

**THE CATHOLIC PRIEST IN A NEW VICIOUS-IDOLATROUS
CULTURE AND SOCIETY**

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Abstract

This essay addresses the prevailing rate of idolatrous practices in the contemporary society and the challenges posed to priestly ministry. The African society has always been known for its notoriously religious character, but the form of religiosity one encounters in many contexts today is a clear departure from the known traditional religious heritage. The essay examines the meanings of idol and idolatry and how they are understood in some cultures and in the biblical text. It also exposes the different forms of idolatry in the contemporary culture, with particular focus on the Nigerian society and the challenges they pose for the priestly ministry.

Key words: culture, idol, idolatry, priestly ministry, shepherd.

1. INTRODUCTION

The title of this essay touches one of the troublesome issues in our contemporary religious experience. The essay was originally presented as a lead paper at Owerri on 8 June, 2022, during the Colloquium to mark the Priestly Golden Jubilee Celebration of Archbishop Anthony Obinna, the Emeritus Archbishop of Owerri. It was a tribute to Obinna's unchanging commitment to the integral development of the African Society and his love for an authentically incarnated Christianity in the local culture. The perception in many contexts is that the contemporary society has a very shallow approach to religion. The problem is most

evident in the Nigerian society, and particularly, the Igbo society, famed for being very religious. This is exemplified in the rampant cases of double allegiance in the practice of Christianity and the increasing attraction to materialism and what may be regarded as sheer Satanic worship. Coupled with these is the dangerous recourse from the Christian faith to the old traditional religion. This is expressed in newfound attractions to the abandoned local deities and their cult images. This fascination for the old religion is not very recent, but it has assumed new dimensions.

In one of his lectures with our class in Fundamental Theology in the late 1980s, the then Fr. Anthony Obinna introduced us to one of the poems of Christopher Okigbo, where this great Nigerian poet spoke of his ancestral goddess, called Idoto. The significant lines of the poem, titled “Heavensgate”, run thus:

Before you, Mother Idoto
Naked I stand;
Before your watery presence,
A prodigal,

Leaning on an oilbean;
Lost in your legend
Under your power wait I on
barefoot,
Watchman for the watchword At
Heavensgate;

Out of the depths my cry:
Give ear and hearken.

In this poem, Christopher Okigbo, regarded as one of the greatest Nigerian poets of all times, laments his abandonment of his cultural heritage, and asked for forgiveness as a penitent. In the poem, Mother

Idoto stands for the water goddess of Ojoto, which is Okigbo's hometown. The oilbean tree is famous for providing one of the natural groves for the encounter with the goddess. The recourse to Idoto in this poem is like a libation to an abandoned deity, since Christopher Okigbo himself was a Christian. The poem exposes an ardent nostalgia for the past and a statement on cultural revival.

This form of revivalist attitude towards the traditional religion has today taken a new dimension. The younger generation has perfected it in a most perfidious manner, as the old symbols of the traditional religion are now turned into diabolical religious symbols. The same names are often used but the practices are more ambivalent. So, when one talks of a vicious idolatrous culture and society, one is talking of an ambivalent return to the traditional religion without the positive ethics and spirituality of that old religion. This idolatrous mindset is exhibited in the repertoire of many superstitious beliefs that still characterize the religious life of our people. It is evident in most of the new religious movements and even in some bizarre abuses of the older ones. The reality is that the society remains viciously idolatrous. This does not mean that every cultural expression of religiosity is idolatrous. There are many cultural practices which are neither Christian nor idolatrous. So, this essay does not tag everything that is not Christian as idolatrous. The challenge of inculturation is to employ those good symbols of the traditional culture in the propagation of the Christian faith.

This essay addresses challenges of priestly ministry in such an idolatrous state of affairs. The question is: What should the priest do in such a society? This implicates the biblical approach to such issues and their contemporary relevance. A number of biblical texts show how some significant religious leaders addressed similar idolatrous issues in their contexts. Such texts serve as important points of reference in

contemporary pastoral approaches. But, first, one needs to make a conceptual clarification of the term idolatry.

2. MEANING OF IDOLATRY

The term idolatry is a very complex one, and many definitions and descriptions abound. The word idolatry is a derivation of the New Testament Greek noun *eidōlōlatría* meaning literally “worship of idols”. Technically, idolatry refers to the worship directed to material objects or images as representatives of divinities. With time it became used to identify all forms of worship directed to foreign gods. But to understand its meaning more deeply, it is good to explain what the term idol really means.

