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# Introduction : on the importance of rereading major works of culture and history and the importance of connecting each other together

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| Item Type | Book chapter |
| Authors | Haaz, Ignace |
| Publisher | Globethics.net |
| Rights | Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International |
| Download date | 2026-11-18 06:51:34 |
| Item License | http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/ |
| Link to Item | http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/3863576 |

# Introduction

*On the importance of rereading major works of culture and history and the importance of connecting each other together*

« À l'âge analytique – celui des divisions, décompositions, destructions, y compris celle de notre planète – succède celui de la synthèse et de la reconstruction. » M. Serres, 2019.

In his latest book, *Relire le relié* (2019)[1], the French philosopher Michel Serres explains that the spirit of synthesis is becoming important in our time, because we live in an era where a global perspective on things and people has become crucial. Perhaps one of the most important reasons could be the meeting between the visible world and an invisible world, in a "blinding" and "incandescent" new horizon offered by the semantic of both terms "relire" *to reread* and "relier" *to connect*. A meeting of a practical, a theoretical knowledge and faith, in an energetic and energizing transformation, is at the core of this book, where human beings might be invited to live in

[1] Serres, Michel (2019): *Relire le relié*, Paris: Ed. Le Pommier, ISBN: 978-2-7465-1938-1, 256pp.

closer proximity to books, culture and literary works *rereading* for better social integration in life. It is an invitation *to connect*, a friendly path toward the development of dynamic networks of cooperation. For these two reasons these two movements should be mentioned and placed at the center of this introduction to Msgr. Prof. Dr Obiora Ike's book, *Applied Ethics*, published by Globethics.net. It is as a second edition an invitation *to reread* a collection of themes, exposed to a wider audience; as profound thinking on religious and cultural ethical values this compendium is an exploration of how values help to connect within and across human communities.

As the author proposes to present his crucial thoughts on development, culture, religion and education in Africa - that is to say on the one hand from an ethics applied to the realities of the African continent - on the other hand the author also aims in particular at an ethics that effectively connects people. By using the notions of trust, justice and equal dignity, it follows that the choice of comparison seems judicious.

Ethics applied to different fields can be normatively based on a momentum that connects people and ideas - an approach concerned with establishing a common and concrete base of experience, across diverse human contexts. For Obiora Ike, applied ethics contributes to a religious experience, taking for granted the existence of an original impulse, a way of living what connects us to each other. This very inspiration, defined by traditional African culture as collective participation, is that which is uniting in

the experience of living in a community, experience mediated by art, culture, and religious discourse and practice itself, in the sense of a philosophy of sharing. We see that this very idea of Obiora Ike is similar to the one just presented, focusing on the binding virtue of *connecting* of the word "religion", understood etymologically ("religare": *to bind*), i.e. a basic anthropological culture:

> […] as "the way of life of a people. It includes the sum total of their mannerisms, beliefs, music, clothing, religion, languages, behavioral patterns, food, housing, agricultural methods, as well as their traditional behavior in a broad sense, including their ideas, arts and artifacts. It is the social heritage which an individual acquires" (Ch. 2, § 3).

On the other side, cultural anthropology and religion understood as the sustainable digestion of cultural and religious dogmas, invites you to *read a word over and over again*, in this sense it has happened, from one religious dogma as opposed to another dogma, that belief (taken as religion or culture) has been left blinded by violence and intolerance over history[2].

[2] Let us only remember that at the threshold of Reform in the fifteenth century, in Europe, the Church could force civil society to sentence someone to death whom civil society had nevertheless pardoned. See e.g.: "Philibert Berthelier", Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Rereading is a *manducatio*, an act that relates our values with a practice similar to the way we eat. It connotes a power of symbolization, which places some distance away from the visible, from this primary link to the need for physical food, and to any other living being. Rather than conflict and sacrifice, religion should be seen as a means of resolving them, as a social instrument allowing greater social unity through symbolic sacrifice, and not through violence (legitimate or illegitimate) exerted against others. One should stop for a moment by reading what *manducatio* has to offer:

> "[by *manducatio*] one can even speak of a process of access to one's humanity which is a form of violence made to one's selfishness, closed on oneself by the food pleasure; it is essentially the passage from eating to manducate. It thus learns to share first with our neighbor, and with the other members of his community, but especially with the Divine[3]."

