

# **RELIGION AS A COMMERCE BETWEEN THE GODS AND HUMANITY: AN EVALUATION OF THE RECIPROCALITY OF MAKING AND REMAKING OF GODS**

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## **Abstract**

Different scholars have defined religion from their different contextual perspectives following situational circumstances. Whichever way, religion has assumed a faith-based practice capable of impacting the individuals or groups involved with belief in and worship of unseen realities known as God / gods. Some see Religion as impactful element designed to influence human conscience, behavioural attitude and emotional reliefs. Religion has impacted on Africans mostly as it percolates into their marrow while seeking and expecting esoteric protection, solution, power and wealth through the worship of supernatural beings. Commerce on the other hand could mean a social dealing between people especially towards the activities of exchange of goods for profit advancement. The economic activities of man has overtly influenced his religious consciousness as his activities in an economic circle have been perceived in his relationship with the divinities. Commerce in religious circle and the change therein have to do with the participation or a contract between the gods and man whereby one party is expected to gain from the other did not start today. And when there is a gap in understanding the main reason for a transaction, there seem to be a breach or a violation of the agreed-upon terms and conditions of the binding contract. Religious change in this context means apostasy or converting from one religion to another religion, or rather abandoning the beliefs of one faith in favour of the other.

**Keywords:** Gods, Religion, Humanity, Commerce

## **Introduction**

The personality of Jesus at the beginning of his mission was understood by his contemporaries as a controversial being. One who could stand the authorities, speak courageously, address and justify the situation as they arose. Jesus did not mince words presenting himself as a messenger of the gospel from the start of his teaching trying to bring out his (Messianic personality), and later as the Son of Man. He took time to expound his real person. First he affirms that He is a messenger of God. Secondly, in the course of his teaching he states that he was the Son of God. Thirdly, towards the end of his ministry, he did equate himself with God saying that He and the Father are one. Whether he meant his foster father or father in heaven, the author was not emphatic but from the foregoing, the reader assumes reference to God. Those that believed in him entered into a contract with him with high expectations of becoming general overseers, economic advisers and ministers amidst the economic challenges of life. These statements have caused upheaval and debate among theologians and scholars leading to the insinuation about religious changes and approach when one becomes impotent.

The successors and followers of Jesus began with one setup to attract and win the confidence of the audience, then upgraded to another and to another in the course of groundbreaking in the ministry.

Mostly he proffers reasons for the religious change as man's immature mind or ignorance to spiritual teaching. The followers of Jesus have varied perceptions and beliefs about the divinity of Jesus. This was the boy they grew up with, whose poor parents they know assuming knowledge and playing the divinity. It was difficult to understand. Those notions influence the attitudinal response of people towards him. And when they felt Jesus was being mischievous many of his followers left him, some even denied him and went back to their traditional practices. It was on this controversy and confusion that Jesus put the question to them, who do people think the son of man is? Some see him as Yeshua meaning Saviour, others as Lessons in Greek meaning healer, still many view him from the point of view of man of Nazareth. He was referred to as the man of Nazareth. Srila Prabhupada once stated that, "Christ is another way of pronouncing Krista and Krista is another way of pronouncing Krishna, the name of God.

### **Impact of Religion on People**

The coexistence of different religions within an enclosure has often been controversial and contentious. In many cases interreligious beliefs have often led to struggle for religious supremacy or dominance. From observation, people of same family and of different religions are often at war with each other's belief and thought. Some beliefs are monotheistic while some are polytheistic. The argument is based on these two beliefs. The polytheistic belief is a reflection that some element of forces are embedded and enclosed in all things both animate and inanimate objects. The inanimate objects need some type of activation to be active. Here, the deities are represented by significant activated objects. This practice may be referred to as cult practice. The belief that the living and the dead are in continuous interaction to the extent that the spirit world is only an extension of the material world (Madu: 1996).

Madu (1996) in *Fundamentals of Religious Studies* opines that one interesting thing about cult or worship is the seriousness of which the worshipper performs his or her worship. In the course of the religious rituals, the worshiper is so confident that his actions must be in variably produce the desired result. This confidence is borne in mind when he performs some sacrifices, libation, when he says some prayers, etc. He believes that these practices suggest that he is performing a religious ritual, a ritual based on the conviction that the Supreme being is the sovereign Lord although he is not visible to him (p.64). The practice and belief of the dead and unseen participating in the ritual activities of the living occasioned continuous sacrifices, the pouring of libation and kola breaking to appease them. Based upon this continuous interaction between the unseen realities and man, man has developed the idea of preserving these unseen beings in the form of carved objects made in different shapes and forms and symbols occasioned by the religious stories surrounding that particular deity or god like the Ikenga, Okposi, alusi, okpesi, the cross / crucifix etc. The invisible presence of these deities as represented in religious objects has made man conduct his affairs with sincerity of purpose and selfish interests.