Idols

The term idol connotes a number of things in contemporary usage. In one way or the other, all these senses are relevant to the argument of this essay. But basically, an idol is understood as a physical representation of a deity.¹ The term idol in English is derived from the Greek word *eidōlon*, meaning “image,” “phantom” or “picture copy”.²

In most cultures and religions of the world, deities are represented in visible forms. Even when they are not so represented, they are described in forms using physical imagery. This is the case in both the ancient religions of the world and in modern religious expressions.

In the Ancient Near East (ANE), images were very prominent in cult. The most common images were the statues of deities, and this was the case for both major and minor deities. One of the main functions of priests in these religions was the care of these statues. Gods and supernatural forces were depicted in diverse ways in the ANE. In Mesopotamia, they were

¹ See Edward M. Curtis, “Idol, Idolatry,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3, 376.

² See Judith M. Hadley, “Idolatry: Theology,” *NIDOTTE* 4, 715.

mostly depicted anthropomorphically, that is, in human forms, but in Egypt one finds a greater diversity in the artistic representations, as the gods appeared in both animal and human forms.

One controversial area in the notion of idols is on how they relate to the deities they represent. The biblical text makes a caricature of them in Psalm 135:15-18:

The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear, and there is no breath in their mouths. Those who make them and all who trust them shall become like them.

This text is rather polemical (see also Psalm 115:4-8). But the influential scholarly opinion is that the images or idols were not intended to describe the exact appearance of the god but were meant to represent various ways of the god's self manifestation as well as the functions and attributes of the god.³ The deity was believed to manifest his or her living presence in the image or statue. For instance, ancient Egyptians believed that the gods entered into the image made of them.⁴ This explains the elaborate prescriptions involved in the erection of a particular image or statue and the rituals involved in the installation of such image.

The presence of the god is made alive in the image through a rite performed on the statue. This rite was called "the opening of the mouth", that is, the opening of the mouth of the image or statue.⁵ The understanding was that without the mouth opening ritual, the statue would not be able to eat offerings and sacrifices. As a matter of fact, the

³ Curtis, "Idol, Idolatry," 377.

⁴ Curtis, "Idol, Idolatry," 377.

⁵ See Curtis, "Idol, Idolatry," 377; T. Jacobsen, "the Graven Image," *AIR* (1987) 15-32.

presence of the deity in the statue was believed to be kept alive through the regular offerings and care. The need to maintain the living presence of the god in the statue led sometimes to the practice of repeating periodically the rite of the opening of the mouth.

3. IDOLS IN IGBO TRADITIONAL RELIGION

There is currently some controversy on the identity of the Supreme Being or Deity in Igbo traditional religion. While some disagree on the question of which of the known deities in the traditional Igbo context can be called the Supreme Deity (for instance Chukwu, Chi, Chineke),⁶ some others contest the existence of a name for such Deity.⁷ Given this controversy, it is very difficult to speak of an image of the supreme Deity in the Igbo context. However, there is a wide agreement on the polytheistic nature of the traditional religion within which many big and small gods abound, together with a number of messenger divinities. From this perspective, Igbo traditional religion is filled with idolatrous representations of the deity in forms of carved images and totemic animals that are believed to be messengers or representations of the deity.

While images of different deities abound, the most common Igbo word for these images or statues is the term *Arusi*, same as *Alusi* in some dialects. The *Arusi* is a wooden image of the deity that functions as the main representative of the deity's presence. For instance, the worshipper of *Ogwugwu* only sees the *Arusi* of *Ogwugwu* as the symbolic representation of the deity. All covenants and oaths with the deity are done before the *Arusi*. Another popular deity that is idolized with the image of *Arusi* is the divinatory deity *Agwu-nsi* or *Agwu-ishi*. What

⁶ See A. E. Afigbo, "Ancestral Igbo Religion and Cosmos and the Idea of World Religion," in *Religion in a World of Change: African Ancestral Religion, Islam and Christianity* (ed. T. I. Okure; Owerri: Whelan Research Academy, 2003) 168-181.

⁷ See R. Arazu, "Chukwu and Yahweh: The Problem of Naming God in Igbo Language," in *God, Bible and African Traditional Religion: Acts of SIST International Symposium 2009* (ed. B. u. Ukwuije; Enugu, 2010) 16-30.

makes *Agwu-nsi* very popular is that it is a household deity like the ancient Hebrew Teraphim.

Igbo traditional religion is very particular in the area of idolatrous worship. Even though images of minor deities abound, these are not absolutized. There is the Igbo adage: *Agwu-nsi kpawa ike egosi ya osisi ejiri kpuo ya* – “If *Agwu-nsi* begins to misbehave, it is shown the wood from which it was carved”. Whenever a deity ceases to be of good to the human community and human welfare it is abandoned together with its cult objects. This explains why conversion to Christianity was rapid among the Igbo people. It also explains why the Igbo find it difficult to pay a lasting allegiance to any human leader or cult figure.

