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RELIGION, ETHICS AND SOCIETY: ATTEMPTING A SYNTHESIS OF A CULTURE OF PERSONALITY

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Abstract

Neutrality is not a veritable option for me when contributing to the “Festschrift in Honour of Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A.C. Obiefuna”. There is reason enough to believe in “models of personalities” in every society as a motivational factor in individual and collective existence. Following this personal conviction, and without engaging in an exclusive and extensive eulogy of the person of Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna, it is my intention, in this write-up to x-ray the convergence (a synthesis) of religion, ethics and society within the context of a Culture of Personality, drawing where necessary, though, from his manifest personality.

Keywords: Personality Challenges, Friendship, Purpose-Driven-Life, Conscience, Responsibility, Uniqueness, Authenticity, (Self-) Transcendence, Fulfilment (the Good Life).

Introduction: The Human Condition – Being in the World

In the field of existential philosophy, metaphysics, and psychology, there is what is characterized – according to Martin Heidegger, especially – as “Being-thrown-out-there” in the world. Out-there-in-the-world, which was originally not its creation, humankind experiences itself among other beings in a *steady process of evolving*. In the words of the great Jesuit Palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, “Every living being passes on to his successor the being he himself inherited, not merely diversified but accentuated in a given direction, according to the line to which he belongs. All the lines, whatever their nature, seem in varying degrees and each after its own formula to move a greater or lesser distance in the general direction of greater spontaneity and consciousness. Something passes, something grows, through the long chain of living creatures. This is the great fact, or the great law, whose discovery has transformed our vision of the Universe during nearly two centuries.” (De Chardin, 1964, 16).

To engage in a meaningful discourse about “Religion – Ethics – Society”, there seems to be a necessity of examining such a Natural Structure of Being in its special importance for the Ex-sistence (*Latin: step forth or forward, come forward, stand out*) of the human person, and indeed in its “going-out-of-itself” to (*re-*)create itself. The proper dynamics of human existence always has to do with *Self-Recreation*. Methinks that this challenge is even prime to the structures and objectives of the instruction given to humankind by God in the Creation Narrative (Gen 1 & 2). Human life must therefore, be characterized as an ever stepping forward towards the multitude of challenges related to its *Being-in-the-World*. As Irvin D. Yalom would put it, “A key existential dynamic, then, is the clash between our confrontation with groundlessness and our wish for ground and structure.” (Yalom, 1980, 9) This touches on the scope of *Human Freedom* in its existentiality, yet to be illustrated, bringing it in a personalized interface with the *individuality* of Revd Fr Prof. Boniface A. C. Obiefuna. For the intended deliberations in this write-up, we would want to opine that, “in the passage of time a state of collective



human consciousness has been progressively evolved which is inherited by each succeeding generation of conscious individuals, and to which each generation adds something. Sustained, certainly, by the individual person, but at the same time embracing and shaping the successive multitude of individuals, a sort of generalized human personality is visibly in process of formation upon the earth. It seems that where Man is concerned the specific function of education is to ensure the continued development of this personality by transmitting it to the endlessly changing mass: in other words, to extend and ensure in collective mankind a consciousness which may already have reached its limit in the individual.” (De Chardin, 23-24) It is worthy of note, what the *operational concepts* are: *sustained by the individual person, generalized human personality, education as a continued development of this personality, extend and ensure in collective mankind a consciousness*. Of course, the idea of a *collective humanity* cannot connote in any way a monistic humanism. It is intended to underscore the sociocultural, philosophical and ethical self-positioning of a specific individual in such a manner that, consciously or unconsciously, its *modus vivendi* (style of life) *permeates* the fabric of a specific society.