According to Obiajulu (2019), in *African Philosophy Aids Recovery*, there is a conception of the Supreme Being as He who gives life, or he who gives forces to other beings that are subordinate. People patronize Him for that special attributes.

Not only in Africa traditional religions, but in every religions of the world, people tend to believe that the deities/gods possess power, force or energy (*ike*) over things that men cannot control or understand. These beliefs teach that gods are responsible for the creation of the world, the continuity and sustenance of life in it, and that they control important events as birth, death, disease and success. Gods unlike men do not die; they live forever and restore forces to created things that lost theirs. Man as force manipulate these forces (p.100). And ravaged by constant fears of insecurity in the face of forces, of which man is one, the African (Igbo) resort to making and creation of yet other forces in the form of charms for the purposes of controlling, solving impending problems, checking and preventing the excesses of malignant forces. He stated that African believe in the existence of spirits, good and evil ones. There is the belief that prayers made to these spirits are heard and its efficacy is brought to bear on the particular thing being asked for (Obiajulu, 2019).

The saying goes that the spirit that receives man's offering is bound to pay him back with life – *muo riri ife onye, ji ndu akwu ya ugwo*. The nature of the deities is that they are spiritual forces and until they are discovered by man, remains passive. The discovery and subsequent offer of sacrifices to them make them potent. The more sacrifices these spirits receive, the more powerful they become and the more powers they possess to bring fortunes or misfortunes. The less offering they receive, the weaker they become. The Igbo regard sacrifice as a process of restitution and renewal of vital forces of the *alusi*. Cease or withdraw from sacrifice to *alusi* forestall danger and leads to calamity and destruction to those attached to it. Not only does misfortune befall them but it signifies failure on the part of man to appease the gods or that the gods did not accept the offering. In retaliation, the gods will withhold their own part of the bargain. And in turn man will abandon the deity for another (Obiajulu, 2019). They believed that any God who could not provide for his followers is a poor God and should be discarded.

Arazu (1982) in his Article, *The Igbo Occultist* documented an actual event, the “prayer” of titled elders at the shrine of a local deity, *Ulas*, in Ihembosi town in the then Ihiala Local Government Area of Anambra State thus:

*Ulas!*

Ihembosi is come to your shrine!

We shall find life!

We shall not find death!

We brought a goat with us!

We brought a cock with us!

We brought a hen with us!

To trade with you by barter!

We shall get the yam in exchange!

We shall get cocoyam in exchange!

We shall get fruitfulness in exchange!

We beg and beg and beg of you!

For the elders of the land spoke in proverb when they said:

“The spirit that accepts man’s property must give man life in recompense!”.  
(p.9)

The Igbo adept (*dibia*) knew all the names of the deities he had to deal with. As an adept, he appeases his god and trades with the god by the barter of sacrifice. Obiajulu (2019) maintains that the universe is like a spider’s web in which all beings are linked together by a network of relationship and interact upon another. Harmonious relationship or interaction leads to the strengthening of forces of being, while pernicious influences lead to diminution of being (p. 104)

Madu (1996) captures, the vital point in the practice of Religion. He considers morality as the science of religion in that the basic elements in religion is morals. Man according to him finds fulfilment in God who he believes cannot disappoint him in the manner of human beings. However, religion is a vital tool that offers hope and provide solace to man’s afflictions. Hope being a strong element for human existence, and since religion preaches hope, the seemingly, hopeless man can endure the hardships of life with the hope of better tomorrow (p.64). Religious ritual or worship brings fulfilment and confidence to man that his actions are expected to invariably produce a desired result. This confidence is borne in mind when he performs some sacrifices, when he says some prayers. In ritual practices, a worshipper or cult member is convinced that the deity or supernatural being should accept his sacrifice and in turn reciprocate by providing the request for which he performs the sacrifice.

### **Reciprocity in Religion: A Commerce between God and Man**

Is there really a dichotomy between religion and commerce? According to (Madu (1996), the vagaries and mysteries of life have compelled man to raise existential questions as to the meaning and relevance of existence. Questions of ultimate meaning, cosmic and religious issues have been raised. Religion discusses the belief and relationship between man and the unseen reality. It affords man the insight into the realm of the spirits and aiding him realize that life has meaning, a meaning which must be sought in union with God (p.63). These gods are represented by remarkable sacred

