

MISSIONARY ACTIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

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This essay is less an account of actual missionary activity in today's Nigeria as it is an effort to uncover the actual situation within which any such activity will function meaningfully and relevantly. It is not so much a reproof of present methods as it is an attempt to reflect on and so to draw attention to new questions and the new situation which lay certain claims on present methods. It is, therefore, to be regarded as an essay in prolegomenon to formulating a missionary theology relevant to the new situation rather than as a proposal in missionary theology itself.

The argument unfolds in three phases, viz., 1) a partial account of the contemporary questionings in the Nigerian Church; 2) an attempt to trace the forces that brought them about and, 3) a spelling out of the implications of this new situation for the Church's mission of teaching all nations. For many reasons but especially because of the cultural diversity in Nigeria, the reflections that follow apply particularly to the Igbo Church. However, they have a general reference to the Nigerian Church as a whole. The Igbos are found all over the country but they are at home in the regions East of the Niger. In the present political set-up, they form the East Central State of Nigeria.

I. The Present Ferment in Nigerian Christianity

The Nigerian Church is today at a turning-point in its history. It is a turning-point that is as significant as it is critical. The turning-point consists of the radical questions that are posed to Christianity from within and from without the Church. It is significant because we are experiencing a transition from a foreign missionary ruled and organized Church to a Nigerian ruled and organized Church. Many of the foreign missionaries were refused entry into the country after the Nigerian-Biafra war (1967—1970). Those that remained are a diminishing minority and there is no immediate hope that their number will ever increase. At the same time there is an on-going "*Nigerianization*" of the Church in the sense that the native clergy are rising to positions of importance and responsibility within the Church. It is critical because the wider Church awaits the result of this on-going transition.

Will the process enable us to maintain a Church which is Nigerian only in name, that is, in so far as it is ruled and organized by Nigerian citizens, or are we undergoing a transition which will enable the Church to be Nigerian not only in form but also in content? Is a local Church a Church in so far as it is able to maintain unchanged a given interpretation of Christianity which it has inherited? Or does it consist in

its capacity to think through such an interpretation within the forms and categories available within and so familiar to its own culture? An answer to these questions seems to the present writer the answer to the central problem that is fundamental to, and reflected in, the radical questions rocking the reflections of those concerned about the next stage of evangelization within the Nigerian context. The contemporary Nigerian Church is a Church in search of its own identity. It is a Church that is questioning and probing for ways to overcoming its past and to coming to terms with the realities of its present. Just as when we speak of the German Church or the French or Italian Church we do not mean a Church separated from Rome but one which while in union with Rome nonetheless maintains its national authenticity. In the same way, the Nigerian Christian is today asking about the possibility and the conditions of being a genuine christian while at the same time remaining an authentic Nigerian. (In actuality it seems better to speak of a Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik or any of the many and vastly differing ethnic groups that build the country, Nigeria.) In other words, the present ferment can be rightly defined as the search after cultural integration. The situation is well brought out by one of the many Igbo proverbs which summaries in a sentence the totality of an aspect of the felt character of our being in the world. For all aspects of the people's life whether in politics, in social relations or religious practices, *Ihe ka nte abatakwuna nte*¹. That means, "what is greater than the beetle has invaded the beetle's domain". The meaning and implications of this thesis becomes clearer in the development of the argument. Here it suffices for our purpose to offer a representative sample² of the nature and scope of the ferment. It is a valid sample because one can validate it simply by taking up the weekly and the fortnightly Catholic papers and checking for himself.

1) There is controversy about how we are to understand the call for cultural adaptation. The leading article of this issue of *The Leader*, "*Umuahia Diocese Refutes Allegation*" refers to the controversy around this theme by accusing certain people of building "defences for personal interest and instincts under the pretext of culture and up-dating the Church".

¹ Nte is a small animal that lives in the earth. It bores its hole large enough to serve its own passage to and from preying on the yams cultivated in the fields. The proverb draws attention to an impossible and therefore an unforeseen development: somehow an animal greater than Nte has come to share the hole. The new situation for Nte is so uncomfortable that it needs no comment.