We may as well refer to this understanding as the *metaphysics of a socialized individuality (personality)*. What I imply by this notion of a *metaphysics of a socialized individuality* finds its explanation in the following words of the Social Scientist, Harmut Rosa, “My thesis is that life is a matter of the quality of one’s *relationship to the world*, i.e. the ways in which one experiences and positions oneself with respect to the world, the quality of one’s *appropriation of the world*.” (Rosa, 2019, 5) *Being human always connotes a relational existence – to the Subjects and Objects of the world*. Concerning this, there is really no option, excepting the *fundamental choice of freedom* as a specific human capacity in alignment with the power of *discernment*. In other words, the idea of being human is fundamentally characterized by the concepts of *dispositional approach* and *perspective perceptivity*. Now, such an understanding implies being sensitive to a possible *ineptness of our thoughts, words and actions*. This is the focal point of the next paragraph.

Religion, Ethics and Society as strategic fundamental anthropological mastery of our Being-in-the World:

Our thought-development having led us thus far, it is apt to look into those specific concepts that are of immense value for humankind to master its *situational existence* in the world that it did not create, but has to organize towards the full realization of its specific Being. Though the sequence of the given topic does not suggest in any way a dogmatically logical approach, it seems nevertheless, appropriate to first take on the concept of religion. The general phenomenology of our 21st century does indeed compel us to undertake this approach, considering the high volatility of religion and the visible dystopic atmosphere it has so far created in the world order, and indeed in too many countries of the world. Therefore, religion should never be understood only in its intrinsic nature, but rather always in connection with its *institutionalization in this world-order*. In a monumental documentary by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, centring on the conciliatory rapprochements made by Pope John Paul II, we thus can read with regard to multifarious tensions caused by religion, “Living together often presents people, religious believers and non-religious alike, with tensions and conflicts. Differences in religion, race, nation, ethnic group, social class, gender, political or economic orientation, while they can greatly enrich any human society, also tend to exacerbate frictions and social fragmentation. Any of these



factors can be used by individuals and groups to define themselves over against others and to identify those outside the group as the enemy, a threat to one's well-being and security. Of all the differentiating factors in society, perhaps religious affiliation, since it touches such deep emotions and convictions, has the greatest potential for fuelling dissension and strife." (Vatican City, 1994, 55)

It is worth noting that religion, understood as an elevated instrumentality of values in the quest to manage some of the major challenges of human existence, can quite easily be misappropriated for negative results. This is why the expression in the above quotation is highly remarkable, "*Any of these factors can be used by individuals and groups to define themselves over against others and to identify those outside the group as the enemy, a threat to one's well-being and security*". In the face of this, it is right to say that an *individualized religion* has the embedded propensity to create, advance and protect a kind of group identity. In effect, "as a general rule, each takes its own religion as an obvious norm." (New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2003, 56) To understand religion fully, it is therefore necessary to come to grasp with its *innate exclusivity*. Such an exclusivity does not pertain to its application alone, but in addition, and above all, to its essence. The New Catholic Encyclopedia then goes further to explain, "In the totality of human experiences and activities, the religious phenomenon presents itself as irreducible to any other category save its own and as definitely and always belonging to its own category and *no other*. At the same time, every religion implies a choice that is so total and exclusive, affecting as it does the personal destiny of every human being in irrevocable fashion even where no clear notion of a transcendent absolute exists, that no religion seems able to tolerate its inclusion in the cadre of a general definition." (2003, 56) At all times and under all circumstances, the serious burden of responsibility lies on all higher institutions of learning to create *enlightened minds* that would/should permeate the social strata of countries with a highly pronounced proclivity towards weaponizing religion for their self-centred political cum economic ambitions. *Intellectual clarity implies definitions* and such definitions with regard to the subject matter of religion necessarily means understanding the *fundamental difference between the subjective and objective dimensions of religion*. "From the subjective point of view, religion is a virtue that leads man to render to God the homage that is due to Him. As an objective manner of behaviour and concrete manifestation of virtue, it comprises belief in one God, personal and infinite in His attributes; an attitude of absolute respect and submission; exterior acts that express this belief and this attitude in worship; and, as required by all exterior human activity, institutions to regulate that activity." (New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2003, 57) It is therefore quite indispensable to ignore both the possible and real influence of "*all exterior human activity through institutions to regulate that activity*". It is the contention of this article therefore, that in many countries like Nigeria, and where religion is used as an instrument of manipulation to create a sustained destructive social dystopia, *the project of sustainable enlightenment must be given the priority it requires in the urgency of now*. This aligns indeed with the professorial and ecclesiastico-clerical activities of Revd Fr Prof. Boniface A. C. Obiefuna. For anchoring himself in a most sustainable manner in a religious understanding and practice that uplifts and liberates the human mind, Prof. Obiefuna regards and treats religion as very instrumental to a balanced personal growth and social engineering. Let me elucidate on this 'arrogance of knowledge.'



