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AFRICAN (IGBO) TRADITION AS EXPRESSION OF DIVINE WILL: INTERPRETING MATT 6:10 FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

Rowland ONYENALI, CMF

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, there have been concerted efforts by Christian missionaries and scholars of various fields to make the Christian message relevant to the continent of Africa. This is borne out of the conviction that for Christianity to respond to the needs of its adherents in every culture, it must speak the language this particular culture understands. These varied efforts have been termed inculturation. However, it seems that no matter the attempts at inculturating the Christian message, it has failed, in many respects, to take root in the continent of Africa. We feel, however, that these failed attempts to inculturate Christianity are based on a false premise of the foreign character of Christianity. Most of these attempts have been geared towards the inculturation of outward aspects of the Christian message or the grafting of outward aspects of traditional African culture to the external elements of Christianity. This can only lead to frustration and a diversion of the message of Christ whose aim is to purify the internal being of his followers. But we attempt to see the convergence of traditional culture and the Christian message through the lens of the Lord's Prayer as given in Matthew 6:9b-13. The focus, however, will be on Matthew 6:10. The article argues that the African culture, as it is, bears enough witness of the presence of divine will in it. Thus, the prayer of Jesus was already answered in the African cultural milieu before the commencement of Christian missionary work in Africa. We shall explore some aspects of the African culture that manifest

the will of God for the Africans. Using the Igbo society as a cultural matrix, this article argues that if Christianity could learn from some of the Igbo cultural values, the Christian message will experience a new Pentecost among the Igbo Christians.

The Gospel according to Matthew is chosen because it is rightly called the Gospel of the Church.¹ This is mainly due to the central position the Church occupies in this narrative. It is only in this Gospel that Jesus promises to build his Church upon the rock, Peter (cf. Matt 16:18). It is also only in this Gospel that the Church is called in to settle disputes among brethren (Matt 18:15–17). It is probably because of this that it stood as the first Gospel in the oldest codices. The length of teaching in the Gospel also makes it rightly a handbook of the Church.² Bornkamm's judgement is also along this line. For him, "no other gospel is so shaped by the thought of the Church as Matthew's, so constructed for use by the Church; for this reason it has exercised, as no other, a normative influence on the later Church."³ The conclusion of the Gospel

¹ Matthew's gospel has been described as a "catechetical handbook," (G. Schille, *Bemerkungen zur Formgeschichte des Evangeliums II. Das Evangelium des Matthäus als Katechismus*, NTS 4 (1957/8), 101-14); as a re-edition of pericopes for reading and exposition in this Church's "liturgy of the Word," (G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946, 57-71); "an ecclesiastical Gospel," (D. A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 33a, Matthew*, Dallas, Word Books, 1993, II.lxiii).

² R. H. Gundry calls Matthew a handbook for a mixed Church under persecution. See R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1994) 1994.

³ G. Bornkamm, "End Expectation and Church in Matthew," in *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (ed. G. Bornkamm, et al.). (London, SCM Press, 1982), 38.

(Matt 28:18–20) also prepares the reader for the mission of the Church.

It is also very important to note that the Gospel according to Matthew manifests an unrepentant acceptance of the importance of the Jewish tradition. Through the use of language and many other motifs, Matthew shows that Jesus has come not to abolish the Jewish Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil them (Matt 5:17). The importance of the Law is further highlighted by juxtaposing its passing away with the hypothetical passing away of heaven and earth (Matt 5:18). Even in some of the things Matthew did not report, we see his concerted effort to safeguard the Jewish tradition. Perhaps his omission of Mark's parenthetical remark that Jesus declared all foods clean (cf. Mark 7:19, cp. Matt 15:20) is a typical case.⁴ This omission by Matthew could be a bid to preserve the Jewish ritual purity laws. This means that we find in this Gospel the centrality of the mission of the Church and acceptance of the Jewish tradition. Hence, it might be a good idea to begin a study of the confluence of divine will and human tradition from the Gospel according to Matthew. The Lord's Prayer as we have it in Matthew 6:9-13 could then serve as a starting point.

