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Religion, Culture and Civilization – The Need for Dialogue

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Chapter Two

Religion, Culture and Civilization – The Need for Dialogue¹

Introduction

Our wisdom and experience show that culture matters in human and international affairs, and the world of human civilization is nothing but a world made up of the historicity of interaction of immigrants and migrants; tourists and landowners; indigenes and non-indigenes; inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue for collaboration, coexistence and communication.

Thus interdependence of cultures, religions and thought patterns make up the content of what we call civilization which is but the cross-pollination of ideas, sieved through generations and peoples in history, whose thought patterns challenge each other to revival, re-evaluation and re-establishment. It is this search for language affinities and cultural artefacts, knowledge transfers of cultures across boundaries, the preservation and the adaptation (*aggiornamento*) of heritage, which belongs to the one human family, born free and created equal by an almighty creator and father of all that justifies this coming together of citizens and friends to Enugu for this week of Cultural Fiesta.

The topic chosen for this Symposium, namely; *Culture, Religion and Civilization – a Need for Dialogue* is apt and corresponds to the spirit of the times and adequately fills the vacuum for the much sought for qualitative and transformational response to the current needs for integral development, economic integration, human progress through civilization, a multicultural society within Nigeria promoting nation building, the ideals of peace, wealth generation and the alleviation of the prejudice of ignorance (*iti bolibo*), discrimination, various forms of ‘*hocus-pocus*’ and deceitful religious syncretism based on the voodoo abracadabra methodology of man-made intellectual deprivation and spiritual poverty based on intimidation, the fear of the unknown spirit-world beyond, and the lack of experience which fuels the imagination with weird possibilities of the killing yonder even whilst alive.

¹ Ike, O.F.; Paper delivered at the Symposium to Unveil the Maiden Edition of Enugu Cultural and Tourism Fiesta at Nike Lake Hotel Resort on 15th December, 2011.

An innovation of an Igbo cultural week with programmed events of this sort bears the promise to showcase the positive cultural values of the people to the larger universe of the ICT, the audio-visual and print media, the television and radio houses, participants, indigenes, nationals, tourists and the African Diaspora as a whole. This exercise can assist the purification of the 'odious' in ancient practices, remove what transgresses human rights and dignity; move the past to the present where it has meaning and relevance; modernize culture in contemporary society and re-establish, for example, the grandiose and multifaceted *Mmanwu* (masquerade) phenomenon, already chased out from the theatre of Igbo village squares and festivities by Western philosophical thought patterns, modernism, Pentecostal Christian attitudes and born again religious evangelism which saw the masquerade as "*a merely women flogging institution and fear instigating male dominated and pagan originated group.*"

The attempt is to rejuvenate authentic cultural values, establish the philosophical and ethical foundations that are suitable and relevant for the proper enculturation of ancient values into modern concepts that is dignifying for human beings in a modern world. My attempt is to insist on the promotion of cultural values as human values by bringing both the old and the new to an acceptable and mutually agreeable level of spiritual conviviality, based on the principles of social entertainment, educational content, *Omenala* preservation and continuity of the good in culture, the metaphysics of bonding the past, the present and the future in an *Igbology* mixed with Natives and Moderns who must integrate the philosophy of "*live and let live*" (*onye anwuna ma ibe ya efula*) for the common good of all and for a sustainable future.

In Fidelity to Truth Lies Human Dignity

"PEOPLE WHO DO NOT LOOK BACK TO HISTORY AND THEIR ANCESTORS
CANNOT COMFORTABLY LOOK FORWARD TO POSTERITY AND THEIR
CHILDREN'S FUTURE"
(OZOR NEIFE OZOIKE FROM UMANA NDIAGU).

There is a lot of confusion in the present times in our society because of the lack of orientation and certainty as to what constitutes the 'Common Good'. This situation mirrors the lack of a definite and sure guide for people's lives, lifestyles and social destiny as to what is useful, correct, ethically imperative, humanly elevating, culturally acceptable and socially unifying, not divisive. There were times, understood as 'in those days' when people were sure of

their beliefs and the customs of their ancestors and motherland. The traditional answers in the present times seem redundant. Thorny questions occur with ever increasing frequency. Somehow in many societies, the vocabulary of 'Right and Wrong'; of 'Duty and Neglect of Duty'; of 'Sin and Shame'; of 'Good and Bad' has become difficult to use.

Our age is confronted with decisions which previous generations did not really have to face. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that many people have rejected the traditional sources of ethical illumination. Today, the old certainties are virtually gone. Shame is seemingly gone. Truth is somehow not fashionable. Integrity and credibility are strange words for some. Dignity and decency are no more very clear and living in deceit and debauchery happen to be relatively fashionable, albeit for just a short period because truth and its search is unquenchable in the human soul and psyche, no matter what pretence any person may try to make of it.