Homo Absconditus and the Homo Revelatus: The Great Treasure of Friendship

As already pointed out above, our Being-in-the-World involves as of necessity a steady confrontation with numerous adversities and adversaries and the constructive ways of navigating through them. *There is a great choice to make here*: One could decide – based on individual experiences – to remain the ‘hidden man’ (homo absconditus) or otherwise the ‘revealed man’ (homo revelatus), with all the opportunities and risks therein. My experience with Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna starting from the Junior Seminary when he was in the “Senior Class” was – and remains (!), *that he has always been a homo revelatus*. I am consciously avoiding the traditional categorization of introverts and extroverts because of the embedded generalized social psychological prejudices. On the other hand, homo revelatus has, within the context of this discourse, the connotation of Self-Definition, i.e. freedom, and can be circumspective. This was exactly the character manifestation that drew me towards him. The result is today the great joy of a reciprocal friendship of considerably shared values.

Expounding and contextualizing the “Known”

Let me borrow a deeply programmatic statement by Jesus in the Gospel according to Saint Matthew and interface it with its origin in the Book of Psalms: “I will speak to you in parables and expound things hidden since the foundation of the world.” (Mt 13:35) In addition: “I am going to speak to you in parable and expound the mysteries of our past. What we have heard and known for ourselves, and what our ancestors have told us, must not be withheld from their descendants, but be handed on by us to the next generation...” (Ps 78:2-4)

In a country that has destroyed successfully systematically the social strata of almost all forms of moral rectitude, *there is a felt sense of urgency of the moment, therefore, to search out for credible and sustainable remedies through a conscientious reorientation of individual and collective mind-set*. With regard to this, there is reason to maintain that some striking personalities could be mirrors of how a widespread retrogressive mind-set in Nigeria could be efficiently *deconstructed and simultaneously reconstructed*. This was exactly the mental project I embarked on, when I did bring to bear the personality and conspicuous positive influence of Dr. Michael Iheonukara Okpara on the Old Eastern Region of Nigeria. In the face of “a disproportionately sustained Identity Confusion because of repeated military coups and with all its destabilizing effects on politics, economy, education, morality and most especially on the individual...” (Mmagu, 2021, 86), I therefore feel strongly that it is properly in order to draw a parallel to the person of Rev. Fr. Professor Dr. Boniface Obiefuna within the context of “Societal Modelling”. *I nurse the strong belief that any society anywhere is doomed without the culture of the awareness of such a “Societal Modelling”*. It is my intention to elucidate on the special reason for this claim.

Now, there is a special quality that is connected with such a reciprocity of *revealed personalities*: an epistemological growth or what I would call the special *gift of informed self-awareness (self-insight)*. For, as John Powell, S.J. puts it, “It is only through this kind of sharing that we come to know ourselves. Introspection of itself is helpless. We can confide all of our secrets to the docile pages of a personal diary, but we can know ourselves and experience the fullness of life only in the sharing with another person. Friendship becomes a great adventure. There is a continuously deeper discovery of myself and my friend as we continue to reveal new and deeper layers of ourselves. It opens my mind,