objects of worship. They remain mere objects unless acted upon by a priest or made potent by invoking certain essential forces into them. By way of denoting that religion permeates the African life, it is believed that every inanimate objects, and natural phenomena possess some elements of spirit in them which remains passive until acted upon in activation by a priest (*dibia*). Mbiti (1977) commonly observed that Africans are notoriously religious. Wherever an Igbo man is, there is his religion. He carries his religion to places. African man decides to embrace his religion because he believes it is god's gift to man and hence leave no stone unturned in the religious practices. This aspect presents the African belief in animism. The fact that there is a communion and tradeoff between the unseen realities and man has led to the institution of deities, images as sacred religious objects and successive conciliation in forms of libation, cola ritual in invocation upon the life-force to rise and hearken to the needs of man. They are somewhat immortalized by carving, engraving or in statuette to symbolize such deities, saints, God stance. They are believed to become sacred religious objects or vehicles that convey spiritual meaning after the activation. In the traditional Igbo they are called *Ikenga*, *okpesi*, as the case may be. Their believed invisible presence reassure man of renewed hope of better days.

Commerce literally refers to the exchange of goods and services between two people or parties for profit making. It is the activities of buying and selling. Any transaction that involves the exchange or purchase of goods and services is labelled commerce. There is always an expectation and demand while embarking on the transaction of goods and services in commerce. The parties involved in the transactions expect to earn equivalent measure of what he deposited or proportionate to their deposit. One does not have in mind to go into business and incur losses but losses cannot be removed entirely from business. It does not go down well with any trader who suffer losses in any business. Some either relocate, change business or business partner or even start all over again following the effect of the losses incurred. In religious practices, the relationship between the unseen realities and man has taken this same (commercial) exchange shape. In this instance, man initiates a deity for the purpose of solving his problems or for protection. He sacrifices to the deity in order to gain in return his own part of the deal.

Invariably, people remonstrate at the destruction of some established sacred channels, traditional sacred objects, images and shrines. The adherents always stand to defend their belief system being destroyed by some zealous religious fanatics. But not when the deity is believed to be so strong and impacts on the adherents. It does not go down well with any deity that has failed to solve the devotees' problems in spite of the sacrifices offered to it. The deity that could not defend, provide, protect his adherents in times of trouble and rescue them from calamity is seen as impotent and should not be mollified. Man considers such actions as a violation of agreed-upon terms and conditions of a binding contract. The Igbo believe and dread powerful deities and sooner discard without delay the impotent ones. The same denunciation is applicable to men of God who intermeditate between these deities and Man. This denunciation has led to religious apostasy in the quest for the miraculous, power and position. The disappointed victims, those who did not benefit from the traded deal embarked upon with the deities,

brazenly hunt for other potent deities, churches, men and women of God that are spiritually powerful as the case may be.

Other factors that may lead to denunciation may include persecution, general suffering and hardship, false teaching and factions, malaise, indifference, engaging in sinful acts and negligence towards the things of God. In either case, man hunt for his own self benefit. Man being an insatiable being feel disappointed if his expectations are not assured in the new religious arena, the hunt for further powerful self-satisfying deities, churches or men of God continues ceaselessly. Man believes he has his own role to play in the contract to cause the deity to fulfil their own part of the deal. It is imperative that the gap on either side leads to the dormancy on both parties. If man on his own part fails to offer the required sacrifice, it is assumed that the deity will in turn refuse to fulfil its own pact and vice-versa.

### **Conclusion**

One thing remains obvious, the relationship between the gods and man could be compared to a trade, a commerce between the gods and man. This relationship entails establishing a deity with the aim of receiving gratification from the gods. When such anticipated good turn did not manifest, there is always a move to get a more powerful deity. This is applicable also in mainstream religions where the miraculous has become the enticing thing. The failure of manifestation of miracles brings about the idea of apostasy. The people fail to understand that *ofu nne na amu ma ofu Chi adighi eke* (siblings may come from the same mother, but have different personal *chi*/spirits). That's is the journey of life. What works for one may not naturally work for the other owing to lots of spiritual circumstances. If at the end of the day the gods refuse to reciprocate, man is always tempted to discard that God, church or religion for another. But the question remains, does the deity/God/religion abandon those who apostatized? People are obliged to reciprocate Divine benefits. We hear much about trade and commerce and the imbalance between two parties involved in the trade. How one tries to cheat the other and selfishly seized the proceeds. If one party fails to fulfill its own part of the contract, the other feels dispirited/downcast. Their relationship is expected to be congenial. It is always demoralizing when one expects a positive action but receives the negative. He is pushed to have a rethink that may lead to change or business or change in the format of doing business or worship.

Man in an effort to please and satisfy himself jumps from one religious house to another in search of solution to his problems. Man is not to be blamed for some of his actions taken in life as they are meant to resolve one disturbing issue or the other. The chief priest whose daughter died in the bible was a Judaist but when the matter became worse he went in search of Jesus when tragedy erupted. Religion as a commerce between the gods and man involves constancy of change but this change should not be forced against the people's will.

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