Phenomenology of Religion, Eight Modern Description of the Essence of Religion*, New York: Harpers & Row, Publishers
- Wenzel-Teuber, C (2017). *Statistics on Religions and Churches of the People’s Republic of China – Update for the Year 2016*, [http://www.china-zentrum.de/fileadmin/downloads/rctc/2017-2/RCTC\\_2017-2.26-53\\_Wenzel-Teuber\\_Statistics\\_on\\_Religions\\_and\\_Churches\\_in\\_the\\_PRC-%E2%80%93\\_Update\\_for\\_the\\_Year\\_2016.pdf](http://www.china-zentrum.de/fileadmin/downloads/rctc/2017-2/RCTC_2017-2.26-53_Wenzel-Teuber_Statistics_on_Religions_and_Churches_in_the_PRC-%E2%80%93_Update_for_the_Year_2016.pdf)