widens my horizons, fills me with new awareness, deepens my feelings, gives my life meaning.” (Powell, John, 1969, 83-84) Good friendship, therefore, becomes a consummate modality of our personal choice in the mastery of our Being-thrown-out-there, of our worldly facticity. *Society*, rightly understood, becomes an *operational space and mental horizon* of organizing our lives, albeit not without the *ensuing* positive impacts on the totality of the same society. Talking about Friendship in its holistic positive influence on any given society cannot imply, nevertheless, that it is a *fait accompli*. “Friendship and mutual self-revelation have a newness about them with each new day, because being a human person involves daily change and growth. You and I are growing, and our differences are becoming more apparent. We are not growing into the same person, but I am growing into my own person and you into yours. I discover in you other tastes and preferences, other feelings and hopes, other reactions to new experiences. I discover that this business of telling you who I am cannot be done once and for all. I must continually tell you who I am and you must continually tell me who you are, because both of us are continually evolving.” (Powell, John, S.J., 84) We have to acknowledge the fact that we are bound to a continuous evolution. We recognize a most fundamental dimension of this evolution that touches on the Triad: Religion, Ethics and Society. Let us call this *factor resonance*, and by extension, *sounding board* or likewise *resonant frequency*. Hartmut Rosa, who carried out an intensive research on our *being-in-the-world*, arrived – inter alia – at the following conclusion with regard to the concept of resonance: “Resonance is thus meant to offer a standard for successful life, one that makes it possible to measure quality of life not indirectly, by the growth of material prosperity, opportunities, and resources, but directly, by the quality of our relationship to the world. A good life, then, is one that is rich in resonant experiences and has at its disposal stable axes of resonance.” (Hartmut, 2019, 450-451)

Resonance: Anchoring the Self Ethically within the Ambience of Humour

Being very conversant with the basic principles of Logotherapy (The Third School of Psychotherapy in Vienna after Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, founded by the Viennese Psychiatric, Neurologist and Philosopher, Viktor Emil Frankl), I am not hesitating here to recall an encounter with Prof. Obiefuna many years ago in Ekwulobia, Anambra State of Nigeria. An experience underscored his unimaginably general sense of humour. It is therefore characteristic of his personality. Going beyond his personal social wiring, there were religious and ethical dimensions of immense relevance to this experience. When I told him (in the midst of a discussion on pertinent issues in the Catholic Church) that I would love to see him my Bishop, he not only laughed loud, but immediately twisted a popular song for Bishops during church ceremonies: “Lee mkpũmkpũ Ùkòchukwu” (Igbo), meaning, “Behold a dwarf Bishop”. In his humorous opinion, it does not square up well! The entertainment was perfect. My Cousin and Niece with me marvelled! He has endeared himself to them – for life! The therapeutic message sunk in! What with an attitude to navigate through certain ubiquitous overreach and inordinate ambitions in a society! Moreover, what a humorous choice of focus! Now, in the light of Logotherapy, *anchored personalities* (and those engulfed with diverse existential crises) require both *Self-Transcendence* and *Self-Distanciation*, avoiding hereto an over concentration on the ‘personal biological umbilical cord’ with all the nervous strains around the neck. What an image, indeed! Never underrate the power of humour! Who would not grasp the ethical dimension in his behaviour? This implies that the factual realization of our true selves does



not lie in a self-indulgence, but much more in opening of one's Self to the world-out-there, without all the prevarications involved in such a self-disclosure. This is indeed the very strong foundation of all forms of the so called 'Self-Actualization' as its most proponents (Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and other advocates of Humanistic Psychology) would like to have it. Following the description by its most renowned proponent, Maslow, who equally developed the Pyramid of Values, defined self-actualization to be self-fulfilment, namely the tendency for him [the individual] to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. He used the term to describe a desire, not a driving force that could lead to realizing one's capabilities. He did not feel that self-actualization determined one's life; rather, he felt that it gave the individual a desire, or motivation to achieve budding ambitions. Maslow's idea of self-actualization has been commonly interpreted as the full realization of one's potential and of one's 'true self'. A more explicit definition of self-actualization according to Maslow is "intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately of what is the organism itself ... Self-actualization is growth-motivated rather than deficiency-motivated." (Wikipedia, 11/29/2023). My consistent and close observations however do tell me that the real Self-Actualization as is applicable to Prof. Obiefuna more fundamentally has another quality of the Self. This, to my proper understanding, is the realm of Logotherapy, and its founder, Viktor Emil Frankl, explains it thus, "by declaring that man is responsible and must actualize the potential meaning of his life, I wish to stress that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic 'the self-transcendence of human existence.' It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfil or another human being to encounter.