Elochukwu Uzukwu demonstrates this with the image of the proud and inflexible Ezeulu, chief priest of *Ulu* deity, in Chinua Achebe’s book, *Arrow of God*.⁸ In the story, Ezeulu’s stubborn refusal to modify the calendar of the New Yam ritual in accordance with the changing times brings calamity to the community. The consequence is that the people abandon him and his deity and join the Christian faith which offered hopes of a better life. As Uzukwu puts it, “*Arrow of God* concluded with what appears to be an intervention of the deity [*Ulu*] to save the people of Umuaro by making his priest insane. It was too late: the people had abandoned *Ulu* and carried their new yam to the Christian church, whose God, they hoped, would satisfy the needs of the community.”⁹ The lesson from the story is that the welfare of the community overrides every other consideration. The priest’s arrogance or conservatism should not be allowed to endanger the welfare of the community.

⁸ See Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *God, Spirit and Human Wholeness. Appropriating faith and Culture in West African Style* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012) 98-102.

⁹ Uzukwu, *God, Spirit and Human Wholeness*, 102.

According to Uzukwu, “The priest’s *refusal to adjust to change along with his stubborn pride is heresy and idolatry.*”¹⁰

4. APPROACH TO IDOLS IN ISRAELITE RELIGION

The official Israelite religion prohibited the representation of the Deity with images. Nonetheless, images were still found among the people, as many texts testify, only that the official religion banned them. This ban is clear in Exod 20:4: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” Here, the term idol is represented with the Hebrew words *pesel* (image) and *temuna* (likeness). There are many other terminologies for idols in the texts, each designating specific species of images. Most prominent were the images of the household gods called *Teraphim*.

It is, however, not certain when the religion of Israel officially banned the use of idols. Some scholars attribute the ban to the Classical prophets of the eighth century B.C., such as Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Micah.¹¹ Some others point to a later stage, probably in the exilic and postexilic periods. The ban was mostly championed by the Deuteronomic Reform movement, whose agenda was a radical reform of the old religion and enforcement of a strict monotheism based on sole YHWH worship. This started from the last years of the monarchic period, extending to the exilic and post exilic periods. According to Rainer Albertz,

“for the Deuteronomists the prohibitions against strange gods and images are almost identical; for them the use of cultic images even in connection with Yahweh is *ipso facto* the cult of strange gods. The intention is also to lay down clear guidelines for family religion, which was particularly difficult

¹⁰ Uzukwu, *God, Spirit and Human Wholeness*, 100.

¹¹ Cf. Curtis, “Idol, Idolatry,” 378.

to control – one has only to think of the Astarte figures and the star cakes for Ishtar.”¹²

The reform movement is responsible for the book of Deuteronomy and the redaction of many other books, particularly the historical books from Joshua through Second Kings. It is also argued that the Deuteronomists redacted some parts of the Pentateuch, from Genesis to Numbers. The Deuteronomic opposition to use of images is most radically expressed in Deut 12:2-4:

“You must demolish completely all the places where the nations whom you are about to dispossess served their gods, on the mountain heights, on the hills, and under every leafy tree. Break down their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred poles with fire, and hew down the idols of their gods, and thus blot out their name from their places. You shall not worship the LORD your God in such ways.”

The last part of the text admonishes Israel never to worship YHWH in such idolatrous ways. Deuteronomy bans the multiplication of worship centres for YHWH. Only one place is approved, but that place is not named anywhere in Deuteronomy. Later traditions identified Jerusalem as the place, but it is also probable that the place could have originally been Shiloh, as Jerusalem was conquered only in the time of David.¹³ The centralisation of worship, which runs through the whole of Deut 12:1-28, was intended to avoid the corruption of the YHWH cult with the multiplication of local worship centres or sanctuaries. For

¹² R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, Volume 1: From the Beginnings to the End of the Exile (London; SCM Press, 1994) 216.

¹³ See J. H. Hunt, “Idols, Idolatry, Teraphim, Household Gods,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (eds. T. Desmond Alexander & David W. Baker; Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2003) 438.

Deuteronomy, it is not only that YHWH alone should be worshipped in Israel but that the worship has to be uniform.

This is the essence of the Great Commandment, called the *Shema*, in Deut 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel! YHWH is our God, YHWH is one! You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” The worship of YHWH alone was the greatest dogma of Israel’s religion, and any departure from it was tagged idolatry. This dogma theoretically rules out any form of polytheism from Israel.¹⁴ But the more important nuance of the formulation is that the YHWH cult was not open to any form of contextual adaptation. It was not open to inculturation. While the cult of Baal had many forms, that of YHWH was one and uniform and did not admit of local variations.¹⁵ This was a real danger in the social environment where local sanctuaries multiplied and were at the service of diverse social and political interests.