⁴ We have argued elsewhere against the opinion that Jesus broke with the purity laws of Judaism in order to establish a community not based on the ethos and politics of purity but on the ethos and politics of compassion. See R. Onyenali, *Paying of Tithe: The History behind the Theology*. (Enugu, CLACOM, 2017), 100-104.

THE CONTEXT OF THE LORD'S PRAYER IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

The prayer taught by Jesus, traditionally called the Lord's Prayer, is located in the context of the Sermon on the Mount.⁵ Unlike Luke who has a different setting for the sermon, namely on a plain (Luke 6:20–23), Matthew locates it on an unnamed mountain. The presentation of the Sermon on a Mountain (Matt 5:1) easily lends itself to the acceptance of the Moses' typology.⁶ This sermon begins with the pouring of blessedness on the poor, those who mourn, the persecuted, etc. In summary, it seems that the sermon was upturning some of the Jewish teaching on what constitutes true blessedness from God.⁷ Jesus must have felt the uneasiness of his listeners that he made the solemn declaration that he has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to complete them (Matt. 5:17). He even went to the extent of declaring that anyone who infringes on any of these laws and teaches others to do same would be considered least in the kingdom of heaven, while anyone who keeps and teaches them would be considered great in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:19). This means that he was not upturning the traditional Jewish

⁵ The literary genre and function of the Sermon on the Mount has been adequately analyzed by H. D. Betz, "The Sermon on the Mount: Its Literary Genre and Function." *The Journal of Religion*, 59, (1979), 285-297.

⁶ A detailed study of the Moses' typology is found in D. C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology*. (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1993). Chapter four of his study focuses on the Matthean materials.

⁷ For an extensive study of the contrasting teachings on wealth and poverty during the second Temple period see M. D. Mathews, *Riches, Poverty, and the Faithful: Perspectives on Wealth in the Second Temple Period and the Apocalypse of John*, SNTS-MS 154 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013). Especially in parts of the wisdom literature, poverty was thought to be the result of laziness (Prv. 6:6-11), pleasure-seeking (Prv. 21:17; Sir 18:32f), frivolity (Prv. 23:21). Although this thought is foreign to the Psalms (cf. Ps. 40:17; 86:1; 109:22, etc.).

teaching but deepening them. The reinterpretations he gave to the Mosaic Law beginning from Matthew 5:21 are indicative of the fact that he treasured this Law and would stop at nothing to uphold it. This has led us to argue elsewhere that what Jesus taught on this mountain should not be seen as antitheses in the sense of introducing a break between his teaching and the Law of God given through Moses.⁸ The reinterpretations focus on the stipulations of the Decalogue (Matt. 5:21–48), on almsgiving (Matt. 6:1–4), on prayer (Matt. 6:5–15), and on fasting (Matt. 6:16–18). These acts of piety seem to have become a benchmark of second Temple Judaism, as is evident from the book of Tobit.⁹ Although these forms of piety seem to be prominent in the book of Tobit,¹⁰ Jesus tells his followers that they must transcend the outward form of these pious gestures. It is easily visible that in Matthew 6:1–18, the interest of Jesus is with what constitutes authentic religion for his followers. In this connection, Jesus contrasts the attitude of the hypocrites and Gentiles with that of his followers in these words: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 6:1).

⁸ See R. Onyenali, “The Role of the Holy Family in the Education and Mission of Jesus: A Model for Christian Formation of the Youth,” *AJCT* 8 (2018), 21, n.51. See also H. D. Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 200–201.

⁹ The book of Tobit was written by a diaspora Jew between 250 and 175 B.C. Cf. D. A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 68–69; B. Metzger, *Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 38–39.

¹⁰ See C. A. Moore, *Tobit*, AB 40A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1996), 176–77.

The Lord's Prayer is contained in the middle of these warnings. The disciples are not to draw attention to themselves while praying. Rather, they should secretly pray to their Father who is in secret (Matt 6:5–6). We shall look at the text of the Lord's Prayer.

