

Religious Ambivalence In Igboland: A Synthesis Of Christianity And Igbo World View

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Abstract

Whenever Christianity is professed, there is a constant dialectic arising from its relationship with the cultural presupposition and practices of the cultures where it is located. A philosophical look at the Christianization of Igboland shows that the response of the Igbo to Christianity has been as interesting as it is ambivalent. On one score, there is the success story of the phenomenological movement of the vast majority of Igbo population to Christianity. Church buildings and related institutions have displaced former sites of powerful local deities and reserved sacred places, forest and groves. However, turning to the other side of the coin, one finds a bewildering array of ambivalent practices, a mix-up of Christian elements and traditional religious beliefs and practices among professing Igbo Christians. Guidance through dreams and visions, miraculous healing, prayer that expects immediate and concrete answers, and so on now constitute the main features of Igbo Christian practices. Critics had condemned this form of Christianity as 'neo paganism' or syncretism. However, this paper has reflected on the nature of syncretism and its meaning in Igbo situation and concluded that what obtains in Igboland is a synthesis.

Introduction

Christianity in Igboland has assumed a global significance and the directions it takes are of importance to Christians anywhere. Christianity came to Igboland in European cultural packaging and contextualization. This brand of Christianity saw Igbo world view and cultural milieu as unnecessary superstitions and unwarranted practices that called for subjugation and total extinction. According to Isichei (1976) "Both the evangelicals of the Niger mission and the Catholic Fathers were hostile to Igbo religion, not once, but repeatedly, in their writings and correspondence does one find Igboland described as the kingdom of Satan" (p. 161). The explanation for this attitude can be found partly in the religious attitude of Europe at that time, and partly in the psychological circumstances of their work. They did not see Igbo religion as one manifestation of that light which enlightens every man born into the world.

Today the Christians of Igbo origin are invited to indigenize Christianity in Igboland. The majority of Igbo Christians are gradually creating their own maps of reality, interpreting their Christianity in terms of their own Old Testament of inherited culture. The true encounter between Christianity and Igbo world view therefore takes place in the heart of Igbo Christians themselves. Once, missionaries insisted on biblical Saints' names for converts, it is now common for Igbo Christians to give their children traditional names, chosen for their congruity with their beliefs, such as Uchechukwu (God's wisdom is

supreme) Olisaemeka (The Lord has done well) Chinenye (God gives) or Chukwuebuka (God is great).

Many prophetic and charismatic leaders in Igboland have developed a profoundly biblical religion, differing from the older Churches in that they reclaim many aspects of religion that has become eroded or forgotten in much western praxis, such as guidance through dreams and visions, miraculous healing, prayers that confronts the machinations of the evil forces, and so on. Most critics had condemned this form of Christianity as syncretism, engaging in non Christian rituals. To them religious pluralism erodes the basic content of faith traditions, for it is the essence of the religion of the book, not of traditional religion, that they make exclusive truth claim. It is not surprising to get this kind of reaction from critics from outside Igboland. Isichei (1995) had remarked that “if a people’s behaviour is in part shaped by their own images and concepts, to the degree that these images and concepts are ignored and alien ones imposed or applied, that behaviour will be misunderstood and faultily explained” (p. 9).

The contention in these few pages therefore is that religious meanings are changed, nuanced, eroded by journeys through time as well as by journeys through cultures. Reality therefore, differs from society to society and from age to age. This applies to Christianity. Every such journey is an encounter, a giving and receiving. The Igbo then received the gospel according to their manner of existence. That means with all structural predisposition of their culture. That means with history, the ideas and ideals, the achievement and aspirations, the collective experience of the Igbo as a people. All this entered into a melting pot with the Christian message and from this mysterious alchemy comes the only thing that one can authentically call African Christianity. This is where one can see the possibility of a synthesis of which the title speaks.

A Peep into the Igbo World View

A world view is a result of the efforts of a people to understand the world or the reality around them. Thus its outcome is often dependent on context and that explains the wide variations that are comparative features of different world views. According to Oguejiofor (2004):

The effort at interpretation that gives rise to a world view is characterized by a primordial attempt to react to the uncontrollability of nature. Man’s initial experience with the world is that of chagrin or *abinitio* surprise that nature does not behave in accordance with nor is it amenable to his will. (p. 230).

He further explains that the theoretical explanation for the difficulties of nature or life contains explanation, which at the same time reveals the finitude of man in finding answers. A world view therefore represents the sedimentation of a people’s conception of the way things are and how they should be.