The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence." (Frankl, 1984, 115) This appears to be a special form of wisdom anchored generally in religion, though most especially, as I would love to put it, in the Christian revealed religion. Aligning this concept of self-transcendence in Logotherapy with the Christian Bible, we read in the Letter to the Romans, "We know that by turning everything to their good God co-operates with all those who love him, with all those that he has called according to his purpose." (Rom 8:28) Interpreting this in the language of existential philosophy and psychiatry, this implies that commitment to a purpose other than oneself carries in itself the fruits of self-realization, of self-fulfilment. Can we simply imagine how any society, associations, faith-communities, and most especially the Nigeria society would look like, if this very philosophy would be both the *modus vivendi et operandi*! There is therefore always a pattern of regression involved in most forms of striving, where the Self is and remains the focal point. We should rather be concerned about motivation, because something out-there is drawing us on; something is waiting for us as a call of life. In answering the call of life, man is discovering through the responsibility he has undertaken, the true meaning of life – not really a generalized meaning, but rather the very meaning of his or her life hidden in every situation in its uniqueness.



There is, therefore, the supremacy of meaning-motivation over striving for either pleasure or power (the bane of the Nigerian society, especially!). To underscore this understanding, let us listen again to Viktor Emil Frankl: “Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning.” (Frankl, 1984, 105)

It does not seem to me a mistake, bringing this very concept of self-transcendence to bear on the person (personality) of Prof. Obiefuna. His commitment to issues of vital importance manifests itself in his infectious self-fulfilment. Though one might not share this perspective, Prof. Obiefuna applied a Social Pedagogy of Self-Delimitation. It dawned on me that Religion and Ethics can converge in a single word that does not lead in any way to self-depersonalization: humility (*humilitas*, *lat.*, implying being earthed, down to earth). Is this not however a central religious and ethical motive in God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ? In effect, the irony of salvation lies in the readiness to self-forfeiture. We read from the Gospel, from Jesus, who was committed to the ultimate purpose of life for a new humanity after the mind of God, “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me. For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it. What gain, then, is it for a man to have won the whole world and to have lost or ruined his very self?” (Lk 9:23-25) In addition, the Gospel according Matthew would complement with, “Or what has a man to offer in exchange for his life?” (Mt 16:24-26) The culture of the Self is consequently very pivotal while discussing religion, ethics and society. A culture that, though it has quite a lot to do with environmental circumstances, still transcends the social determinism of the Self. This is to say, “The environment contains what is of appeal to the instinctual makeup of a species. By contrast, it is a characteristic constituent of human existence to break through the barriers of the environment of the species - *homo sapiens*. Man is reaching out for, and actually reaching, finally attaining, the world – a world, that is, which is replete with other beings to encounter, and meanings to fulfil.” (Frankl, 1988, 31) The next consideration in relation to the person (personality) of Prof. Obiefuna would bring this exposé to an open closure.