² The sample here used is *The Leader* of Saturday June 7—21, 1975. It is one of the Nigerian Catholic Newspapers and it is published in Owerri. It is representative in three ways: a) just as its motto, the paper represents the opinions of those concerned about "God and Nigeria"; b) it carries articles of wide ranging variety and is destined for an equally wide-ranging public and, c) its articles are a valid sample of the issues discussed in the Nigerian Church as well as the different positions taken in the face of the discussions.

2) Reactions to these questions vary vastly. Some writers seek to ward off the questions and to restate "the bitter truth", truth conceived within a certain horizon and understood after a certain model. In the article "*Polygamy is not an African monopoly*", the writer seems to dismiss the problem of polygamy (whether Christians whose pagan ancestors had more than one wife and who seek to maintain this custom even as Christians and appeal to Old Testament figures as evidence for its possibility) as "words about nothing", the reason being "no decent fellow today likes to be known and addressed as a polygamist". Some take a purely negative plan of attack, waiting for a future time which revindicates the ancient way. An Igbo proverb expresses it as "Keep your cool till what is hot oncemore turns cold". A commentary on a priest that left the priesthood awaits the time when married priests prove a success as married men. Yet another commentary "Criticize, but with sanity" tries to direct minds and thoughts away from merely negative observations to seeking for a way "of improving the lot of our society both morally and otherwise". Perhaps this last is the most creative reaction, namely to seek to come to terms explicitly with the issues involved largely on the wise ground that, if we are men on the balance of our life, we must be no less Nigerian in our religious faith if that faith is to have meaning for us or vitality in us.

3) The other element in these probings is that they convulse the Nigerian society as a whole. They are not questions put to the Church from unbelievers from outside the Church walls as in the past history of the relation between Church and the world. Today even concerned laymen are asking deep questions about the relation of Christian faith to their cultural values. The Church itself is exploring the depths of its own uncertainty and itself searching for possible foundations within its familiar patterns of meanings and systems of values to appropriate for itself the Christian faith which it has come to accept. The editorial, "*Criticisms in the Church*", clearly distinguishes between "some Nigerian Newspapers that have been running hot with subtle criticisms against the Church" and "some Catholics ... standing within the mainstream of the Church" who have joined in the same exercise. The newspapers are accused of giving "unprecedented coverage" to abuses committed by some individuals in the Church; that they have purposely falsified or distorted the meaning of events "with a view to defame the Church and her missionary activity".

It is important to note that one's assessment of the Church and her mission tends to be greatly influenced by one's feelings for missionary work itself, its value and its legitimacy. If a person does not believe in whatever the Church is devoted to spreading, he is not inclined to like either the Church or what the Church does. Thus the missionary role of the Church is often identified with imperialism, the forcing down our throats of a foreign religion. No doubt the Christian religion has had

a considerable impact on Nigerian cultures. But its critics do not seem to realize that its influence is separable from other forms of "missionary" activity. Its influence has not been nearly destructive of the patterns of life in our ethnic groups as the introduction of industrialism, the natural and the social sciences, universal and modern education, democratic and socialist concepts, and medicine. These are also missionaries of some sort and although they are not often found independent of Church missionaries, they have their appropriate role in the search for human fulfillment, a way of formulating the Church's mission. Above all, it is evident that among all the Westerners who have left their imprint on the peoples of this country, the missionary was the one who had a sincere wish to help the Nigerian rather than either to dominate or to milk him. Though there were certain misunderstandings, one can generally and safely say that the missionaries did their best to distinguish themselves from other Westerners operating in the country.

More can be added to deepen and extend the above exposition. All we have sought to do is to bring to consciousness the nature and extent of the present discussions within and outside the Nigerian Church. A full documentation is here not possible nor desirable. What is important is that these questions are being openly discussed and that interested people are taking up respectable positions. In this situation, this essay is only a personal contribution to the common search for further understanding.