Religion and religious beliefs and their effects on the Igbo communities are the key to understanding the Igbo world view, Ilogu (1985) rightly remarked that “the life and thought of any pre-literate people is best studied through their religious beliefs and practices” (p. 8). Mbiti (1975) also believe that:

It is religion more than anything else, which colours the African participation in the universe, making life a profoundly religious phenomenon. To be is to be religious in a religious universe. That is the philosophical understanding behind

African myths, customs, traditions, beliefs, morals, actions and social relationships. (p. 262).

African world view generally emerged from a situation of relative poverty and under development. A world view marked in a special way by the quest for survival, which is an outcrop of relative poverty, has some characteristics. Among these is the coalescence of the divine and human, the supernatural and the natural. Life becomes a huge circle in which each of these dimensions is closely linked with the other. A possible explanation of this coalescence is the factor of inter-dependence. "This is in turn born of the vision engendered by life threatening situations, which has been described as precarious vision" (Kalu, 1978:110). In turn such vision gives rise to the quest for help from all conceivable sources, divine and human. Oguejiofor (2004) insisted that this quest presupposes a conception of the sources of trouble, which can also be taken to be both terrestrial (human) and supra-terrestrial (spiritual). It is thus not surprising that the traditional African religious word is the one peopled by a number of deities detailed to take care of spiritual aspects of life. These also serve as counter forces against other spiritual beings that are considered to be life threatening.

The spirit world is always inscrutable, near as it may be. At important junctions of life, the will of its inhabitants requires to be ascertained through divination and the oracles. The importance of these means of knowledge lay in the fact that in Africa, incomprehensible things are often attributed to the supernatural. Many phenomena that are otherwise explicable by deeper knowledge of the operation of nature are attributed to the machinations of super-natural disasters such as flooding and storm, death of young people, problem of conception or childbearing, lack of male offspring, and failure in business, in more modern time failure in examination, difficulty in bagging a job, dismissal from already bagged, and so on, are attributed to the machinations of the spirit world. The attitude engendered by these as well as by other aspects of Igbo world view is far from being obliterated despite the age of Christianity in Igboland. In the same way the characteristic of the Igbo world view may have lost the explicit religious expressions and beliefs which gave rise to them or which they engendered, but the cast of mind, which they bequeathed to generations of Igbo people still persist. So the missionaries to Igboland never found an empty void into which to pour the Christian message. They found existing religious beliefs and practices, social and cultural values. Thus the crucial issue in the Christian mission in Igboland demands the survival of the world view in the practice of the one Christian faith, and the development of this world view in the context of a healthy culture change and continuity.

The point is that the Igbo embraced Christianity not necessarily as a substitute to the Igbo world view but because some of the features of the world view of the Igbo are shared in common with Christian religion seen in the prism of both the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament there is abundance of occurrences, which were attributed to the direct intervention of God in the affairs of men, ranging from the deluge (Gen.7-17-24), the plagues (Ex.3:1-6), the crossing of the red sea (Ex.14:15-31) the feeding with manna (Ex.16), and so on. The New Testament presents Christ as the fulfillment of messianic promise in his birth, his preaching, his work, especially his miracles (Oguejiofor, 2004). The fulfillment of the expectation of Christ is eminently signified by the wonderful work of God in Him through the salvation (body and soul) wrought by his incarnation, his life, death, resurrection and ascension. The interpretation

of the miraculous work of Christ is very central in the Igbo understanding of the Christian message. Christ becomes the ultimate clearing house for man's problems. It is on this understanding that the Igbo seek the intervention of the divinities in the face of his life challenges. It then follows that to understand an Igbo and to preach Christianity to him; an approach must be made through the language he understands, through his world view.

Highlights on the encounter between the Christian missions and Igbo religion

The coming of Christian missions in Igboland aroused widespread hopes among number of individuals. Their message enjoyed an extraordinary response and in many areas mass movement began into the mission Churches Protestants and Catholic. However, one question which is difficult to answer is the extent to which the Christianization of Igboland had been completed. Missionary accounts portray missionary history as a triumphal progress. But the extent of the Christianization of Igboland is a question of depth and sincerity, as well as numbers.