THE TEXT OF THE LORD'S PRAYER (MATT. 6:9–13)

There is no doubt that the Lord's Prayer contains a summary of the most profound extant teachings of Jesus. Tertullian refers to it as *breviarium totius evangelii* (summary of the whole gospel).¹¹ These same words are echoed by the initial words on the topic from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which refer to the prayer as "truly the summary of the whole gospel."¹² D. E. Lanier has argued that the prayer itself occupies a very prominent place in the whole of the Sermon.¹³ Among a number of reasons he gives for the prominence of the prayer we adopt his view that a cluster of imperative verbs occurring in the prayer is a sign of prominence. Again, the prayer is addressed to no other person than God. This short prayer runs thus:

Our Father in the heavens, may your name be held holy, may your kingdom come, may your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who are in debt to us. And do not put us to the test, but save us from the evil one (Translation mine).

¹¹ Tertullian, *De Orat. 1.*, quoted in A Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1982), 95, n. 2.

¹² CCC 2761.

¹³ D. E. Lanier, "The Lord's Prayer: Matt 6:9-13- A Thematic and Semantic-Structural Analysis," *Criswell Theological Review* 6.1 (1992), 57-72.

We do not concern ourselves here with the exact words employed by Jesus in this prayer or whether Jesus wanted the prayer to be seen as a format for praying or to be appropriated for liturgical use. The fact that the early Church preserved it in a different form could indicate that she took the content of the prayer more seriously than the exact form.¹⁴ Also we do not consider it of great interest whether the prayer was formulated in Aramaic¹⁵ or in Greek.¹⁶ These distinctions do not introduce a fundamental difference to the intention of the prayer. Again source critical issues bothering on a comparison between the Matthean and Lukan versions would take us far away from our immediate interest in this article, namely, finding the congruence between the will of God and human tradition. Suffice it to say that while on the one hand, Luke seems to offer a fixed form of prayer with the opening clause, "when you pray, say..." (Lk 11:2), on the other hand, Matthew begins with the words "pray then like this ..." (Matt 6:9) which is not to be interpreted as a fixed formula. Again, the clause dealing with the doing of the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven (Matt 6:10) is missing in the Lukan account. In the context of Matthew's narrative, this prayer serves as

¹⁴ See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, TNICNT. (Grand Rapids, B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007), 242.

¹⁵ This is the argument of J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (German original, *Neutestamentliche Theologie*. Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1971), 195-196.

¹⁶ This is the conclusion of H. D. Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*. (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985), 374-375; R. A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding*, (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 285. There also scholarly arguments whether the whole of the Sermon on the Mount was pre-Matthean (see D. H. Betz, "Die Makarismen der Bergpredigt (Matthäus 5,3-12). Beobachtungen zur literarischen Form und theologischen Bedeutungen," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 75 (1978), 3-9); or composed by Matthew (see G. Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies*, 24 (1978), 419-432). These arguments do not concern us in this article.

corrective to the attention-seeking prayers of hypocrites (v.5) and the blabbing (*battalogeó*)¹⁷ of the Gentiles (v.7).¹⁸

THE STRUCTURE OF THE LORD'S PRAYER

Perhaps it would be of first interest to look at the structure of the prayer and the communicative mode employed therein. The prayer is evidently divided into three sections, namely:

- Matt 6:9b an opening address
 our father in the heavens
- Matt 6:9c–10 three 'thou' petitions about God and worship due to him
 May your name be held holy
 May your kingdom come
 May your will be done on earth as in heaven
- Matt 6:11–13 four¹⁹ 'we' petitions for our own needs
 Give us today our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive those who are in debt to us.
 And do not put us to the test,
 but save us from the evil one.

¹⁷ According to R. H. Gundry, "the verb may denote meaningless or repetitive speech, as in the extensive listing of divine names by pagans. They hoped that at least one of the names might prove effective for an answer." R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1982), 100-104. This was the act carried out by the prophets of Baal in 1 Kgs 18:36-37. This action brought out the height of cynicism by Elijah who encouraged the prophets of Baal to keep crying to the god who may have been on a journey or involved in sundry other activities. The Jewish repudiation of pagan practices is carried on by Jesus.