Religion remains an essential anthropological energy for the human being. Interestingly it could be defined as a seismic wave that continues to connect human beings, an "axial area" as Karl Jaspers liked to say[4]. It is a universal event which continues to metamorphose the world of East and

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[3] Bamony, P. *Sturcture apparente, structure invisible : l'ambivalence des pouvoirs chez les Lyéla du Burkina Faso*, Doctoral thesis quoted from the article : Manducation, https://www.hommes-et-faits.com/anthropsy/PB_Manducation.htm

[4] *Karl Jaspers, Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte.* München/Zürich: R, Piper & Co. Verlag 1949. 8th Ed. 1983.

West since the sixth century (BC). It is an astonishing simultaneous emergence of new ways of thinking, new ethical codes, in China, India, Persia and in the West - connecting heaven, earth, but also faith, that many confusedly feel, without a clear symbolic language.

The emergence of the axial area is a concept proposed by Jaspers, which allowed words to be placed on a deep reality and on the spark of philosophical astonishment. Nowadays, large numbers of people, especially in the global space that should be called the great "Global South", cherish a more vivid notion of this common emotion, and do much more than save incandescent embers of religiosity at the bottom of their being since their childhood.

Faith and religion are not the disarray of reason in the face of the limits of existence - although religion takes its natural sources in such emotions as Cicero already described (*De Natura Deorum*, 45 BC).

It is not, as Obiora shows us, to imagine the turpitudes, the despair of a lost faith, as some romanticism in the 19th century had sketched it out. It is a question, as 19th century philosopher Kierkegaard said, of taking the gesture of linking or binding with others, because to share with others is to believe in the virtue of reason, without letting it dictate to us all of the most fundamental creative energies of our existence. Ethics is thus an "existential sphere, or

stage, which is superseded by the higher stage of the religious life[5]".

Consequently, if we choose faith, we can legitimately suspend our reason in order to believe in something higher than reason. We should not fear a moral of transformative laughter, because the colossal challenges of our world deserve that we translate our feeling of uneasiness in the existence into affirmative laughter. Laughter is a double affirmation, a grateful affirmation of being there in the world, in this changing world, ready to react to the most honest of oneself; it is also affirmation in the answer because the joy of providing an answer is the energy of finding a positive resolution to a problem, which can tolerate different paths. For Jaspers, global axial paths in the world should be divided into: a "world history", a projection focused on the "present and future", and more centrally, our common destiny has to do with a reflection "on the meaning of history".

The method of transformative theological education is the answer to the challenges of contemporary world for Obiora Ike. To find a solution is to pose the problem: it is to decide that transformative theological education is a way out of a poor system of reproduction of inequalities, a transmission of an unbalanced social capital from one generation to the other. Transforming education is showing, before launching actions and implementing any

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[5] McDonald, William, "Søren Kierkegaard", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/ win2017/ entries/kierkegaard/>.

possible solution against socially unfair situations, that it is indeed this momentum of transformative faith, and of self-overcoming together with others, which is at the heart of the ethical and religious significant impulsions. The duty to work, and the idea of integrative catholic social teaching, are parts of a wider symbolic objective than the individual economic survival. Religious commitment and philosophical questioning is reminding us about the value of human work and dignity as being active and self-overcoming (see Chapt. 7). In Chapt. 9, this principle is applied to Church assets management, and in Chapt. 10 to higher education in an interreligious perspective, subordinated to the respect of the human person.

By allowing this personalist approach on the value of respect and dignity, ethics is applied in a Neo-Kantian sense, not in the sense of a return to the foundation on analytical ethics as such, nor in the sense of radical existential philosophy of the describing our being in the world. In an analytical optic ethic would be realigned on a properly speculative discipline of the reason, which finds in itself, in logic and constructive methods of science its cognitive value and energy. In such positivistic scientific tendencies, values related to faith are assessed by the yardstick of a) knowledge ontologies, b) knowledge methods, c) knowledge semantic, and ultimately on the questioning on d) the nature of knowledge in itself. By positioning the pretension to modally necessary knowledge, and the pretension to truth at the top of the hierarchy of

things, faith might get under valuated. Indeed on a line developed critically by P. Engel:
"Faced with the absence of sufficient evidence and reasons, as well as contrary reasons, the believer may be tempted to fall back on no longer epistemic, but pragmatic reasons: believing because it reassures, makes happy, satisfies a need, ensures a family, social, historical, cultural identity, etc.[6]"
Attempting to re-enchant the faith in our secularized world, we might be tempted by playing a different game from the *Enlightenments*, based on a fideist and pragmatic abandon of the criteria of sufficient evidence (transparency) and the criteria of reasons, which means different from the serious focusing on the methods of proof (epistemology). But doing so is not at all meaningless, a person could have good practical reasons for believing in God, provided he/she could be assured on advantageous consequences for this choice and commitment, even if he/she is convinced that he/she does not have good intellectual reasons for doing so.