It has been necessary to refer to the discussions as reflected in a newspaper because Igbo society as a whole is only learning to express its views in print. What the Newspapers say are only an aspect, a repercussion in writing of a wider ferment. In the traditional societies, problems were discussed orally in local assemblies and the decisions were committed to participants' memories. Inventive people and village sages reflected on these decisions and their experience of men, the world and God and transmitted their conclusions through myths, stories, the names their children bore, songs and proverbs. To reconstruct Igbo life before the invasion of Western influence, these oral traditions are indispensable. The Igbo acknowledged his indebtedness to the past by introducing his speech by recourse to authority: "As our fathers said..." Today, however, oral tradition is giving place to written tradition. Books have started to appear and the newspaper columns, "Letters to the Editor" tend to replace the local assemblies as the new center for expressing personal opinion. One who follows the discussions there has a valid sample of the wider problem that worries the general population.

As to the religious discussions, the above sample yield three different positions:

a) the position that recognizes the new questions put to Christian faith from the side of native culture but which dismisses the native and traditional mores and practices as against genuine Christian faith. In other words, Christian faith is sufficient and possible independent of a

nation's culture and tradition. The arguments for this position vary from regarding native culture as old-fashioned (e.g., the question of the possibility of a Christian polygamist) to defending Christian faith independent of culture on the score that the Church will always remain "a sign of contradiction" for the nations (e.g., the editorial's reaction to criticism of the Church).

b) There is the position, which "under the pretext of culture and updating the Church" goes its way to propagating personal ideas and interests. This position is reductionist in temper; it tries to reduce Christianity to a certain conception. Here Christianity turns out to be a cultural religion; instead of its function of transforming culture through incarnation within it, it is made to confirm a given culture without transcending it. An example would be the tendency to reduce the Christian priesthood to the *Ukochukwu* of Igbo traditional religion and the easy identification of the Igbo God with the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

c) Finally, there is the position which recognizes the discussions and their background and then probes for ways of explicitly coming to terms with the issues involved. All such efforts at the present stage can only be tentative. The issues involved are large and complicated and any attempt to hasten matters prematurely may be rash and destructive.

In keeping with the aims of this essay, we are not arguing for a position within any of the above three. We are concerned with the presuppositions for a positive or negative position. We are calling attention to presuppositions which are sometimes overlooked or very little considered in the course of the discussions. Our contribution is therefore limited to uncovering the grounds that will enable one take up a defensible position. For like the *Nte* of the Igbo proverb, Nigerians are awakening from their dogmatic slumbers; they are slowly coming to awareness and to assess in reflection the impact of western culture and missionary meanings and values on their traditional cultures and religions. With political independence assured and with the insistent call for full "Nigerianization" of the Church, the full impact of foreign occupation is beginning to emerge. To account for some of the background of the present situation is part of the burden of the next section. I should like to mention two intellectual elements which seem to me particularly illuminating: the school system and its impact on the traditional Nigerian societies and, the way the Christian religion was learnt and maintained. In each case, interest is limited to pointing out an existing and yet un-overcome problem.

II. Background to the Ferment

A. Social: The social situation in Nigeria has undergone a change. Before the coming of the British in the middle of the last century, there was no such country as Nigeria. There were rather different tribes with vastly different cultures and civilizations developing side by side and

independently of one another. By "culture" we mean, "a set of meanings and values that inform the way of life of a community"³. Each of the component tribes of what today we call Nigeria had developed each its own set of meanings and values. We have evidence of them in their wisdom sayings, their myths and their moral legitimations. On account of their different languages, there was little commerce between them. It was the British colonialists that wielded the tribes together into one country, gave it a name and a language. The government was modeled on the British parliamentary system, social institutions were established on foundations that envisaged a future evolution oriented towards a scientific culture as we know it in Western Europe and North America. The differing peoples were taught to answer Nigerians without their consent; their former boundaries were erased and redrawn between powers who contested for their allegiance but without their choice in the matter.

The indigenous life-styles lived on side by side with "*the British way of life*" but then their future was already predetermined. For through the English schools which came in where there was no school before, the new generation that went through them came to know more about Britain and Europe than about their own people, and about the cultures of the neighbours with whom they now form a country. The text books were in English and about the English. The history learnt was British and European. Since there was no indigenous literature, SHAKESPEARE, DICKENS and WORDSWORTH became the starting-point for the new Nigerians. The school-goers and students learnt names and words which had no referents in their own and familiar world of experience. It helped those fortunate enough to continue further studies in Europe without set-back. But it did estrange them from the customs and habits of their parents who were not undergoing the same slow but irreversible transformation in mentality. Ability to speak English and imitate the "*british way of life*" signaled modernity; holding on to tribal customs signaled old-fashioned anachronism. In certain quarters, to go native was the same as to embrace primitivity.