A case in point is the religious reform of Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12. Jeroboam, out of political expediency, shifted the religious capital of Israel from Jerusalem to the two centres, Bethel and Dan, and appointed new religious leaders contrary to existing practice (1 Kgs 12:26-32). His reasons were very plausible:

And Jeroboam said in his heart, ‘Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David; if this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah’ (1 Kgs 12:26-27).

¹⁴ See Luke E. Ijezie, “The Love Commandment in Deut 6:4-9 and Its Centrality for Biblical Faith and Evangelisation,” in *The Bible on faith and Evangelisation* (eds. A. Ewherido *et al*; Acts of CABAN 6; Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2015) 1-16.

¹⁵ See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1: The History of Israel’s Historical Traditions (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1975) 227.

As a matter of fact, Jerusalem was not the original religious centre of Israel, and Jerusalem was not even originally an Israelite city. It was a Jebusite city until David captured it and made it his capital city for the united kingdom of Israel and Judah. Solomon promoted the religious and political aura of the city by building the magnificent YHWH temple and royal palace there. It gradually became engrained in the consciousness of many political and religious observers that Jerusalem was now the undisputable eternal centre of Israel's religious and political life.

What Jeroboam did was to bring his own entity, Israel, back to the more ancient traditions. He did not, however, abolish the worship of YHWH and it is not clear if ever he did introduce the worship of any other deity. It is important to underline this point. What he did was to transfer the worship centre, most probably YHWH worship, to Bethel and Dan. Aberrations could have set in afterwards. Bethel and Dan were more ancient Israelite religious centres than Jerusalem. But, why was Jeroboam accused of leading Israel into sin? The reason is given in 1 Kgs 12:28-30:

So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. And this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one at Bethel and before the other as far as Dan."

The sin of Jeroboam is fourfold: first, he made images of the Deity in form of two golden calves, which was a direct contravention of the Mosaic commandment (Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8), recalling the Golden calf of Aaron in Exodus 32; second, he established illegal sanctuaries and

altars; third, he appointed non Levites as priests; fourth, he established new religious feasts which he had no right to do. The whole sin of Jeroboam can be summed up as cultic apostasy.¹⁶ Jeroboam's reforms were politically expedient, but he failed to understand that he was made a king over YHWH's people. He had no right to act on his own volition without the approval of YHWH. In the biblical evaluation, political expediency does not count. What matters is to act in accordance with the divine will.

The Deuteronomic reform movement fought against these pluralistic expressions of the YHWH cult, and the account of the Josiah reform in 2 Kings 22:1-23:28 shows the dismantling of the localized shrines and altars. The law on centralization of worship in Deut 12:1-28 stipulates only a single sanctuary for the worship of YHWH, and this eventually came to be the Jerusalem temple. But despite this centralisation which, of course, was a later development, Israelites continued to express their religious worship in diverse places and in diverse forms. Irrespective of the legal stipulations, the use of images was not completely absent from Israel's worship in the monarchic times and even later among some circles.

The Solomonic temple was adorned with many artistic representations of heavenly bodies and earthly things. The images of the Cherubim over the ark were representations of creatures. Some scholars also point out that the Asherah pole was used at a certain time in the worship of YHWH, though this was later condemned by the prophets.¹⁷ The bronze snake mentioned in Num 21:8-9 was part of the images in the Jerusalem temple at a certain time. Scholars have traced the background of the story of the Bronze serpent to the ancient Near Eastern beliefs in snakes

¹⁶ Cf. R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, Volume 2: From the Exile to the Maccabees (London; SCM Press, 1994) 396.

¹⁷ See Hadley, "Idolatry: Theology," 716.

as protectors of the people.¹⁸ In the Canaanite religion, the serpent is the iconographic representation of the god Baal. There is the opinion that some forms of YHWHism also represented the Israelite God YHWH in form of a serpent.¹⁹ Images of snakes are often found in ancient temples. This was much practised in Egypt. It is also common in many forms of Igbo traditional religion, most prominent being the *eke Njaba* and the *eke Idemmili*.²⁰ The story of the Bronze serpent in Num 21:8-9 actually functions as an etiological story to explain the presence of the Bronze serpent image in the temple of Jerusalem. The aim is to trace it to YHWHistic origin rather than pagan origin. The later reformers of the YHWH religion were, however, embarrassed by the serpent image (called Nehushtan) as they did not consider it adequate for the YHWH cult. In fact, it was among the objects destroyed during the reforms of King Hezekiah of Judah (2 Kgs 18:4).