Instead, Obiora Ike puts faith and the human person at the center of existence, because faith and respect for the person amount to realizing that becoming a scholar, and mastering intellectual knowledge is not enough. Being a scholar in various fields (as it is the case for the author who

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[6] Pouivet, Roger « Le droit de (ne pas) croire. Une réponse à Pascal Engel », *Philosophia Scientiæ*, 21-3, 2017, accessed 27 January 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/philosophiascientiae/1307 ; DOI : 10.4000/philosophiascientiae.1307

is theologian, activist, journalist, philosopher…) does not yet allow us to compare what in the various contexts can apply to the same situation *in practice*. Knowing better and knowing more is not intrinsically related to a transformative empowering of others, although knowledge brings always a positive impact in a world dominated by mere ignorance, because practical and subjective implications might overall be compared against contrary options.

If denying the difference between religious beliefs and ordinary or scientific beliefs, to the extent that all obey the norms of belief is sound, then prudential calculus should have transparent and evidence based justification too.

As we can be sure, transformative theological education can be based on good reasons, even from the line of argument taken from previous meta-ethical analysis. As Engel shows, the connecting force of religion and culture is precisely this very condition that believing in fact is seen to be "an attitude of trust or faith towards a person or an entity that we consider reliable[7]". The French philosopher recognizes that "to believe in Barack Obama, in Europe, in his lucky star, in eternal life and... in God - not believe propositional content", might be a way to admit the value of faith based education. It is not enough to recognize the value of truth across different disciplines of knowledge,

[7] Pascal Engel, « Le droit de ne pas croire », *ThéoRèmes*, 2, 2012, accessed 27 Jan. 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/theoremes/295 ; DOI : 10.4000/theoremes.295

according to definable methods for Obiora Ike. There are, on this long path, which connect the human being through different contexts significant indications of a fascinating journey in the History of the Self, which eventually corresponds to the development of the metaphysical subject after Kant's philosophy toward Max Weber's work, and eventually even to economical and sociological accents similar to Pierre Bourdieu[8]. But, in many places around the world, rational thinking may have inadvertently suppressed Christianity, without at all being fully aware of it, risking to suppress transformative thinking and commitment as well. Consequently, applied ethical knowledge and in particular in education, should be following the reaffirmation of the religious path for Obiora Ike, which has been presented by S. Kierkegaard, but on a line sympathetic to the Reformed and Lutheran Church. Reaffirming religious ethics as transformative power in education is to realize that if something has to be done, it is that one should try again to introduce Christianity after secular crisis, or affirm the importance of global ethical transformative thinking.

Since our world is changing so much, that in sixty years, we are living through unprecedented upheavals in the world, and that everyone should reinvent intelligence, as condition for integrating digital disruption in society, not fearing technology, rereading religious perspectives and bridging

[8] Obiora Ike shared with us, across our informal discussions, how important Kant's Critique and philosophy of freedom has been, since his first Master dissertation.

people together seems to be a well-informed position in favour of an essential mutual intelligence.

It is an impetus which links what by nature should be perceived as distinct, it is first of all a political ethical position: it is the equalitarian philosophical point of view of an equal consideration and respect for others as R. Dworkin may have developed it in legal philosophy. It is to realize the importance of a firm resolution for life, which is the same across different people, different genders, and different cultures. We give the last word to Kierkegaard:

> "Now it is certainly true that the good [...] is different for different people, but resolution, which is the true acknowledgment, is still the same. This is a very upbuilding thought. Someone who wants to erect a tower sits down and roughly estimates how high he can erect the tower. Alas, how different it appears at the time of the rough estimate, but how similar in the moment of resolution, and if there is no resolution there will be no tower, however imaginary or however really splendid the estimate was! The good resolution is to will to do everything in one's power, so serve it to the utmost of one's capability." (Kierkegaard, *Four Upbuilding Discourses* 1844, Against Cowardiness).

Ignace Haaz*, Globethics.net Publications Manager, Ph.D.*
*Geneva, January 2020,*