History records show that **Culture matters** and the relationship and interaction of the world of human beings to transcendence, translates to the search for meaning and happiness which all people seek. It also translates to lasting values which concern God and the metaphysical beyond the physical; the noumenon beyond the phenomenon; the 'Kairos' beyond the 'Kronos'. In an earlier work I wrote on the theme of "Development is People; Business is Ethics" (Ike/Nnoli 2003, p. 95), I stated that a source of complication is the new global and pluralistic environment. We live in a meeting point and global village environment. Several questions emerge and some people say: Culture is a thing of the past. Yet the question needs to be asked and it is this:

"In the light of the moral diversity and the proliferation of moral languages issuing from our plural and global world, what must remain central to humanity after the fact of relativity is acknowledged. Nothing? Something? What could it be? Could legislation cover these ambiguities in life? Are any ethical principles universally applicable and what are they? How do we cope with the contending characteristics of our age? its ethical pluralisms; its rapid social change, its linguistic distrust of centralistic claims? This is the challenge young people face as they leave home for the first time from their parents in one week or semester in school. They imbibe the new slogans, lose their roots and end up neither being European nor being authentically African, like the bird called 'Usu', (Bat). Some join bad company and lose direction."

There is no such thing as truth; they teach even the little children at school. Truth is bondage. Believe what seems right to you. There are many truths as

there are individuals. Follow your feelings. Do as you please. Get in touch with yourself. Do what feel comfortable. This is the language of the times and they speak thus who prepare the jails for the young. To undermine the truth is to perform the work of tyrants, as Henry Novak wrote in his *Templeton Address*. Even under conditions of nihilism, fidelity to Truth is better than cowardice. If we remain faithful to the truth, inner liberty is obtained. Vulgar relativism and its subjective culture so undermines the culture of liberty and knowledge that it is preferable to take a position on an issue than to remain neutral. Even for those unsure whether there is a God or not, a truth is different from a lie. Torturers can twist your mind, even reduce you to a vegetable, but as long as you retain the ability to say yes or no as truth alone commands, they cannot own you. To obey truth is to be free, and in certain extremities, nothing is dearer to the tormented mind, nothing more vital to the survival of self-respect, nothing so important to one's sense of remaining a worthy human being, of being no one's log, part of no one's machine, and register to death against the kingdom of lies – nothing is so dear as to hold to the truth.

Today we cannot remain unconcerned by the debate that is going on around us on culture, on our cultural heritage; on the Church and culture and the adaptation of Christianity to indigenous cultures; on the relationship between religions, cultures and civilizations; on whether or not Christianity as we got it from Europe is trans-culturally viable; on whether or not missionary work as we have known it is still justifiable.

The Philosophical Concept of Culture

Let me begin with some analysis and interpretation of the philosophical hermeneutics concerning the concept of culture. In his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, the Nobel-prize-winning poet and literary critic T.S. Eliot asserts that the term culture has three different associations according to whether we have in mind the development of an individual, of a group of class or of a whole society. As my teacher Prof. Monsignor Theophilus Okere has written in his book *"Culture and Religion"* (1974; pp. 9 ff.), *"when we talk of culture here, we mean it first and foremost, but not exclusively, in the sense it is understood by cultural anthropologists."*

In this meaning, culture is the way of life of a people. It includes the sum total of their mannerisms, beliefs, music, clothing, religions, language, behavioural patterns, food, housing, agricultural methods including their traditional behaviour in a broad sense, including their ideas, arts and artefacts. It is the social heritage which an individual acquires from his or her group and which

heritage classifies a people as belonging to a group. Culture makes it possible for us to distinguish between a Chinese, a Briton, Swede, Russian, American, German, Frenchman, Igbo, Yoruba and Idoma to mention but a few.

“It denotes a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about an attitude towards life” (‘Religion as a Cultural System’, C. Geertz in ‘Anthropological approach to the Study of Religion’, p. 3).

Culture in contra-distinction from nature is that part of his milieu which man himself created.

Why we must eat in order to survive, is a question of nature. Why the Igbo fulfils this duty with ‘*Ukwa*’ and ‘*Okwuru*’ and the English with “Bread and Tea”, is a matter of culture.

“That man must enter into marriage with woman is altogether natural. But that an Englishman thinks monogamy the only reasonable and normal type of marriage whereas an Igbo man thinks polygamy just as reasonable and normal, if not more so this is a matter of culture, which always means: this is the way they have been brought up.

Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, believing. It is the accumulated experience, knowledge and lore of social group stored, for future use, in the memories of men, in books, in objects” (Okere, T; Ibid).

Since culture is a way of life, the form in which culture is expressed; its symbols are the objectivities of the life of a people. Though incarnate in symbols and the various elements of culture the very heterogeneous character of these element-social organization, art, religion, ideas, etc, show that the idea of culture is an abstraction, a working hypothesis like evolution or relativity. No one can see them but they help explain observable facts. Culture is therefore a theory designed to yoke together these heterogeneous elements into one common system, purposely vaguely described as a people’s way of life.

Culture is distinct from society. It is society’s way of life. Hence society can remain when its culture has changed. Culture is specifically human. It is learned and not instinctive. It varies from group to group and from one

period of time to another within a single group. Customs, beliefs, social structures and institutions can change.

In the functionalist view, all these elements of culture are closely integrated and any change will involve a dislocation of their delicate equilibrium, a modification of the entire culture.