5. THEOLOGICAL REASONS FOR THE PROHIBITION OF IDOLS

Some theological reasons may be identified as the basis for the ban on the making of images of the Deity in the Bible

1. The first theological ground for the prohibition of images of God in Israel's cult is the understanding that human beings are made in the image (*selem*) of God. The Genesis account presents the human being as *imago Dei* (image of God), and this resemblance is not only in form but also in function, as God entrusts the continuation of the creative work to human beings. J. H. Hunt puts it succinctly: "God fashioned humans in

¹⁸ Cf. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion*, 180, 334-335. See also K. R. Joines, *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament* (Haddonfield, NJ: Haddonfield House, 1974); J. H. Walton, "Serpent," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 736-739.

¹⁹ See the recent article of Nissim Amzallag, "The Serpent as a Symbol of Primeval Yahwism," *Semitica* 58 (2016) 207-236.

²⁰ See Luke E. Ijezie, *Hebrew YHWH and Igbo Njawa. Introducing Research on Igbo Connections with Hebrew and Related Semitic Languages* (Port Harcourt, 2013) 29.

the image of God. Humans, in contrast, may not fashion God in the image of humans or anything else. Potential potters of deity must realize that the fashioner was fashioned by the divine to evoke God. The equation, however, does not work in reverse; humans may not take it upon themselves to represent the deity by earthly fabrications.”²¹ It is, in fact, a travesty for human beings to turn around and start fashioning the Great Intelligence that created everything in the image of created things. No human creation can come near the divine reality without making a caricature of that reality.

2. A second theological ground may be seen in the Lucan presentation of the Areopagus speech of Paul in Acts 17:16-34. In this text, Luke, the writer of Acts, addresses the difficulties involved in the mission of Christianity to the Gentile world.²² Here, the Apostle Paul is depicted as coming into direct confrontation with the Athenian idolatrous religion. He was fascinated by the preponderance of altars and religious idols all over the city. He was most attracted to an altar designated as altar To an Unknown God. He went on to identify the Unknown God with the God whom he now preaches. In his dialogue with the Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers of the city, Paul makes the following argument against the practice of idolatry: i. God, as creator and Lord of heaven and earth, does not need man-made shrines and carved idols; ii. human beings are made to live in limited time and space so that they may continue to search for the Deity who is not far to find since he is always present in created beings, and it is in him that we live and move and exist, meaning that the life we live comes from him; iii. we are God’s children and thus the Deity cannot be in the form of anything carved from gold or silver or stone. Paul sums his argument by saying that all these were done in an age of ignorance.

²¹ Hunt, “Idols, Idolatry,” 438.

²² See Richard J. Dillon, “Acts of the Apostles,” NJBC, 754.

3. A third reason is the argument of Paul in Rom 1:21-31. According to Paul, idolatry emanates from human stubbornness expressed in transferring God's glory to created things. He argues that the problem of humanity is not ignorance of God but refusal to give due glory (*doxa*) and thanks to Him. The theme of glory (*doxa*) is very central to the whole discourse. The word *doxa* is often translated as glory or honour. It literally means brightness, brilliance, splendour. God's brightness is his glory. It shines everywhere. People knew God, but they transferred his *doxa* (glory) to images and created things. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an iconographic image (Rom 1:23). This is the basic problem of representing God in images. The danger is that one beholds the beauty of the image rather than the contemplation of God's true beauty. It happens with a statue or any picturesque representation of the deity. Often the pagans represented the deity in form of totemic animals or trees. All these come under the name of idolatry.

According to Paul, the punishment for idolatry is that God handed humanity over to the filthy practices of dishonouring their own bodies. Since the divine "body" is dishonoured by its representation in images, the adequate punishment is also the dishonouring of the human body. It is a negation of what God is and thus a perversion of the right order. Created things are absolutized as if they were divine, and no difference is made between the infinite and the transient or ephemeral. The consequence is God's wrath on humanity,²³ which has brought about the perversion of the whole created order (vv. 28-31). Creation has passed from order to chaos, and this is expressed in the reign of immorality and injustice. Paul articulates these in vv. 28-31:

²³ The idea of God's wrath is an anthropomorphic use of language, very common in the Old Testament, and so needs not be understood literally. See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Letter to the Romans", *NIBC*, 835. See also J. A. T. Robinson, *Wrestling with Romans* (Phl, 1979) 18.

In other words, since they would not consent to acknowledge God, God abandoned them to their unacceptable thoughts and indecent behaviour. And so now they are steeped in all sorts of injustice, rottenness, greed and malice; full of envy, murder, wrangling, treachery and spite, libellers, slanderers, enemies of God, rude, arrogant and boastful, enterprising in evil, rebellious to parents, without brains, honour, love or pity.