This is not to say that Western values and habits of thought have become entirely triumphant in Nigerian society. I am only indicating that the process is going on. There are still increasingly articulate pockets of resistance. But even here, the Ozo title-taking taken as an example, the traditional customs have undergone considerable change both in form and content. When Ozo title is taken by a Christian, it cannot be expected to be what it was before Christians were allowed into it. The struggle between native Nigerian culture and European influence, especially from the Igbo view-point has been celebrated in the novels of CHINUA

³ B. LONERGAN, "*Revolution in Catholic Theology*" in: *A Second Collection*, London (1974) p. 232.

ACHEBE⁴. Up to the moment, there has been no religious literature that discusses the influence of Western culture and Christianity on traditional religious beliefs.

It is the same religious man who is a businessman, a politician or whatever else he may be doing in social life. It is false to construct "religious areas of life" which will enable a man to go about his business in the world in its own right and unaffected by the Christian standards one professed. It is an error to think that one can "purely" participate in secular life in such a way that one's activity in the Church is separable or vice-versa. Many have not yet realized the difficulty involved in living six days of the week in the benefits of a scientific and technological culture and the seventh day getting inspiration from documents whose language has little in common with that culture. This is not merely an academic problem but one that deeply concerns the future of our Western civilization which, whether we like it or not, we have come to accept in reality. There have been much debating and writing — one has only to turn to the "Letters to the Editor" columns of the daily papers — about our returning to our indigenous habits and life-styles. These efforts float in the air. Nobody is really campaigning for a return to life as it was before Western influence broke in. In actuality, and from every observable evidence, every aspect of the nation's life is geared to preserving and improving what we have inherited from the West. This state of affairs has weighty implications for the contemporary explicator of the Gospel. And now we must turn to the religious situation.

B. Religious. The Church is still young in Nigeria. In Eastern Nigeria, the Catholic Church is not yet a century old. The first Catholic missionaries arrived in Onitsha at the banks of the Niger in 1885. The same boat that brought the colonialists brought the missionaries and initially there was little distinction between missionary and nonmissionary. They all were whitemen perpetuating Western influence. Contact with the people was built through freed slaves who served as interpreters.

The first and second generation Christians learnt their faith from the *Yellow Catechism* (so-called because of the colour of the dust cover). Its clear-cut questions and entirely certain answers reflected the *Chukwu di uwatuwa* (the eternal God) himself. The mysteries of faith are true because they are revealed by God who can neither deceive nor be deceived. The truth is what ought to be and, therefore, cannot be refuted by what is. It is immutable like God *Onye di oge nina ka odi keta, otu a ka oga esi a diriri* (who is the same today as he was and so he will ever be). There is no greater participation of the elder Christians in the liturgy than when hymns along this theme are sung.

⁴ See especially his *No longer At Ease*, London (1960) and *Things Fall Apart* London (1958). ACHEBE seems to have solved the problem by the tragic death of Okonkwo (Igbo culture). The actual relation between the two modes of culture is more paradoxical than his account.

In the seminaries, the theology manuals came from Europe. Dogmatic theology followed the pedagogy of the thesis. Like the catechism, it gave basic and central significance to the certitudes of faith, their suppositions and their consequences. Its mode of proof goes back to the Spaniard, MELCHIOR CANO (1509—60). He is the classic author on theological proof, as the *loci* based not on objective insight but on authority. Not only was he a theologian he was also a bishop and inquisitor⁵. Thus dogmatic theology not only proved its theses, it was also supported by the teaching authority and sanctions of the Church. Until after Vatican II, the priests in Nigeria were brought up in this conception of theology. Just as the traditional Igbo society settled important questions by referring to the wisdom and authority accumulated by our ancestors, so the theology text books served as the new centers of authority in religious matters. The unexpressed assumption was that all important questions about faith had long been conveniently solved. And since the text books were in latin, the main task was that of understanding the text.