Though cultures are continuously changing, they are essentially conservative. There is no change except on continuity. No African culture has remained totally unaffected by European contact (Bascom and Herskovits: **'Continuity and Change in African Culture'**) but there is none which has entirely given way before it. Here in Igbo land we have incorporated foreign elements like tobacco, cassava and maize, the school, the motor car; but native law and custom exists side with European law, just as European medical practice exists parallel to indigenous medicine. Polygamy is still competing with monogamy and traditional religion coexist with Christianity, often in the same individual but especially in society at large where religious pluralism has emerged as a social norm. These examples show not only that all change is in continuity, but also that most changes are selective.

And rather than substitute a new item for an old one, cultures often prefer to add the new one to the old. 'Akwete' cloth has not been chased out of the market by European made cloths, nor have 'Awka blacksmith' gone out of market because of the influx of European made ironware. Our people reckon their week according to both the European and native calendars (Afor, Nkwo, Eke, Oye) and many of us have learnt to enjoy the music of Beethoven without growing any less enthusiastic of 'Atilogwu', 'Ijele dance', 'Egwu Ukwu' and 'Nwokedibia'.

Culture and Development

Culture change is a principle of cultural development. For culture, the law also holds that *"unless a grain of seed dies, itself remaineth alone, but if it dies, it generates new life"* (Wisdom words of Jesus Christ in the Bible).

Development means self-unfolding of what is contained in germ, and who would deny that some cultures need this development? For too long, African cultures remained alone and isolated, merely identical with themselves, and cut off from the main stream of world cultural development. They could be called culture only in the most general sense of the term, the way of life of a people. Thus, invited though without justifying it, the terrible indictment of

Hegel on Africa, the continent, he said, where the spirit has not yet become conscious of itself.

Of Africa, Hegel writes “*It has no historical interest of its own except that we see man here living in barbarism, in savagery and where he does not yet furnish any ingredient of culture. Africa is, as far back as history goes, separated from the rest of the world. It is El Dorado closed in upon itself, the land of children, which lying on the antipodes of the daylight of conscious history is hidden in the black colour of the night*” (*Vernunft in der Geschichte* P. 214). Here Hegel is of course a philosophical racist but I used this rather brutal example to introduce another meaning of the concept of culture. Here we associate it with conscious development.

But to think of culture in terms of development is to think of culture with a richer meaning; beyond the merely descriptive and qualitative neutral “*way of life of a people*”. It is culture in the original sense of culture, **colo-colere-colui-cultum** to cultivate, to till; to tend from where we have agriculture and horticulture. Culture here involves a conscious effort, a common pursuit, a forward march towards higher values, towards more refinement. It is in this sense that Herbert Marcuse defines culture as “A humanizing process, characterized by the collective effort to preserve human life, pacify the struggle for existence, hold it down to controllable limits, secure a productive organization of society, develop the spiritual capabilities of man and minimize and sublimate aggression, brute force and misery” (**H. Marcuse: Kultur Und Gesellschaft II p. 148**).

Here culture comes very near to being synonymous with civilization. In this sense, culture is guided by development, a conscious collective effort, a productive appropriation of one’s social heritage, with a view to refining, to humanizing it. Culture is a project and as such is not merely what it actually is, a people’s way of life, but also what it can become, the level it can attain, its potentialities yet to be developed. To pursue the vocation to culture is to heed the injunction of Goethe: “**Mensch werde was Du schon bist.**”

Man become what you already are! (quoted in M. Heidegger: ‘*Sein und Zeit*’, p. 145). It is in the light of such cultural development that cultural change is understandable and desirable. If it were so understood, there would be less lamentation and wailing as “*things fall apart*”, since this can be prelude to a stronger and higher synthesis. Having thus sketched our concept of culture, we come now to that of religion. We shall later indicate how both are related.

Critique of Religion in Society

It is no longer unusual to read open criticism of religion in our local newspapers. Religion and the churches are blamed for sowing discord in the country through the denominational schools, even held responsible for the so called educational imbalance between one part of the country and another. They are accused of dogmatic indoctrination, of intolerance and bigotry. On another level, the Christian religion is labelled as foreign and condemned as a colonial remnant responsible for the cultural alienation of the African and the banishment of its gods. Thinly veiled or even overt anti-religion or anti-clericalism has not been unknown in the pronouncements and administrative policies of some of our leaders. In general, there is a tendency to make religion a scape goat for a lot of our societal ills and the impression is given that society would certainly be better-off without religion.

Leftist Criticism of Religion

Beyond our National frontiers the criticism of religion and of its role in society has even gained in intensity. It is taunted that religion has not succeeded in making the world better; that in fact, on the contrary, it has made it worse.

Left-Wing critics point out that religion as institution- fixed belief has become an ideology in the service of the bourgeoisie with whose world-view and life style it is identified. It has, therefore, become an instrument for the maintenance, of a conservative *status quo*, that is to say an instrument of oppression. Christianity, it has been urged, has lost its initial evangelical impulse which was essentially humanitarian and has now deteriorated into a system of cold dogmas, empty ritual and intellectual mystification.

‘God Is Dead’ Philosophy of the German Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche

In the history of the criticism of religion a few names stand out very clearly. I will just recall some of them briefly.

Nietzsche, the man who announced to the world that God was dead, has a very negative view of the function of religion, more especially of Christianity. According to him “it is a demoralizing, emasculating force since it preaches humility and thereby robs men of pride and damps that enthusiasm, élan and hubris necessary for achieving great things.” Nietzsche was of course dreaming for the advent of the new man, who would be beyond good and evil, a race of supermen in a brave, new world.