In the early days, missions were preoccupied with and often overwhelmed by their task of Church buildings, and had little time for any real encounter in depth with indigenous beliefs and systems of thought which were in any case expected to disappear rapidly in favour of European culture and religion. Consequently little attempt was made to discern points of preparedness for the gospel in traditional religion and the world view of the Igbo. In the earlier years, missions were co-partners with European administrators in opposing, on "humanitarian grounds", such features of traditional societies as human sacrifices, ritual murder, tribal warfare, corruption and indigenous slavery. This later extended to a disparaging of 'pagan superstition' and of institutions unacceptable to European morality. The absence at that period of serious ethnographic literature left the early missionaries to Igboland in ignorant of Igbo world view and of the social functions of traditional religion. Ozigbo (1988) also noted that apart from the European image of Africa, the theological culture of the missionaries had some part to play. The Jewish biblical and patristic view of "idols" and "gods", and of the traditional religion as "idolatry", had hardened into a rigid Christian dogma, long before the missionaries arrived in South-eastern Nigeria. Saturated and burdened with cultural borrowings from other peoples, the missionaries had developed a phobia against syncretism.

What was being attacked varied from mission to mission, but was usually one or more of the component features of the following traditional complex found in most parts of Igboland – polygamy, laws and taboos, the tribal world view, priests and priestesses, medicine men, witch doctors, rainmakers and mediums, seers and diviners, universal belief in and fear of efficacy of magic, exorcism, rites for combating witchcrafts and sorcery, singing, dancing and drumming, the immediacy of the spiritual world, and so on. This demolition of the traditional institutions and the Igbo world view was upon the promise that their fears and insecurity would be addressed with the introduction of a new religion. However, Barrett (1970) confirmed that:

The people realized with some bitterness that the hopes aroused by the early days of Christian preaching would not materialize. They had not anticipated the consequences in the severe strain being put on their traditional institutions. They had failed to obtain the force *vitale*, the mysterious power of the whites – material, financial, cultural, religious, spiritual or ecclesiastical. Their societies were not being fulfilled by the new religion, but were being demolished. In

place of the secure religion they thought they had of old, there was now a religious void. A widespread sense of uncertainty and insecurity therefore arose. (p. 267).

All the new impinging forces consequent on white contact-economic, social, political and religious – led to a widespread anomie and generated major tensions in Igbo societies. However, the publication of Christian scripture in the language of the people was an event of major importance to the Christian life of the Igbo. According to Barrett (1970). With the translation of the complete Bible, African societies gradually began to discern a serious discrepancy between missions and biblical religion in connection with the traditional institutions under attack. Missions had, it now seemed, inadvertently overstepped their biblical authority, and were vocal where the Bible was silent, whereas Jesus had come to fulfill the old order, missions by contrast had come to destroy it. The gospel was therefore being misrepresented by missionaries who had added their own cultural biases to it. The climate of opinion with the Igbo Christian was disaffection with the disembodied doctrine, pre-fabricated dogma, formalized religion, abstract theology, indigestible liturgy, complex regulations and harsh ecclesiastical discipline all imported from Europe. Gradually the scripture became for the Igbo an independent standard of reference to legitimize their grievances. These grievances became articulated in certain biblical themes centering among other things, on the desire to experience biblical release from sickness, witchcrafts and sorcery. In short the desire to control their own destinies by exercising the biblical power promised to the people of God. At a certain point the limit of tolerance was reached; the reactions then came with the emergence of charismatic leaders, seers, prophets, who now came into prominence in form of evolving a synthesis from the encounter between the Christian religion and the Igbo world view in order to address the frustrations of the people whose religious security and social setting had been disparaged by the activities of the missions. This synthesis is characterized by a marked resurgence of traditional Igbo customs and world-view, and a strong affirmation of the right to be both an Igbo and fully Christian. What emerged out of this whole reaction was a complex new religious form which replaced the assaulted and discredited traditional complex by a synthesis of old and new, with selective drawings from western culture and mission theology and practice, combining cultural integrity and spiritual autonomy, and marked by the two themes of biblicalism and Africanness. The whole complex of this parallel represents a creative response to the breakdown of the old forms, and an attempt at Christianizing the earlier traditional complex.

Reformation theology and the new religious communities in Igboland

After the medieval reformation, says Du Plessis (1929) “the Papal Bulls could not prevent traders, missionaries and adventures of every language and nation from sailing to the coast of West Africa in their desire to search for the hidden treasure of West Africa” (p.109). So also the reformation of the Church in Igboland occasioned an exploration into the Igbo religio-cultural milieu in the desire to exploit the rich values of Igbo religio-cultural heritage for the nourishment of Igbo Christianity. The people wanted a form of Christianity that would enable them to interpret, understand, and come to grips with their own rapidly changing society.