¹⁸ See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 241.

¹⁹ We find it difficult to justify the scholarly acceptance of three "we petitions" in the second half of the prayer. Our indication of four petitions adds to the importance of numerology in Matthew's narrative. The number of petitions in the prayer adds up to seven.

According to R. T. France, the first half of the prayer (Matt 6:9c-10) which is concerned with God's honour, kingdom and will are "cast in the form of wishes, using third-person imperative form; they are in effect a doxology, an act of worship associating the praying community with God's purpose [will] in the world."²⁰ The imperative nature of the verbs is shown in their ending which is very obvious in the Greek language: *hagiassthētō* (lit. let be made holy), *elthetō* (lit. let come) and *genethētō* (lit. let be done). The importance of the imperative mode cannot be overlooked. Dana and Mantey have explained that "the imperative is the mood of command or entreaty – the mood of volition. It is the genius of the imperative to express the appeal of will to will. In ordinary linguistic communication, the primary appeal is from intellect to intellect, but in the imperative one will addresses another. It expresses neither probability nor possibility, but only intention, and is, therefore the furthest removed from reality."²¹ In the context of the Lord's Prayer, the imperative mode of the verbs does not indicate a command to God. Rather, it indicates entreaty from an inferior person to a superior person. It is the intention of the person offering the prayer that these petitions will become reality.

Of the three clauses in the first part of the prayer, two are passive relating to the hallowing of the name of God (Matt 6:9c) and the doing of his will (Matt 6:10b). Only the clause dealing with the coming of God's kingdom (Matt 6:10a) is active. France has noted that "in prayer such an imperative is in effect a plea for God's action to bring about the desired state of affairs."²² This means that we are dealing with what is

²⁰ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 243.

²¹ H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the New Testament*. (New York, Macmillan, 1957), 174

²² R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 245f.



classically called the *passivum divinum* or the divine passive in the two clauses of v.9c and v.10b. It is a central feature of the Sermon on the Mount²³ and brings out clearly the aspect of God as the agent that brings about the desired result.²⁴

THE LORD'S PRAYER AS JEWISH PRAYER

These first three clauses are also reminiscent of the Aramaic *Qaddish* prayer or doxology which was a regular feature of the synagogue prayers during the time of Jesus.²⁵ There are numerous points of agreement between the Lord's Prayer and the *Qaddish* prayer that we do not have enough space to explore here. However, we note that the expression "Father in Heaven" is evinced in the *Qaddish* in the following words: "may the prayers and petitions of the entire community of Israel be accepted by their Father in Heaven."²⁶ Despite this, some scholars have wrongly thought that the distinction between the prayer taught by Jesus and the Synagogue

²³ Places where the divine passive is used in the Beatitudes include Matthew 5:4.6.7.9. B. T. Viviano has noted that many of the reward clauses in the Beatitudes are divine or theological passives. See his "*The Gospel According to Matthew*," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 640. Other places in the Sermon where the divine passive is employed include Matthew 6:33; 7:1-3; 7:7-8

²⁴ Against this idea that the divine passive points to a divine agent in the operation, M. L. Bowen has argued that the divine passive is a poetic and ambiguous application that allows the reader to identify multiple authors: God the Father, the Saviour himself and our own participation to bring about their purposes. See his "*'Thy Will Be Done': The Savior's Use of the Divine Passive*," in *The Sermon on the Mount in Latter-day Scripture* (ed. G. Strathearn, et al.) (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City, 2010), 230-248.

²⁵ See J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 198-199.

²⁶ Other points of agreement include the invocations for the hallowing of God's name, the coming of God's kingdom, the will of God, the motif of bread, the forgiveness of sins, the freedom from sin and the evil one. In fact, every portion of the Matthean version of the prayer is a reflection of the Jewish *Qaddish*.