But Christianity says Nietzsche, has declared a war unto death against this higher type of man banned by all his fundamental instincts; from these instincts it has distilled out evil, the evil one: the strong man as the typical damnable, the damned man. Christianity has taken the side of the weak, the lowly, the failures; it has made an ideal from the contradiction of the instinct of preservation of the strong life; it has even ruined the understanding of the intellectually strongest natures by teaching people to regard the highest intellectual values as sinful, misleading, as temptations (Nietzsche 'Antichrist', 5).

The Italian Maverick Prince Niccolo Machiavelli

Before Nietzsche, Niccolo Machiavelli at the Renaissance castigated Christianity for inducing meekness and the patient acceptance of injuries and because, as he put it "it causes us to attach less value to the honours and possessions of this world." But Machiavelli would not for that reason advocate the abrogation of religion. Like Plato long ago he wanted religious practice pressed into the service of the State. For this cold, calculating technician of naked power, religion, because it was useful for keeping the masses submissive and for training the army to discipline and obedience, was indeed a vital item in the complicated calculus of a prince hungry for power and intent on keeping it.

The Communist Philosophy of Karl Marx

Nearer our own times, we meet the formidable figure of Karl Marx whose criticism of religion determined official policy in more than half of the world until the crumble of Soviet Union in 1989. For Marx "Religion is nothing but a world of phantastic unreality, made by man for his own illusion." Religion, says Marx in a famous phrase, "is the opium of the people". "The abolition of Religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the necessary condition for their real happiness." (Marx- 'Engels Studienausgabe Band I Philosophie Fischer Buche'- rei p... 17-18).

The Need for the Criticism of Religion

Nietzsche, Machiavelli, Karl Marx: are these negative appraisals of the role of religion in society justified by the facts?

Not only on account of this anti-religious tradition which we have rather illustrated than exhausted by the names just mentioned, an examination of the role of religion in public life is positively necessary for the sake of those of us who happen to be professionals in matters of religion. What is our role in society? What use is this role at present? What possible use will it be in

the future? What expectations are our people entitled to have from the fact that Christianity is about 100 years old here, has touched the majority of our elite and has therefore become a factor in our public life? The answer to such existential questions may not be easy, but a hard look at the objective, historical relations between religion and public life is necessary for our own understanding of our position and perhaps useful for revalidating this position.

Finally, at this period of our social history when serious thinking is going on, on the future of this country and how to secure lasting peace and well-being for its people, it is proper to cast a glance at an area that tends to be either neglected or beclouded with prejudice. To the great debate on the country's future let our reflections be a modest contribution.

Two Vital Distinctions of Religion

A useful distinction to bear in mind during this discussion is that between religion as man's relation with the supernatural and the organization promoting this relation, between, for instance, Christianity as a message and the Christian church or churches as institutions for spreading this message, it may happen, it does happen, that some of the criticisms aimed at religion should be more properly directed against the institutions.

Another no less important distinction is that between the states and the body-politic. The body politic is the people politically organized and this is the fundamental political reality. The state on the other hand, is strictly speaking, the machinery of government - legislature, executive and judiciary. As such, it is part of; it is an agency of the body politic. Although it may be superior, by reason of the extent of its responsibility, to any other part of this body, it cannot validly claim equality, much less identity with the whole. (Cf. Jacques Maritain: 'Man and the State' pp. 10-11).

That religion has merited the criticism of Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Karl Marx as we have noted earlier is already an indication that it is a factor that is reckoned with in social life. It is not in vain that religion appears not only as a private affair of the individual but as a public and socially relevant phenomenon in all human societies.

Religion as a Factor of Reaction

The assessment of these thinkers is however negative. And indeed it does appear that there are some aspects of religion which can be socially dysfunctional if not detrimental.

Religion though a response to the problems of the individual in the face of the human condition, has very distinct functions for society at large; it is both an intimately private and also an eminently public affair.

Religion, on account of its transcendental dimension - at any rate in the functionalist view - sacralizes the norms and values of the established order, maintaining the dominance of group goals over individual wishes, and of group disciplines over individual impulses. It is, therefore, a means of social control, a stabilizing factor. It imposes a frame-work of ultimate reference, that is, it determines the value system of society.

In the functionalist view all elements of a society perform a positive function which is necessary and sufficient to maintain the social equilibrium. By conferring finality and ultimacy to established values, religion becomes a powerful means of social control and therefore of maintaining the established order, whatever this may be. This is the reason why Machiavelli whose interest is in the ruler recommends the use or rather the abuse of religion as an effective means of repression, while Karl Marx whose sympathies are populist recommends its abrogation. Religion in this view is conservative, reactionary, opposed to salutary change.

Some biblical passages quoted in support of this view of religion are duly famous:

"For the sake of the Lord accept the authority of every social institution." (I Peter 2,13).

"Remind them that it is their duty to be obedient to the officials and representatives of the government." (Titus 3:1).

But the *locus classicus* is the 13th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans. There St. Paul says:

"You must all obey the governing authorities. Since all government comes from God, the civil authorities were appointed by God, .and so anyone who resists authority is rebelling against God's decision, and such an act is bound to be punished."

