
Jude Ezimakor

Faith and Culture

Reconciling the Christian Belief
with Igbo Faith Experience Today

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Tectum Verlag

Nihil Obstat: Very Rev. Dr. Fr. Ambrose Chineme Agu, Censor Librorum, Enugu, Nigeria
Imprimatur: Most Rev. Callistus V. C. Onaga, Bishop of Enugu, Nigeria

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

ISBN 978-3-8288-4687-6 (Print)
978-3-8288-7770-2 (ePDF)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-8288-4687-6 (Print)
978-3-8288-7770-2 (ePDF)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ezimakor, Jude
Faith and Culture
Reconciling the Christian Belief with Igbo Faith Experience Today
128 pp.
Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 978-3-8288-4687-6 (Print)
978-3-8288-7770-2 (ePDF)

1st edition 2021

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my late Mum, Mrs. Theresa Ukachi Ezimakor in memory of her five year's demise.

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Acknowledgements

Undertaking the task of reflecting on the person, Jesus Christ and his impact on human experience and cultures has been truly a life-transforming experience for me. It gives me great cause for joy when I recall how the thoughts came at the first place. All these would not have been possible if not by the grace of the same Christ and on this note, I thank him immensely for being my primary source of inspiration in this exploration and also his Blessed Mother Mary for her intercession. I thank also my Local Ordinary, Most Rev. Callistus Valentine Chukwuma Onaga, who gave me approval to publish this work through his *Imprimatur*. I remain grateful to him for his love and good will.

I would like to appreciate Dr. Moses Awinongya, who through careful supervision and unalloyed efforts, accompanied me through the rigours of the work and also wrote the foreword. I acknowledge the efforts of Fr. Ambrose Agu, who read through the book and wrote the *Nihil Obstat*. I am also appreciative of the inputs of Msgr. Anthony Anijielo, Fr. Liberatus Isife, Fr. Joe Ezechi and Fr. Benjamin Achi.

Finally, I would like to appreciate my family members, friends and colleagues both in Nigeria, Germany and United States for their assistance in realizing the dream of this book especially Mrs. Gisela Muthny, who translated the entire work from English to German. My appreciation

extends also to Mrs. Henny Spahl, Mrs. Erika Lambertz and Rev. Rolf Dittrich, who worked on the translated German version. My prayer is that Jesus Christ, who is the main focus in this work, will bless and reward you most abundantly, Amen.

Jude Ikechukwu Ezimakor

Foreword

The Church has experienced the reception of the Word of God in various cultures and social contexts through many ways and forms depending on the situation at hand. Even though the Word of God in itself has been the same over time, the manner of its proclamation has always taken different modes to suit the location, where it is announced and in accordance with the cultural background of the bearers of the message.

The command of Jesus to his disciples is to go and proclaim the Good News to the whole world. Those, who believe are to be baptised. This stands to reason that, just like Jesus himself, the recipients of the Word are part of a particular cultural setting and their perception of reality including the understanding of the concepts might be coloured by their contexts. All the same, there is supposed to be a common denominator that serves as the basis for all believers. This work is, therefore, a very good attempt to contextualise the lived faith within a given ecclesial context. By so doing, certain factors are taken into consideration beginning with “the historical Jesus within the Jewish culture.” In this vein, the author tries to analyse the way the Gospel message was received by the Igbo in the south-eastern part of Nigeria as an example to situate Jesus’ identification with the Jewish culture of his time within the contemporary Christian experience. As such, this book emphasizes on the manner in which the Igbo as an ethnic group interpreted

the Good News proclaimed to them and how they applied their perception of Jesus within their cultural environment. This explains further the need for the “body of Christ – the Church” as well as the individual Christian to engage in a relationship with the Lord in a peculiar manner.

In addressing the issue of faith and culture, Jude Ezimakor is careful to hint that the Gospel message stands above all cultures, even though the manner in which concepts are internalised and/or understood is greatly influenced by the orientation of the individual bearer of the message within the cultural context. In every situation and society, the Gospel comes in contact with people of different life’s orientation and religions. This interaction between the Christian message and the existing religions as well as cultures over the years have engendered growth and conflict. In any case, the agents of the Word of God play an important role here since it is their personality and charism that help the Gospel message to attain its goal. Just as it was the case in the Council of Jerusalem (ca. 48 AD), where the nascent Church had to define what is to be believed, the local Church today would have to learn to draw a line between what the content of the faith is and what amounts to interpretation of the Gospel message.

The problem in Christianity is probably not about who Jesus is, rather it is about how the individual Christians understand Jesus to be. The images that people have of Jesus or would want to have of him are what is causing the tensions within Christian living and witnessing. The question in this book is, who is Jesus and what is the message that he proclaimed? Is it possible for the Church in Igboland to undertake a theological and pastoral reflection on the

person of Jesus and his message within the local cultural setting without diluting the import thereof? The answers would not be of less importance in faith discussions *ad intra*. As a matter of fact, the Christian message could be compared with the seed and fruit of a tree. In its generic terms, the main features remain the same but the taste might change depending on the soil type and other factors. In the same way, the local Church and the faith in a particular society would have two characteristics, namely universal and particular elements respectively.

As you read this book, I wish you a good discovery of that interplay between faith and culture in the context of human experience.