Conclusion: Religion-Ethics-Society – A Necessity for a Moral Navigation System

The interconnectivity between religion, ethics and society seems to be apparent, when considered in terms of values – constructed or revealed and appropriated. It is a truism that at the centre of it all we find man – the human person, endowed with reason and freedom (*animal rationales*, *homo sapiens*), wherefrom results his or her individual responsibility. In most contemporary societies of the world – even in the self-acclaimed ‘God’s own nation’, the United States of America – there is obviously a manifestation of a disjunctive social order, because the individual has lost the grip of his or her personality and has become a tool of mostly political and religious manipulation. Erich Fromm already in his days called this structure of society a moral problem. His definition should be considered a vital contribution to the theme of this article. He explains, “Our moral problem is man’s indifference to himself. It lies in the fact that we have lost the sense of the significance and uniqueness of the individual, that we have made ourselves into instruments for purposes outside ourselves, that we experience and treat ourselves as commodities, and that our own

powers have become alienated from ourselves. We have become things and our neighbours have become things. The result is that we feel powerless and despise ourselves for our impotence. Since we do not trust our own power, we have no faith in man, no faith in ourselves or in what own powers can create. We have no conscience in the humanistic sense, since we do not dare to trust our judgement. We are a herd believing that the road we follow must lead to a goal since we see everybody else on the same road.” (Fromm, 1990, 248).

In a subsistent disjunctive social order therefore, Fromm is calling out for morally and ethically anchored personalities as Social Engineers. The German analytic and humanistic Psychologist invokes the power of conscience in discerning and determining the appropriate values in any given society. He does not therefore believe in the hopelessness of a disjunctive social order, but rather perceives a systematic correctional approach through individuals with a steady moral compass. In his words; “humanistic ethics takes the position that if man is alive he knows what is allowed; and to be alive means to be productive, to use one’s powers not for any purpose transcending man, but for oneself, to make sense of one’s existence, to be human. As long as anyone believes that his ideal and purpose is outside him, that it is above the clouds, in the past or in the future, he will go outside himself and seek fulfilment where it cannot be found. He will look for solutions and answers at every point except the one where they can be found – in himself.” (Fromm, 1990, 248-249) Religiously and ethically anchored individuals are therefore to a considerable extent a motivational blessing to their societies, as they do not perceive themselves as having something or somebody impose a moral responsibility on them. Their personality structure has no exogenic causes. Their moral compass is operative – in spite of all possibly conditioning circumstances. They are non-deterministic personalities! Again, Fromm has the following to say on this subject matter, “Responsibility is not a duty imposed on one from the outside, but is my response to a request which I feel to be my concern. Responsibility and response have the same root, *respondere* = to answer; to be responsible means to be ready to respond.” (Fromm, 1990, 99) A similar echo reverberates in Logotherapy, when its founder elucidates thus, “If morals are to survive they must be not only ontologized and existentialized, but also phenomenologized. Thus the man in the street becomes the true teacher of morals.” (Frankl, 2000, 126) Being conscious of the multifarious phenomena of a dystopic Nigerian society (other countries might not be much better off!), our understanding of the three basic concepts of ontologized, existentialized and phenomenologized morals becomes of paramount importance.

This, apparently, is a project of bringing morals to the lowest common denominator, understandable by all. Viktor Emil Frankl explains the central idea behind those concepts, “Traditions and values are crumbling. But meanings are not – cannot be – transmitted by traditions because in contrast to values, which are universal, meanings are unique. As such, they are transmitted/mediated to one’s consciousness, by personal conscience. In an age such as ours, in the age of meaninglessness, education, instead of confining itself to transmitting traditions and knowledge, must see its principal assignment in refining the individual’s conscience – his only capacity still to find meanings despite the wane of traditions and values.” (Frankl, 2000, 118-119) Human conscience becomes therefore the silent judge of any serene society and appertains to individuals, leading them on to a constructive moral sense.

Finally, therefore, a proper and sustained reflection on the person and personality of Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna, from his early years in the Junior and Senior Seminaries up till his ascendancy to the chair of a University Professor, cannot but be brought to bear on his authentic educational efforts in refining the individual's conscience. It would seem proper to me that he epitomizes the synchronization of religion, ethics and society within the context of a self-fulfilling life guided by conscience.

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