The State is there to serve God for your benefit, if you break the law, however, you may well have fear; the bearing of the sword has its significance. The authorities are there to serve God: they carry out God's revenge by punishing wrong doers. You must obey, therefore, not only because you are afraid of being punished, but also for conscience sake. This is also the reason why you must pay taxes, since all government officials are

God's officers they serve God by collecting taxes. Pay every government official what he has a right to ask - whether it be direct tax or indirect, fear or honour. How to carry out this function in an era of function where government functionaries have become practical thieves is a matter that is baffling and needs another forum for discussion.

"All government comes from God." Even the government of a dictator? Of the person who comes to power through a bloody *coup d'état*? "Anyone who resists authority is rebelling against God's decision." Does he rebel against God's decision who resists apartheid? Protests against genocide or takes up arms as a guerrilla against a regime of organised injustice or legalised brigandage?

At any rate one can see a number of crucial problems raised by this passage and understand why our age would tend to be embarrassed by it. But this is the manifesto of all advocates of the *status quo*, of the law and order school of thought; it is the *Magna Charta* of all those fascist and dictatorial regimes, from Nazi Germany to Apartheid South Africa, which have learnt to press religion into the service of institutionalized oppression.

Now this phenomenon is not peculiar to Christianity alone but is a tendency inherent in the structure of religion itself and its ambivalent relation to society. The conservatism of Islam together with its fatalistic defeatism in face of social questions is well-nigh proverbial.

Our traditional religion too, did not only dominate every aspect of life by the imposition of a particular world view... It is well known that the most effective sanctions backing the laws and customs of the land were provided by religion by way of taboos, oath, 'Mmanwu' etc.

Religion tends then to become an ideology, at the service of the ruling class. But when the basis of government is unjust or the ruling class becomes corrupt, religion continues to serve its ends and its perpetuation. This is why religion must constantly purify its intentions and guard itself by frequent auto-criticism "*ecclesia semper reformanda*" from too much identification with the *status quo*.

Happily, this is not the only role of religion in society. In fact, the functional explanation of religion is only a partial explanation and is calculated to emphasize the pacific, conservative, stabilising role of religion in society.

Religion as a Revolutionary Factor

Some people call this the priestly function of religion. But there is another, and today more relevant one, the prophetic function. To understand what is meant here one has only to recall the case of King David who sinned and lived in sin with Bathsheba the wife of Uriah. Protected both by the secrecy of the crime and by royal immunity and privilege, he thought he was above reproach. Then came the prophet Nathan who rebuked him and brought him to confess and repent. Religion plays such a role in the society. It makes pale the cheeks of rulers by its frozen admonition. In the first place, religion has a transcendental reference. It has a system of values, and values are ideals rather than facts; they say how men should live rather than how they actually live. Now, this concentration on what should be rather than on what actually is the case, gives religion a great moral advantage, a moral superiority over the goings-on in society. Through it, men are in possession of a higher court of appeal standing above the established institutions of society. The individual is enabled to challenge and criticize policies, personalities and events by comparing them with ideals, deals provided by religion, ideals to which they are necessarily inferior. The prophetic function of religion enables us, if need be, to say no to the given, to escape from the tyranny of the facts and from the tyranny of public opinion.

That the individual can, as it were, appeal to Caesar, that he has direct access to the transcendent, that is to say, to God or to his conscience, enhances his dignity and emphasizes his autonomy. To that extent he is independent of society and can not only take his distance from it and criticize it, but also assert his rights *vis-a-vis* its demands. What we are saying is that religion makes room for protest, for non-conformity, for rebellion. Through its prophetic role religion encourages revolt in certain circumstances.

If the facts of society compare too unfavourably with the ideals on which religion ever focuses our critical view, then we can and we should improve them, which always means change them. Here the revolutionary character of religion is too obvious to need further commentary.

The prophetic function is, therefore, both vital for the survival of freedom and the individual in society, and, through constant criticism, and instrumental to the raising of standards in the society itself.

What we have established so far shows the ambivalent or dialectical relationship between religion and society. From one point of view religion can be seen as a stabilizing factor, from another as a factor of disintegration a catalyst in society.

These two functions, though opposed to each other are indispensable to the society. A society without stable values, institutions and traditions would be no less inhuman than one where progress is totally arrested and change impossible.

These functions are fulfilled to a greater or less extent and there is more emphasis on one rather than the other according to the particular religion and in varying degrees during the course of its history. If we consider Christianity, it is relatively easy to see that: -

- (a) *Initially the two impulses were present*
- (b) *From Christ himself, through the apostolic times and the age of the martyrs and catacombs the prophetic function dominated.*
- (c) *From Constantine, through the Middle Ages, till perhaps the Second Vatican Council the Priestly function dominated. This is the period when the Church itself became more and more institutionalized*
- (d) *Today a movement towards the prophetic role is distinctly noticeable.*

But in whichever role, priestly or prophetic, ultimately Christianity has been a great benefactor of human society not least because the Christian religion has given to the world a good number of those political ideas and ideals which have moved and are still moving the world.

Christian Contribution to Social History

Liberte, Egalite Fraternite—Liberty, Equality, Brotherhood: These were the powerful, magic slogans of the French Revolution, that movement which not only swept through Europe but was destined to have a profound influence on human history.