Moses Asaah Awinongya SVD
Sankt Augustin, 15th January 2021

Preamble

Jesus Christ at the Core of Christian Message and Witnessing

At the centre of the Christian faith and confession is God's self-communication in Jesus of Nazareth, whom He declared as His Son (cf. Matt 3:17, 17:5) and who was acclaimed the Messiah; the Christ (cf. Joh 1:41) as well as Lord and God (Joh 20:28). These biblical testimonies form the bedrock of the Apostolic faith which reads: "We believe in Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, our Lord..."¹ To reflect theologically on the concept and the identity of Jesus Christ is, invariably, to build a Christology, which emphasizes the Jesus of Nazareth and the exalted Christ. Jesus was born into the world as a human being and was situated in a cultural context. He identified himself with the people of his age by speaking their language, being part of their religion, shared their experience and way of life. The fact that he assumed human flesh and was born a human person as well as lived amongst a people confirms his natural identity and historical existence, which the theology of incarnation articulates. However, he did not only embody in himself the humanness but also in him, divinity

1 *Schneider*, T.: Was Wir Glauben: Eine Auslegung des Apostolischen Glaubensbekenntnisses (2. Auflage). Düsseldorf 1986, 186. Original Text reads: („Wir glauben an Jesus Christus, den Gottes eingeborenen Sohn, unseren Herrn...“)

inheres. Thus, the mystery of Jesus Christ as God-man forms the basis of Christian teaching and distinguishes Christianity from other religions.²

As a matter of fact, Christology reaches its climax with the confession that this same Jesus, who was incarnate from the Virgin Mary (cf. DH 150) and grew up in Nazareth (cf. Lk 2:39f), is equally the Christ, the Son of God (cf. Joh 20:31, see also Matt 16:15). Hence, he is God. Little wonder, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed while referring to the divinity of Jesus describes him as “God from God, light from light, true God from true God.” (DH 150) The Christian faith, therefore, embodies these two basic truths of humanity and divinity inhering in the one person Jesus Christ. Thus, the Christian confession is that Jesus is indeed the Christ.³

As a theological system of thought and belief, Christology needs to appeal to concrete human context(s) in order to impart on human life and experience for the purpose of Christian witnessing. This is because theology as faith seeking understanding tries to clarify faith within a socio-cultural and religious milieu for a better perception of the Christian message. In this manner, dogma seeks expression and meaning through human cultures and condition of existence for the sake of relevance.⁴ This leads to the idea of situating Jesus Christ and his message in a given cultural context from which the idea of contextual Christology is derived.

2 Cf. *Boff*, L.: *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology of Our Time*. London 1980, 180f.

3 Cf. *McBrien*, R.: *Catholicism*. London 2008, 400.

4 Cf. *Boff*, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 181.

To this idea, Bevans avers that the contextualization of theology has come to be a theological imperative because it is an attempt to understand Christian faith within a particular context and this, he considers as part of the very nature of theology itself.⁵ So, when Jesus poses the question: "Who do you say I am?" (Mt 16:15), which is one of the biblical foundations of Christology, the answer should essentially be an attempt to understand Jesus Christ within the context of the community whom the question is addressed to. If the question is restructured, it could read: 'Who is Jesus Christ for us as a community of believers, what meaning does he convey to us in our lives today and in our particular cultural life situations?' In this way, Christology sets out to blend orthodoxy and orthopraxis with the question: How does faith become life in a particular socio-cultural context?

Based on the foregoing, the necessity for a Christology, which expresses the belief in Jesus Christ and cultures within the social context of a people becomes an urgent response. In this wise, a critical look at Igbo socio-cultural and religious context will serve as an example to assessing the practicability of the co-existence of the Christian faith and culture in human experience. As a result of this, the work is divided into two parts; while the first part deals with a more global picture of contextual Christology, which emphasizes Jesus Christ and the impact of his message on human cultures and experience, the second part cites an example with the relationship of the Christian message with Igbo culture through evangelization. The

5 Cf. *Bevans, S.*: *Models of Contextual Theology*. Maryknoll 1992, 1.

goal of this exploration is to seek to understand who a Christian really is, bearing in mind his socio-cultural context of existence and his life in Christ, which he received through faith and baptism. In order to achieve this, effective inculturation of the Gospel message, which is one of the basic forms of contextual theology,⁶ would be of necessity so as to give way for an appropriate evangelization through and with the culture.

It is worth remarking that contextual theology, which is the theological framework for the analysis and application of this Christological reflection to human culture and experience, takes into account the spirit and message of the Gospel, the tradition of the Christian people, the culture in which theologizing takes place and the social change in that culture.⁷ The consequence, therefore, should be a proper integration of faith and culture, without which the contextualization project would be effort in futility.

In the final analysis, it has to be underscored that this work is undertaken with the assumption that the person of Jesus Christ and his message are revealed truths on which the Christian faith proclaimed by the Church are based. However, this faith is not an abstraction or isolated reality in the sense of existing in a vacuum, rather it is meant to affect concrete human experience in its totality since the human being is the one called into this life of faith. In other words, he is the subject of faith. To this end, the Church is instituted to be the recipient and custodian of the revealed truth of faith, which anchors on Jesus Christ,

6 Cf. *Zacka, J.*: Tasks of a Theologian in Africa Today. Kigali 2019, 2.

7 Cf. *Bevans*, Models of Contextual Theology, 1.

the prophecies about him, his message and works of salvation as seen in both Old and New Testaments, which are presented in the first and second chapters. She, therefore, has the responsibility of reflecting on this truth in order to transmit it to the faithful, who are called through baptism to live out the message of Christ in their daily lives.⁸

8 Cf. *Dupuis, J.* (Ed.): *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (7th Revised and Enlarged Edition). Bangalore 2008, xxxiii.