Today, however new questions are being asked. The close tie between the country and the Western world makes it easy that whatever happens in Western Europe and North America has immediate, even though superficial repercussion on the country. This is true both in the areas of secular pursuits and religious concerns. Our models and anti-models, saints and sinners, Church organization or town-planning come to us from the Western world. We seem to forget that we are modern men living in the modern world. It is impossible for us to live spiritually in the past but existentially in the present. It is necessary to find a bridge between our spiritual existence and the new world which seems not to relate to that spiritual existence. It is hoped that the efforts of the next few years will be directed to fashioning a synthesis between our religious heritage from our fathers and that which Christianity has brought us. We believe that they are not contradictory.

III. Implications of the new Situation

The above discussion indicate an undeniable fact in the social and religious life of Nigeria, viz., the contact with Western influence is a mixed blessing. The different tribes have moved into Western culture, losing thereby almost those elements of tribal absoluteness, emotional experience and communal ethic which were maintained by their separateness from outside influence. Correspondingly there has not yet evolved any viable form of Church life within culture which can maintain both the tribal values on the one hand and the foreign cultural influence on the other. At the same time we feel that Christianity and a nation's culture are not mutually exclusive. It is a question of forging a valid and

⁵ E. HAIBLE, "*Loci Theologici*", in *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 6, p. 224.

authentic synthesis. The expression of the Gospel always requires that there be no total capitulation to a given culture; and yet no formulation of the Gospel that is relevant or meaningful can possibly fail to express itself in categories familiar to its hearers. The missionaries have brought us the Gospel; it is for us to reformulate it in a language and express it in a celebration familiar to us.

What has actually happened is that our Western friends, missionaries and colonialists, teacher and businessman somehow overlooked an aspect of Igbo wisdom enshrined in the proverb: "When a hen visits a strange land, it stands initially on one leg and looks round to see whether the native hens stand on one or on both legs". In other words, a visitor should not begin with his customary ideas and habits but should first of all observe and begin with the experience of his hosts. Our foreign visitors — in spite of themselves — felt they had conferred a double benefit on us if they not only taught us the Gospel but also let us partake the riches of their culture. Nobody could fail to be a child of his time; in their time it was normal to think that Western culture was tied to Christian faith. Thus they did not really try to understand us; we were meant to understand them. They spoke English to us, not Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa; and they expected us to reply in English. English became the national language and made compulsory throughout the country. In the same way, since Christianity has been given a form it was only natural to preach it in that form. It was the most practical policy, otherwise how could one rule or evangelize a territory like Nigeria? But this practical and pragmatic policy has created a dilemma today: our spiritual existence is thematized by no coherent and cogent religious symbols familiar to us. Our traditional and cultural religious symbols were neglected and the symbols of a foreign language even in translation carry with them an aura of emptiness and unreality. Our use of ordinary English words often fail to express our real feelings and thoughts. In the same way technical theological terms like substance, person, and nature while often mispronounced are rarely understood.

In Baptism only Saints' names were accepted. And since a missionary country that had not undergone persecution was not expected to have produced saints, we had a wide variety of names coming from Christian Europe. It is clear that some of the preaching was mere transcendentalism, unrelated to cultural ideas and therefore irrelevant to understanding daily life. Many Nigerians today view Christianity as a foreign religion from which one hopes for the same type of independence associated with political autonomy. Just as the colonialists modeled Nigerian politics on English standards, so also some of the missionaries ended by producing a copy, faithful to the minutest detail of that form of Christian faith to which they themselves were accustomed in their own land. Were they entirely to be blamed? Are we ourselves not imitative? Is it not we ourselves who want everything done as in "the holy and eternal

city"? Perhaps, some of them may have yielded to "*the colonial complex*"⁶, that only Western man was man in the full sense of the word, but we must recognize that we also wanted to play the whiteman. We have learned their patterns of thought and education and through them gained recognition in the modern world but we are realizing that theirs is alien to our native mental make-up and psychology.