A cursory glance at the history of these ideas will show how much they owe, perhaps not their origin, but certainly their reinforced validity and world-wide expansion to the Christian religion.

Historically, the idea of freedom existed and was cherished already in antiquity. But both in theories—one can think of Plato and Aristotle and in practice say in the Athenian democracy of Pericles - liberty remained the attribute of a privileged few. Christianity preached the idea of redemption

and liberation for both the individual and humanity at large. Christ came to proclaim liberty to captives. We all are enjoying the liberty of the children of God. This idea of freedom, of liberation, of redemption, occupies such a strategic place in the whole economy of Christianity that it was bound to have, by the very fact of the growth of Christianity, a universal and revolutionary mission for the history of mankind.

Equality before the law was also known to antiquity. This much is certain at least from the famous definition of the Natural Law by Cicero. But it remained a mere idea and a wish until Christianity, which abolished the difference between Jew and Gentile, circumcision and non-circumcision, preached the-ultimate character of the individual destiny, the intangibility of the individual conscience, individual responsibility and therefore also men's equality before God and the Law.

The idea of fraternity, of the universal brotherhood of men, probably still more than that of liberty and equality, owes its origin and spread to the Christian religion. What brotherhood could there have been between the Greek and the Barbarian before the Christian religion announced to the world that we were all children of one Father? Christianity was the first religion to make a commandment of love, a love that embraced all mankind, love that bound men to God and to one another and welded all into one divine-human commonwealth.

Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite —these three magic words of the French Revolution which seemed then as anti-establishment as they were anti-religious were ideas lifted out of the gospel itself.

Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite we have chosen quite at random. What we said of them is valid for other world historical ideas such as welfare and happiness, democracy, the sanctity of the human person and more especially the idea of progress. We leave out of account of contributions Christianity has made to the world in the fields of agriculture, education and learning, in the preservation of culture, in the cultivation of the arts. So much that has positively influenced human society has been due to religion, above all, the Christian religion.

Give Religion a Chance

One wholesome lesson one can draw from this is that religion which has done so much good elsewhere and for humanity at large should be given a chance in our own society. I am hereby appealing to our rulers to give

religion a chance. I am praying that they hide their petty, personal, anti-religious prejudices. I am asking that nothing be done that should kill the religious instinct, muzzle the voice of religion or hamper its exercise.

One can understand a certain uneasiness on the part of rulers especially when faced with religion in its prophetic role. The great temptation is to resort to all sorts of persecution and harassment, both subtle and crude in order to get rid of an uncomfortable voice of conscience.

Religion and Civil Authority are Compatible

But an honourable co-existence is perfectly possible. Christianity itself recognises and has made ample room for the authority of the State in its own sphere. The passage from the letter to the Romans comes easily to mind. Now, elsewhere in the New Testament, at the trial of Jesus before Pilate, there was question of Christ's competence and authority. "My Kingdom is not of this world," he said. But Pilate, in asking the famous question "What is the truth?" refuses to commit himself on this matter. He admits ignorance and incompetence in this area. The State represented by Pilate has its own proper sphere, a limited mission from God. But beside it, above it, and with Jesus there arises another power, not of this world. This is the power of the truth, the voice of the truth demanding to be heard by the State.

The State is not Omnipotent

"Give then to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

The permanent, totalitarian temptation however is to claim everything for Caesar. But Caesar's things are not everything. The State, therefore, is not omnipotent. Just as the State itself represents only a part of the body politic, certain areas of life—the area of truth for instance—are beyond its control and competence. This is why we must check all inordinate claims by the state to be the be all and end all. We must resist such claims by state agents or more importantly those parasitical sycophants whose only passport to the favour of the state is the vociferous denigration of religion and religious institutions.

Better Recognition of the Role of Religion

In our country we must press for more and more recognition of the role of religion. Perhaps there could be no better guarantee for the success of the new civilian era.

This is not a plaidoyer for a latter-day theocracy, nor a plea for a return to the theory of the two sovereignties as in post-Constantine Europe. For its own good and for that of the people the state must tolerate, even encourage religion.

Its role as critic or on occasion as non-parliamentary opposition is necessary for the good health of the State. An unexamined life is not worth living. Even for a state— Plato's saying is still valid.

We need the voice of religion to purify our private and public lives and to keep us in mind of higher, nobler things.

The restraint and self-control in prosperity, the courage and patience in adversity, the fear of God and respect for man which every sane religion promotes, in particular the selfless and altruistic love which Christianity inculcates in the individual, all these may not eliminate evil, but they can only have a healthy effect on the body politic.

Conversely where individual egoism is unbridled by the discipline that religion imposes, the task of governing is certainly not the easier.

The bond of Christian love established by Christianity which melted the barriers of race and tongue in Europe can yet perhaps provide a potent against the poison of tribalism which threatens to neutralize all our efforts at nation building.

We have tried to look at the relationship between religion and the society mainly from a sociological standpoint. We have seen that this relationship is a kind of double-edged sword with a negative and a positive side; both of which are necessary and function together for the welfare of the society.