The 20th century desire for the Igbo to increase his knowledge about his world was the result of the reformation. A fundamental difference in attitude to the traditional Igbo world view remains the basic divisive issue between missions and the Igbo Christians;

and the more biblical position claimed by the latter is the basis for their assertion that it constitutes an incipient reformation of Igbo Christianity. According to Achunike (2009):

The reformation movement is prefigured in the person of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. Methodism was essentially a reaction against the extreme Calvinism, which had dominated English social, religious, and political life during much of the seventeenth century; if Calvinism taught the doctrine that only the elect could be saved, Methodism taught that anyone could find salvation. (p. 41).

Indeed the 18th century Methodism was a reaction against a prevailing creedal rigidity, liturgical strictness, and ironclad institutionalism that had largely depersonalized religion and had rendered it incapable of serving the needs of the individuals. Methodist perfectionism in America was a swing toward warmth, feeling, experience, and morality and away from the mechanical, permissive, de-ethicalized, and formal worship of the time. Hence, MacNult (cited in Achunike, 2009) believed that the main reason or aim of the reformation movement in Igbo Church is not just the doctrines of the Church but is rather a question of the power of the spirit to accomplish what we say the doctrine should accomplish in the area of saving humankind. They feel that the power of the spirit has really been neglected, and as a result, people in their basic human needs go to sources other than Christianity.

Among the Igbo it was the traditional priests who diagnosed the cause of an illness and prescribed the appropriate treatment. Illness was seen as part of the problem of evil in the world, and therefore had a religious or non-material side of it. There would be an incantation for a difficult pregnancy or for various types of illness, and if the correct word and especially the correct names were used then, it was believed, the desired effect in the overall scheme of things would come about. Clarke (1986) believes that:

The name of God in particular was believed to have considerable intrinsic power and when used on the form of a prayer were regarded, as was prayer in general, as much more than a simple request or petition but rather as the invocation of a law which carries with it its own fulfillment. (p. 167).

This in part explains the widespread response to the praying bands, associations, societies and Churches.

It is frequently stated that Africa and Latin America are the continents that will determine the future of Christianity. One of the most remarkable trends of the last few decades among the Christian population of eastern Nigeria has been the dramatic rise of the variously called “Charismatic Movements”, “Spiritual Churches”, “New Religious Movements”, African Independent Churches, “Pentecostalism”, and so on. Literally thousands of new Churches and evangelical groups have cropped up in cities and towns forming a form of synthesis in Christian practices which is rapidly becoming a powerful new social and religious force. These new religious movements or Churches though did not sanction and uphold all that was traditional, nevertheless offered what many saw as an attractive, meaningful, easily accessible method of resolving or coping with their spiritual and other problems of medical, social, cultural and to some extent political nature. According to Marshall (1993), one of the other highly attractive aspects of the new movement is its treatment of evil forces and spiritual oppression on both the theological and practical level. These movements with their emphasis on the spiritual forces behind events in the material world, finds a strong parallel with traditional Igbo

cosmologies. The idea that events, especially unfortunate ones, have unseen or spiritual causes, is one of the most banal facts of life. What is crucial, therefore, is to have some methods of confronting these forces or protecting oneself from them. In urban settings, where life is chaotic, unregulated and precarious, these evil forces are in abundance – stealing wages, causing ill-health, accidents, barrenness, joblessness and a host of other social ills. As social instability and insecurity increases, fear of witchcraft and evil spirit reaches near-hysterical proportions. Rather than sidelining these problems, as mission founded Churches appear to do, these new movements confront them directly, and make the vanquishing of witches, evil spirits, and other “agents of Satan” one of the central elements of Church practice. What is more to the point is that people embrace that which offers both the conceptual reorganization of a chaotic moral field, as well as practical solutions. Thus, people opted for more relevant and in their view authentic version of Christianity. Clarke (1986) preserved the sentiment of a Nigerian expressed in the early 1940s thus:

Christianity—the old conception of it—as dogmatic and unconcerned with mundane affairs—is spurious and anachronistic. Those who believe in a Christ of the gospel believe in a real and not an abstract deity. Christianity is a religion of rebirth and regeneration and has an efficacious prescription for social regeneration. It cannot afford to be mute and must concern itself with every phase of life. (pp. 178-179).

Haes (1993) further maintained that “the new movements represents efforts made in various ways to recapture, in its integrity, the message of the Bible, which according to them, was distorted and rendered lifeless by the missionaries who came from outside the African continent” (p. 98).