Because things are distorted, the human mind is darkened and human judgement is distorted, such that unjust structures are promoted and the good is no longer distinguished from the bad. It is in this state of chaos and moral stupor that suffering multiplies.

4. The fourth reason can be gleaned from 1 Cor 10:14-30. Here Paul admonishes the Corinthian Christians to flee from idolatry and never consciously eat what is sacrificed to idols. The interesting thing in this text is that Paul says it categorically that idols do not exist. But he regards the food sacrificed to them as food sacrificed to demons. In other words, what people actually worship as idols are demons. Because of this eating food or meat offered to idols is equivalent to having communion or fellowship with demons. For Paul, idolatry is particularly abhorrent because it is a *koinōnia* (fellowship, partnership) with demons.²⁴

The identification of idols as demons is neither unique to Paul nor originated by him. Some sections of the Old Testament already refer to idols and the gods of the nations as demons. For instance, Deut 32:16-17 says of erring Israelites: “They made him jealous with strange gods, with abhorrent things they provoked him. They sacrificed to demons, not God, to deities they had never known, to new ones recently arrived, whom your ancestors had not feared.” Here, the strange gods are referred to as “abhorrent things” (another name for idols), “deities”, “new ones”, and

²⁴ See Camillus R. Umoh, *Paul's Response to Idolatry in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and its Implications for the Annang Christian*; Unpublished Masters Thesis at CIWA Port Harcourt in Affiliation with the University of Calabar (1991) 39-40.

they are all qualified as demons (*shēdîm* in Hebrew). This is also the case in Psalm 106:37, where foreign gods are identified as demons (*shēdîm*).

6. FORMS OF IDOLATRY IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

To appreciate the depth of Paul's thought on idolatry, one does not need to limit the idea of idol to a piece of wood or metal. Idolatry is basically a transfer of the honour and glory due to God to other things. From this perspective, idolatry expresses itself in diverse forms, in social structures, in ideological orientations and in cultic practices in which one finds a misplacement of values.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church qualifies the following practices as idolatry: false pagan worship, divinizing what is not God, honouring and revering a creature in place of God, and such could be gods or demons (as in satanism), power, pleasure, race, ancestors, the state.²⁵ Significantly, apart from the direct worship of other gods, excessive attachment to power, pleasure, racial issues, clan and ethnic issues, ancestral traditions and political matters can easily become idolatrous. Since God is the only absolute, whenever any of these things or entities is absolutized what results is idolatry. Since human beings are made in the image of God, any entity or system of ideas that is prioritized at the expense of the human welfare becomes a source of idolatry. In the same way, any exaltation of the individual to the detriment of the common good becomes idolatry. One can talk of idolatry of power, idolatry of status, idolatry of self, idolatry of ambition, idolatry of a system or ideology. Thus, idolatry is practiced in different forms in our contemporary society.

²⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2113.

The idolatrous orientation brings about a three-fold alienation in the human condition, namely: a. alienation from the true God; b. alienation from the self, leading to inner disharmony; c. alienation in the social order, leading to distortion of social relationships. Alienation, as used in this context, expresses an excessive detachment of oneself from the normal web of relationship. It leaves the victim divided and incomplete. What it means is that idolatry brings about brokenness at all levels of relationship.

Francis Bacon identifies four categories of idols in the human mental process. By these he means bad habits of the mind that incline people to error. These include: Idols of the Tribe, Idols of the Cave, Idols of the Marketplace, and Idols of the Theatre.²⁶ The Idols of the Tribe refer to our natural instinct which inclines us to the false notion that our senses are the measure of all things. Sometimes, people expect too much order from natural things that is not possible to realise in the particular situation. But according to Bacon, the individual mind is limited in its perceptions.

The Idols of the Cave refer to our individual problems, passions, devotions and ideologies which can lead to the misunderstanding of the true nature of things. The Idols of the Marketplace refer to the words we form in political and interpersonal relations, tyranny of words, which can block the true reality of things and lead to empty controversies. The Idols of the Theatre refer to inherited ideas, philosophies and systems of thought which when held as unchanging dogmas can block the way to new progress.

7. PRIESTLY APOSTOLATE IN AN IDOLATROUS SOCIETY

The question of the priestly apostolate in an idolatrous society can be approached from diverse perspectives. As a matter of fact, the priests in the ancient Near Eastern Religions as well as the African Traditional

²⁶ Janet-panic.com – World History Portal – 5/6/2022

Religion were fully involved in the making of idols. Even in the Bible, it was Aaron, the high priest, who fabricated the Golden Calf for the people's idolatrous worship. An important aspect of the priest's function in these old religions was the care and maintenance of the idols. Of course, they saw their duty as that of service to their respective deities, whom they did not recognize as mere pieces of wood or molded things. The polemic against the foreign deities came with the reform of the Israelite Religion when the idea of the true God and true religion became diffused. The role of the priests and prophets now became that of teaching the people the dangers of idolatry.