We have also traced the historical achievements of a particular religion, Christianity, showing the enormous contributions some of its principles and teaching have made to the history of ideas and to human society. It now remains for us here in Nigeria, if we want to profit by these contributions to give religion a chance in our society

Recently someone defined religion as "*the set of phenomena which men call Religion*" (Paul W. Pruyser: '**Die Wurzeln des Glaubens**'). No doubt in reference to the complexity of the problem and the difficulty of getting a

definition to satisfy all the varieties of religious experience actually existing in the world.

But in general, we can safely say that *'religion is that element of culture which expresses man's relationship with transcendence or with the supernatural'*.

David Hume traces the origin of religious belief to a concern with *"the various contrary events of human life"* (D. Hume: 'The Natural History of Religion', p. 39).

In other words, it has its concern with the giving of meaning to life. The question of religion, the question of transcendence, is essentially a question of meaning. Several thinkers have pointed out how religious conceptions bring order at three points where chaos threatens to break in upon man -

- at the limits of his analytic capacities,
- at the limit of his power of endurance,
- at the limit of his moral insight.

Religion has to do with these limiting situations. Religious conceptions order and give meaning to such situations.

'The problem of meaning' says Norberck, *"is a matter of affirming, or at least recognizing the inescapability of ignorance, pain and injustice on the human plane while simultaneously denying that these irrationalities are characteristic of the world as a whole."*

And it is in religious symbolism, a symbolism relating man's sphere of existence to a wider sphere within which it is conceived to rest (transcendence) that both the affirmation and the denial are made (**Norberck, E.: 'Religion in Primitive Society', 1964, p. 24**).

Max Weber, the great German thinker expressed that in the face of the basic facts of the human condition - existence and suffering, death, contingency, powerlessness and scarcity, man needed not only emotional adjustment, (which religion also gave), but also cognitive assurance. There is an innate human need to understand the discrepancy between ideal and facts in life. In other words, men require answers to questions on human destiny, the demands of morality and the evils of injustice, suffering and death.

Each religion offers a different but rationally integrated solution to these questions. Looking at it psychologically, visible reality on the one hand and transcendence on the other, correspond to the **two different human attitudes; that of knowledge and that of belief.**

Belief is a fundamental form of behaviour which refuses to accept that man's universe is coterminous with the visible, but which regards the invisible (the Transcendent) as not only real, but indeed as the key to the meaning, the true explanation of the visible reality

Thus, religion provides an ultimate answer to the problem of meaning. This meaning is sought outside of man; in transcendence religion becomes the institutionalized avowal of human finitude. And it is from the great Marxist and Founding Father of the Frankfurt critical school, Max Horkheimer, that we have the following appraisal: Religion "makes it clear to man that he is a finite being and that he must suffer and die; but that beyond suffering and death, there is a long-time that this earthly existence be not the absolute and the last ... Dissatisfaction with our earthly lot is the greatest source of our recognition of a transcendent being.

Horkheimer calls religion "*a longing for the altogether other*" **le tout autre, the totaliter aliter**. Thus, man is unable to bear the chaos or meaninglessness. He is congenitally, incurably a meaning-giver. Religion serves the purpose of giving meaning, ultimate meaning to human life. With this explanation of the nature of religion, we have already indicted its main relationship to culture and society.

But religion performs other functions in the society. Durkheim has shown how religion socializes the norms and values of society and thus, functions as an efficacious means of social control. It also performs a prophetic-critical function by providing values and ideals against which social reality can be critically viewed and if possible improved. This implies that, religion has a dialectical relationship to society; acting now as an element of social control and stability and now as a disturbing and revolutionary element.

These are some of the functions of religion in the society. But what role does it play in the development and maintenance of the culture of a society? What is its relation to culture? This is where the theme of civilization comes in.

Civilization

Elliot says that no great culture has ever been developed without religion. He even goes so far as to say that culture and religion are two aspects of the

same thing, culture being the incarnation of religion. C. Dawson, that indefatigable student of European Christian civilization, maintains that every living culture must possess some spiritual dynamic which provides the energy necessary for that sustained social effort which is civilization. Normally, this dynamic is supplied by a religion, but in exceptional circumstances religious impulse may disguise itself under philosophical or political form.

Dawson is thinking here of religion surrogates like communism, nationalism or even ideas like progress. Religion is the active, the creative element of culture, the *entelechy* informing its matter. Dawson tests out this assertion by a study of the well-known historical cultures.

A culture is not merely a material unity – it implies also a common conception of reality, a view of life which even in the most primitive societies express itself through magical practices and religious beliefs, and which in the higher cultures appears in a fuller and more conscious form in religion, science and philosophy. In this way, the intellectual factor conditions the development of every society. This is the active and creative element in culture.

Dawson demonstrates sufficiently convincingly how this principle is historically borne out in what he calls primitive societies (among which he mentions the barbarous Igbo people of South Nigeria in connection with the long juju.) in archaic ritual culture of Egypt, Babylon, Maya, in the world religions of the *Near* and *Far* East, Greece, India, China; in Christianity and Western culture.

The great hesitation. The Christian Church has felt in adopting important elements of Igbo culture is precisely due to the fact our traditional culture was inspired almost in every detail by the traditional religion.

The Hebrew culture provides another clear example: in the *Torah*, the unity of religion, ethics, laws, rites and ceremonies is peculiarly clear and we see how this sacred law is also regarded as the condition for the national cultures and the very essence of the people's being.