The second implication of the present cultural revolution is that our traditional religious values and authorities are challenged by our Western education. Igbo traditional society was built on authority wielded by the elders. The *Ukochukwu* of the traditional Igbo religion was not only the cult man; he also transmitted decisions from the spirit-world of our dead ancestors. The idea was that wisdom belonged to the ancients and every important decision for the future takes its models from the changeless past. Our western heritage just as themes in Christian revelation tend to look towards the future for fulfilment. Western education since the Enlightenment tends to emphasize freedom from authority, the wisdom and goodness of the common man and, as a consequence, the democratic process. In politics, we have learnt that there are "*natural rights of man*", in economics the laws of the free market, and in social relations there are the democratic ideals of the value of the individual, his self development and self-realization. The word "*freedom*" is charged with emotive possibilities. Today, it functions as the key word of the "*man come of age*" who is seeking for the opportunity to exercise his own freedom in order to create value and so to refashion history according to his own chosen images. In one way or another, explicitly or implicitly, these are forces operative in the Nigeria society as a whole. They lay claims on the way we continue preaching the Gospel. They are directing development away from original forms perhaps absolutely unintended and unknown to us. They promote a type of self-understanding which is different from the self-understanding of our ancestors and a type of existence which is un-Nigerian in the traditional sense.

The third implication is that the new missionaries may not underrate or over-value their public. The new generation of Nigerians are modern men, men who participate actively in the modern world of science and philosophy. On the one hand, they receive their dominant ideas — religious and ethical — from their business life, from their club speakers, the result of their scientific and historical investigations, and from their weekly magazines. The priest-missionary is no longer, as it was formerly accepted, the sole authority in everything. The voice and attitude of the layman and the average Nigerian probably reflects the ideas of his popular journalist or what has worked for him in the real world of competitive business. On the other hand, it would be very optimistic on the part of the preacher and missionary to expect that his public has kept up with

⁶ St. NEILL, *A History of Christian Missions*, Middlesex (1964, reprinted 1973) p. 259.

its religious education. Many laymen have been content to leave their beliefs or doctrines of the Church where they were when they studied their catechism for first communion. Though our Churches are full on Sundays and the priest spends long hours distributing communion, it is probable that Church doctrines have not entered as a meaningful dimension to understanding the people's day-to-day life. How many of our Christians read the Bible? How many turn up for instructions on Sundays? It is likely that the educated class is quite more at home with the assumptions about the world that guide modern technology and commercialism than it is about Christian views about man and his world. Thus we are faced with the problem of fashioning a Christian mode of existence that makes it possible for the Nigerian to live creatively in the scientific thought world of modern culture which we owe to our Western contact while at the same time keeping in touch with his own faith in his own traditional culture. Our traditional cultures have something to contribute to expanding our understanding of Christian faith.

These seem to be the most fundamental questions that face evangelization today. In order to answer them, the mere repetition of our old official language as taught by the original missionaries is not enough. It does not suffice merely to translate Roman documents in fluent Igbo or Yoruba. It seems to call for something deeper: a rethinking of these concepts in such a way that it represents while renewing our cultural viewpoint. This points to the final implication of this study, namely, the granting of the necessary freedom and support for enterprising Nigerians to experiment responsibly with our traditional self-understanding and its ritual celebrations. Towards this program, a personal suggestion is in order.

IV. The latent Possibilities of traditional Myths

Here one is merely suggesting the appropriate orientation and attitudes. It is neither simply rejecting the past nor, on the other hand, falling short of the exigencies of the present. Like the wise scribe of the Gospel, we have to bring out of our treasure things both old and new.

There are considerable potentialities latent in our traditional religious beliefs which will help us at once to understand Christianity as a religion while at the same time allowing it its uniqueness. It is not Christian doctrine that God is only known through his special revelation in the history of Israel and above all in the history of Jesus who is the Christ. The heavens announce the glory of God. In other words, knowledge of God is also mediated by creation. Christians also believe that God's love and care is as wide as his creation: it is God's will that all men should find salvation and come to know the truth (*1 Tim 2:4*). From this many theologians have concluded that, since grace is necessary for salvation, grace sufficient for salvation is given to all men. Though Christians may claim a special election, this privilege with its corresponding task, is not exclu-

sive. What distinguishes the Christian is not God's grace, for he shares this with others, but the mediation of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