In our Contemporary times, the phenomenon of idolatry has assumed many sophisticated dimensions. The role of the priest becomes more complex, as he has to confront the diverse genre of idolatry. However, in our Contemporary Christian context, the priestly apostolate in the idolatrous society is basically tied to mending the broken relationships caused by commitment to misplaced values. This can be approached on three levels: awareness of the issues involved; dialogue; and greater commitment to the apostolate.

i. Awareness of the Idolatrous Situation: The priest working in a particular context as a pastor of souls needs to get informed of the situation on ground. He has to understand the level of double allegiance among his flock. God sent Moses to go and see how his people had gone astray in the case of the idolatrous Golden Calf. As a matter of fact, many of those that frequent the Churches and Sacraments are involved in local superstitious and idolatrous practices which they find more relevant than the Christian systems. These practices involve all categories of the flock: Christian men, Christian women and youth. Many of our local Christian men and women settle their conflicts before shrines. They believe strongly in the workings of ancestral spirits and carry out the relevant traditional rituals as the need arises. They believe

strongly in reincarnation despite their avowed Christian faith. They believe in the workings of the earth goddess and Aquatic spirits and consult them from time to time. Many of our Christian men and women consult traditional oracles and fortune tellers in periods of crisis. Many Christian traders visit traditional medicine men for charms and other protective and success inducing rituals. Satanic worship abounds in most of our local rivers and rivulets. Our children we send to school are involved in many acts of cultism and satanic worship. It is a fact that many of our supposedly ardent Christians believe strongly in the efficacy of charms, and some even indulge in witchcraft and in the use of diabolical charms. These and many other beliefs and practices are rampant in our Christian oriented Communities. The increase in insecurity in the society has inclined many to resort to idolatrous means of self-defence and self-protection.

What is clear is that most Africans and most Igbos are converted to Christianity but their basic worldview remains with the traditional religion. Christopher Ejizu puts it well when he says: “The fact is that the indigenous religion, particularly the overarching cosmology that underpins its wide variety of beliefs, practices, values and norms, remains still a potent force on the present-day Igbo religious scene. Igbo Indigenous Religion may be down, but by no means out.”²⁷ This means a lot for a priest working in our local context. He cannot afford to be ignorant of these facts on the ground. Situations may vary from community to community, but the reality remains. Many of our people are converted to Christianity but remain deeply attached to the worldview and practices of the traditional religion. The priestly pastor in the community needs to understand the basic African vision of life and how this interfaces with the Christian faith.

²⁷ Christopher Ejizu, “Down but not Out: Contemporary Forms of Igbo Indigenous Religion,” in *Religion in a World of Change: African Ancestral Religion, Islam and Christianity* (ed. T. I. Okere; Owerri: Whelan Research Academy, 2003) 183.

ii. Dialogue at All Levels of the Community: Dialogue is a bridging of the gap in communication. It is a coming together and reasoning together on issues that bind us together and even on issues that threaten our lives and wellbeing. Through dialogue, the pastor comes to know the inner depths of the members of his community, their values, fears and motivations. The biblical text is full of instances of such coming together and reasoning together in difficult moments. The book of Joshua narrates how Joshua rallied the whole community of Israel to decide on their worship of YHWH. This became necessary as the people were confused in their religious orientations. The meeting provided the people with the adequate context to reason on why they should continue to worship YHWH, even though they had all along been worshipping Him. It became clear to them that no other Deity could do for them what YHWH had done for them in their history and continued to do. Joshua tried to explain to them the challenges and difficulties involved in worshipping YHWH, but they were decided, because they were now working with reasoned conviction. This is the power of dialogue. The Biblical text praises the Joshua generation more than any other generation in the history of Israel. According to Josh 24:31: “Israel served Yahweh throughout the lifetime of Joshua and throughout the lifetime of those elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the deeds which Yahweh had done for the sake of Israel.” The priest working in an idolatrous society has to engage his flock at different levels from time to time to feel their pulse and also to listen to them.

iii. Total Commitment to the Care of the Flock: Pastoral activity is a serious activity directed to the wellbeing of the flock of Christ, the people of God in a particular society or community. This is the primary duty of the priest in the community. Without the shepherding care, the flock goes astray. There is no doubt about it. A biblical text of great significance here is the story of the appearance of the risen Jesus in John

21:1-19. It is within this text that Jesus asks Peter the triple question, “Do you love me?” But why does Jesus engage Peter in these questions. To understand the text and what is going on in the story, one must start from the beginning of the story. Raymond Brown sees two scenes in the chapter, namely, 21:1-14 (involving fishing) and 21:15-23 (containing sayings of the risen Jesus to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple).²⁸ Brown considers the literary connection between the two scenes as questionable but affirms their theological relationship.²⁹ However, our reading of the text, here, considers the two scenes as forming a narrative whole, as the meaning of the second scene is better understood in the light of the first scene.