In Islam, a new attitude to life arising in Arabia – has transformed the lives and social organization of peoples so far apart as the Middle East, Malaysia, Indonesia, Persia, the Indian sub-continent and tropical Africa. In other words, the religious factors are responsible for imposing cultural unity on

religions so materially different, so geographically disparate, so racially heterogeneous. Finally, we come to the problem as it touches us ourselves.

The Invasion of Igbo Culture and Society by Europe

In Igbo land, we have both a changing culture and a changed religion. Our culture has been changing at a near-revolutionary pace since our first contact with the white man, almost 500 years ago.

The Slave Trade, commerce in oil, colonization and Christian Evangelization, urbanization and industrialization has followed one another in uninterrupted succession.

Moreover, colonial history has tied the political fortunes of our people to those of our neighbours in a way that seems irreversible. Subjected to this volume and tempo of change, identity of Igbo culture has become highly problematic. On the other hand, for a good percentage of our people, religion has not only been influenced and modified, it has been completely replaced by a totally new religion. Christianity or rather its innumerable variations exist side by side with the traditional religion, and within the Nigerian context, with Islam.

Putting it bluntly, we live in a totally pluralistic atmosphere, a pluralism which applies both to religion and to culture itself. Pluralism means not only *the de facto* existence of other cultures and other religions, but also their right to exist and the fact that this right is based on human finitude itself.

The Fact of Pluralism

Pluralism is a fact of life to which we must adjust ourselves. Pluralism as defined by K. Rahner means the fact that man and his sphere of existence is made up of so different and so many realities, that man's experience itself springs from several original sources whose interplay does not already have a unified structure, and he cannot either theoretically or practically bring this manifold to a common denominator, from which alone this manifold could be deductible, understandable or controllable. The absolutely transparent and concrete unity of reality exists for man only as a metaphysical postulate and an eschatological hope, but not as a disposable quantity. This pluralism is the index of creature-hood; it is only in God that all is one. In finite being, the antagonism of realities is not resolvable.

Though a fundamental trait of human nature, pluralism is one of the great discoveries of modern thinking. No doubt impressed on the modern mind

both by the enormous vogue of Einstein's theory of relativity and by the great progress made by cultural anthropology.

Now, granted the premise of cultural and religious pluralism, it would seem that religion and culture cannot again entertain the same relations as in traditional society or even in modern but more religiously homogenous society, for if religion and culture were so closely connected, it was because within the culture, the religion was homogenous.

This is heart of our dilemma. We are not sure which religion is to inform which stage of our cultural evolution. We cannot go in here to establish the claims of Christianity *vis-à-vis* our traditional religions. For us Christians, the question of the choice of religion does not arise since it is already resolved.

I think the complexity of the problem is often lost sight of when we talk of our cultural heritage in terms suggestive of a revivalism that would restore everything to its pristine State. **'Laudat ores temporis acti!'** Let us remember that *'mgba ala wuru ala'* is only a figure of speech. There is no calling back yesterday, what has not survived will not survive.

But even if our people all become Christians, we are not even sure that our culture, the Igbo culture, subjected to constant and permanent erosion within the political context of a multinational country like Nigeria, has not lost the will to exist, content to dissolve its identity in a melting pot where another culture, a Pan-Nigerian / African culture is being concocted.

It is this indecision, the hesitation in the will to be, this permanent schizophrenia which is responsible for the floating of all our personal and societal values, moral, religious, and aesthetic. Pluralism has as it were stolen the soul out of our culture.

In this, Europe has had enormous advantages over us. Christianity, more precisely Catholicism was a continental religion for centuries, the various nationalities with their subcultures emerging much later in history. For us it is too late to be ambitious. The great mutations of the world are acted. or are they not?

The Poverty of Secularism

Someone might see a way out of the secularization of Western cultures not open up for us the alternative of building a culture without a religion, a secular culture? I think one could not rule out this possibility, but one should add immediately that in this case, what takes the place and fulfils the function of religion- an ideology like communism in the East of the passionate belief in progress in the West- become itself a quasi-religion, a religion surrogate.

Secularization is not so much a rejection of religion as a change of gods. It is a form of idolatry, in other words still a form of religion, albeit a false one. In fact, these quasi religions are often distorted, earthly version of true religious themes.

The communism of Karl Max is essentially the idea of the kingdom of God brought down from heaven to earth and the Western pseudo-religion of progress combines the doctrines of providence and salvation.

According to Tillich, they can still inspire and sustain a culture, but not in the long run. For the more secularized they become, the greater the rift between them and their ultimate source of meaning. The finite cannot in the long run substitute for the infinite. The result is a spiritual emptiness which ends in destroying the culture. This is how things went at the secularization of the Greek culture.

The same pattern is about to repeat itself in the West. The poverty of secularism is the reason for the spiritual malaise and profound pessimism felt today in the West in spite of the unprecedented material boom, in spite of their having achieved the highest technical progress mankind has ever known.

Like Reverend Prof. Okere has said;

“The pathetic Jeremiah’s and Cassandra warnings coming from the intellectual *avant-garde* of Europe, from Novelties to existentialist philosophers is an indictment on secularism which we can only ignore to our own detriment.”