In the Christian, therefore, God's gift of his grace is a grace that is in Christ Jesus. From this fact flow the social, historical, and doctrinal aspects of Christianity. What I am drawing attention to is that before Christian revelation came to be preached, God's manifestation through his creation has found response and resonance in our traditional religions. In a way, Christianity presupposes for its intelligibility such traditional religions and comes as making explicit what was dimly perceived through natural revelation⁷. At first, for an example, Christianity appeared only as one more sect or group within a Judaism that was already accustomed to considerable diversity in religious expression, and Jesus was regarded as another Rabbi or another of the usual prophets. That is to say, the understanding of Jesus and his mission was already prepared for in the Old Testament and in Judaism. The first Christians, then, were Jews differentiated from their fellowcountrymen by their profession that in Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah of the nation's expectation had come. They understood that his coming, being a fulfilment, must be continuous with the past revelation of God to his people; it could not mean a total break inconsistent with his past words and actions⁸. They spoke of their new faith in forms and accents usual in their day and culture.

In the same way, we are suggesting the exploration of the possibilities latent in our traditional religious symbols and myths. Symbols are embodiments of conceptions; myths communicate a certain self-understanding in a pre-philosophic and imagery form. Although these are not characteristically Christian, they are nevertheless a certain religious mode of understanding and speaking about the referents of Christian faith⁹. Myth has been defined as "a certain mode of language, whose elements are multivalent symbols, whose referent is in some more strange way the transcendent . . . and whose meanings concern the ultimate or existential issues of actual life and the questions of human and historical destiny"¹⁰. Ac-

⁷ For a fuller discussion of the relation between Christianity and the world religions, one is referred among others to LANGDON GILKEY's *Naming the Whirlwind: the Renewal of God-Language* (Indianapolis and New York, 1969), pp. 284ff; 415ff. Many of the ideas expressed in this essay go back to him. His theological effort is bent to spelling out the problems of secularism for contemporary theology. See also, B. LONERGAN, *The Future of Christianity* in: op. cit. p. 149.

⁸ H. CHADWICK, *The Early Church*, Middlesex (1967, reprinted 1974), chapter 1.

⁹ Among the various literature on traditional or ancient mythical discourse one is referred to the works of MIRCEA ELIADE especially his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, New York (1963) and *Cosmos and History*, New York (1959). See also, PAUL RICOEUR, *The Symbolism of Evil*, New York (1967).

¹⁰ L. GILKEY, *Modern Myth-making and the Possibilities of Twentieth-Century Theology*, in: *Theology of Renewal* vol. I L. K. SHOOK, ed., New York (1968), p. 283.

cording to this view, our traditional religious myths must not be understood in the pejorative sense of ancient and so untrue fable. The history of religions have found them to mean: not false explanations by means of images and fables, but a traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men today and in a general sense, establish all the forms of action and thought by which a man understands himself and his world.

In our traditional myths of origins, reincarnations, births, sufferings and deaths, we have a treasure which, through appropriate manipulation, will enable us to make our own the claims of Christianity; for Christianity presents itself not only as one among many but the key to understanding the questions of human existence in relation to God. The various ideas and attitudes characteristic of our traditional religions afford us the starting points and present themselves as instruments of meaning. In this way, it is to be hoped that we can re-establish the sense of reality and belonging that Christianity is the goodnews for us and not an alienation from our cultural values. Our task then is that of reinserting the Gospel within a culture which was neglected. To make it at home there, we have in the local language and habits the potentialities of expressing the message and celebrating it in liturgy. By developing these potentialities of our culture, that is, in coming to understand new meanings and coming to accept higher values promised by Christianity, the mission will succeed.

We must conclude by recalling the themes of this essay. The Nigerian Church has arrived at a new stage in its history: that of assessing the place of traditional culture in the understanding of Christianity preached to it in European form and interpretation. As the Igbo proverb has it: at last the visitor will have to go home. So the foreign missionaries are going after bringing us the faith and opening up for us the riches of their own cultures. In the different positions being taken up, this essay has limited itself to suggesting a possible way of overcoming the association of Christianity with foreign imperialism. After the manner of the Incarnation¹¹, we have in our traditional religions the stuff for expressing Christianity in forms and accents familiar to us.

¹¹ *Ad Gentes*, Nr. 10.