There were seven disciples in all in the story: Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, the sons of Zebedee and two other unnamed disciples. They had returned to Galilee where they came from. Peter told them he was going fishing and they all decided to join him. They got into the boat and went to their usual place of fishing, the Sea of Tiberias. What Peter has decided to do in this context is to go back to his profession as a fisherman.²⁹ He seems to have abandoned the ministry for which Jesus called him. The whole years of following Jesus were, probably, seen as wasted years. Now he decides to turn back to where he thought he belonged. But unfortunately he and his colleagues spend the whole night catching nothing until Jesus appears to them in the morning. Then he guides them to a great catch of fish and even from there gives them free breakfast.

In the first scene in 21:1-14, it is clear that Peter’s decision to go back fishing is ill-conceived. He and his colleagues can no longer do without Jesus. Jesus already told them that very truth in the same Gospel of John: “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). In the second scene, after the free breakfast, Jesus interrogates Peter in 21:15-17: “Do

²⁸ R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 361. ²⁹ Brown, *An Introduction*, 361.

²⁹ Cf. R. A. Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (IBT; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988) 246.

you love me more than these others?” And after each response he commands him to feed, tend and look after his sheep. What Jesus is telling Peter in clear and practical terms is that his job lies with the shepherding of the flock of Jesus and no longer with the catching of fish. According to R. Alan Culpepper,

When Jesus asks Peter if he loves him ‘more than these,’ the point of the question is probably to see if Peter will claim that he loves Jesus more than the other disciples do [cf. 13:36-38], but it may be to ask if Peter loves Jesus more than he loves the boats and nets.³⁰

The only way that Peter can demonstrate that he loves Jesus is to abandon the fishing profession and become the pastor (shepherd) of the flock of Jesus. Peter’s job description is expressed clearly in 21:15-17: “Feed (*boske*) my lambs (*arnia*)”; “Tend (*poimaine*) my sheep (*probata*)”; “Feed (*boske*) my sheep (*probata*)”. All these three repetitions are meant to let Peter know that his Apostolic ministry involves the wellbeing of the sheep, the people of God. It is only in caring for the people that Peter can demonstrate that he truly loves Jesus. Any other profession is a distraction. The beautiful story concludes in 21:22-23 with Jesus telling Peter: “Follow me!” What this means is that Jesus has brought Peter out from his attempted return to the fishing profession and brought him back into the Pastoral ministry.

One can learn a lot from this story for pastoral work. In the ancient Near East, priests functioned to maintain and care for the images or statues of the gods. But in the new dispensation with Jesus, his pastors have the function of caring for the people, the community. The welfare of the community must be their daily preoccupation. While cultic objects can be taken care of, this cannot be at the detriment of the more important

³⁰ Culpepper, *The Gospel*, 248.

function of caring for the people, which is *salus animarum*. Every action that de-emphasizes or de-prioritizes the care of the people becomes idolatrous.

Total commitment in caring for the flock is one of the ways the priest can function in an idolatrous society. It is through commitment that he can truly be salt and light to the society and to his community. It is through such commitment and dedication that he can nourish the flock, heal the sick, bandage the wounded and bring the erring members of the flock back on track. The human heart is inclined to going astray easily, and that is why God's people are called sheep. That is why a guide is always needed. As Prov 11:14 says, "Where there is no guidance, a people falls; but in an abundance of counselors there is safety."

8. CONCLUSION

This paper acknowledges the fact that we today live in a religiously complex society. The society appears religious from various perspectives, but deep down it is a very spiritually shallow society. In the face of many competing needs and mad rush to succeed at all costs, people easily manipulate the Deity for their selfish ends. Most of our younger generation are literally worshipping Satan and Mammon. In the face of such a situation, the Apostle Paul admonishes Timothy to be watchful:

"You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them" (2 Tim 3:1-5).

What the Apostle said over two thousand years ago is still very true and relevant in our context today. The same can be said to our priests as they minister daily to this idolatrous society. The great challenge is never to abandon the flock as the integral welfare of the flock is the primary purpose for mission. Any other consideration that takes undue precedence over the care of the flock can only be idolatrous.