The mission Churches demanded that people renounce once and entirely the traditional religious belief system and at the same time did not seem to provide an alternative means of protecting these converts from the evil world around them. This meant that many of those for who religion was an important means of explaining, interpreting and understanding the world were expected to live without the full support and benefits of either traditional religion or Christianity. That such individual should feel constrained, in such circumstances, to turn to alternative ways of solving their problems is not surprising. Ekechi (1972) asked a worthwhile question, “When a man is driven from one country into another, if the inhabitants of that country would not receive him, is he to live in the air?” (p. 93).

The evolution of the new religious forms is an important strand in Igbo Christianity. The new form of Christianity is characterized by some of the following features: occasional dual or plural membership in mission and spiritual Churches, random borrowing from various historical denominations and traditional religion, a claim indigenous or African theology, prophesying, faith healing, stress on spiritual gifts, trances, visions and dreams, acceptance of polygamists as members but infrequently as officials, religious symbolism, use of holy water, exorcism, ringing of hand bell, millennial release from sorcery, mass confession of witches, mass glossolalia, telephonic conversation with the Holy Ghost, special ritual language, religious joy and ecstasy, drums and flutes in worships, hand-clapping, vernacular hymns, vernacular names of endearment for Jesus, and so on. Majority of these religious forms are drawn from the Igbo experience and world view, and hence differentiated it from Western Christianity. According to Barrett (1970), “most

of them are defended as compatible with biblical faith and therefore as a legitimate indigenizing of the apostolic Kerygma” (p. 275). Further, the whole complex may be regarded as the focus of a new type of community, a restructuring of society which replaces the old tribe by the new Church often with its own closely-integrated institutions, customs, beliefs and laws, in which the mass of innovatory ideas and practices serves to bring about a quite new social cohesion in a disintegrating society. This new society, Barrett (1970) concludes, becomes a place to feel at home, capable of fulfilling the same mediating role in the new secular world as the traditional tribal complex played in the old.

The proliferation and persistence of these new communities of faith highlights and challenges at least two aspects of missionary activity in Igboland. These are, on one hand, the historical link with the power of the whites, attitudes of superiority toward Western culture, and a tendentious interpretation of the Bible, and on the other, the arrogant manner in which the gospel has been preached. The acute lack of explanation, prediction and control of world view has been responsible for the prevalence of religious ambivalence in Igboland. Many Igbo Christians seem to have one foot in Christianity and the other in traditional religion. With this picture of spiritual poverty, new faith communities are a welcome development.

Conclusion

Religious ambivalence in Igboland is an extension of Igbo traditional world view. There was an underlying problem which greatly complicated relationships between foreign missionaries and Igbo Christians, and it lies on the question—*is Igbo world view an illusion?* To the 19th century missionaries, the spirits of traditional religion were often real demons. For modern Igbo Christians, this is a good example of white racism. It was indeed out of such circumstance that Anderson (1990) had seen the need for a reinterpretation of spirit concepts adequately within the perceived Igbo traditional world view. It is welcome news that the Holy Spirit is a power greater than any of the powers, which threaten the existence of the human beings within the Igbo cultural milieu. Without the power of the spirit the Igbo Christians can easily revert to the religion of their ancestors, which was more “powerful” than the somewhat sterile, rational Christianity imported from the West.

The new faith communities have presented the Good News of Christ’s Lordship into the dark realm and existential reality of evil. In this way their contribution is original and has effectively helped evil related pastoral cares than other mission founded Churches which misunderstood, rejected and ultimately neglected the belief in evil spirits and resultant needs of the Igbo. Ojo (1988) argues that the spiritual Churches have been presented in a relevant and acceptable manners to Nigerians adapted to the Nigerian situation and have contextualized their teachings within the Nigerian environment. The new form of Igbo Christianity is for conversion and it also serves as a work of redemption, freeing people from the clutches of witches, forces of darkness, principalities, hard luck and repeated failures.

Ejizu (2003) shed a considerable light on the ambivalent response of a vast population of Igbo people to Christianity when he concluded that:

Dual religious affiliation is undoubtedly a widespread phenomenon in contemporary Igbo society. Vast populations of converts are still caught betwixt and between two faiths and two words. They find themselves engulfed by the modern society with all the demands and challenges of a fast moving world. But they equally live with their traditional religious and cultural heritage. Igbo traditional religion persists and continues to hold considerable attention for that significant portion of Igbo Christian converts. (p. 193).

The conclusion, therefore, is that the Igbo man in his Christian practice is not syncretistic, but he has rather demonstrated the fact that there is an Igbo way of being a Christian and a Christian way of being an Igbo man.

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