Qaddish is the Abba terminology which some Christian scholars have seen as a distinctive address to God found only in the sayings of Jesus in the NT. This wrong notion dates as far back as the time of Origen who viewed that the Lord's Prayer marked a radical break from Jewish practice because of Jesus' address to God as father. The acceptance that the Abba terminology goes back to the earthly Jesus was emphasised by J. Jeremias' analysis of the Gospel material presented in a study entitled *Abba*.²⁷ His studies and those of Kittel²⁸ and other Christian scholars have tried to show the distinctiveness of Jesus' use of Abba as direct address to God. The conclusion is that such a usage shows the special relationship between Jesus and God not found in Judaism. This conclusion is easily refuted by the numerous places the Jewish Testament refers to God as father (cf. Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:16 and 64:8; Malachi (2:10). Jewish scholars, on the other hand, have argued that Jesus' use of the terminology is a testimony to the Jewish character of Jesus' teaching.²⁹ Some scholars have even suggested that divesting the Abba terminology of its Jewish character smacks of anti-Semitism.³⁰ His study of the Lord's

²⁷ J. Jeremias, *Abba: Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie und Zeitgeschichte*. (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966), 15-67.

²⁸ For G. Kittel, "Jewish usage shows how this Father-child relationship to God far surpasses any possibilities of intimacy assumed in Judaism, introducing indeed something which is wholly new. "Abba": TDNT 1.5-6

²⁹ See, e.g., G. Friedlander, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount*. (London, G. Routledge & Sons, 1911), 123-136; G. Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*. (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1983), 39-42; see also J. J. Petuchowski/M. Brock (eds.), *The Lord's Prayer and Jewish Liturgy*. (New York, Seabury, 1978).

³⁰ On the anti-Judaism in Jeremias' treatment, see M. Gnadt, "Understanding the Origins of the Lord's Prayer: A Critical Re-Evaluation of the Contribution by Joachim Jeremias" (paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, 1990); F. Meyer, "A Caricature of Joachim Jeremias and His Work," JBL 110 (1991), 451-62; E. P. Sanders, "Defending the Indefensible," JBL 110 (1991), 463-477.

Prayer led J. L. Houlden to conclude that “the Lord’s Prayer is distinctly Jewish in character, with numerous parallels in Jewish forms of prayer, e.g., “Bring me not into the power of sin, iniquity, temptation or contempt, and let the good impulse have dominion over me.”³¹

Moreover, the eighteen Jewish Benedictions, which is the central prayer said three times a day by the devout Jews of the second Temple period, employ the Abba terminology with reference to God.³² This is especially true of the fourth and sixth benedictions which are invocations for the gift of wisdom and the forgiveness of sins respectively. Hence, the Lord’s Prayer does not deviate from the standard Jewish form of prayer and is easily traceable to the historical Jesus. We also have evidence of the usage of this terminology in Paul’s letters to the Romans (8:15) and the Galatians (4:6). This conclusion means that Jesus did not teach against the mainstream Jewish piety but rather prayed in line with the spirituality of Judaism. Such a view, which we agree to, is supported by the studies of Moore on Jewish piety³³ and by Fitzmyer who concluded that “it is not surprising that ‘abba’ is even usually extended to God himself, especially in light of the Old Testament material which is also part of the background of the usage.”³⁴

³¹ J. L. Houlden, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York, Doubleday, 1992), vol.4, 359.

³² For an in depth study of the Eighteen Benedictions see L. Finkelstein, “*The Development of the Amidah*,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 16, No. 1 (1925), 1-43; F. C. Grant, “*Modern Study of the Jewish Liturgy*” (*Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 65 (1953), 59-77.

³³ G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*. (New York, Schocken Books Inc., 1971), 201-211.

³⁴ J. A. Fitzmyer, “Abba and Jesus’ Relation to God”: in *A Cause de l’Evangile: Etudes sur les Synoptiques et Actes offertes a Jacques Dupont*

With this wealth of finding, one could assume that the Lord's Prayer is a veritable ground for dialogue between Christians and Jews. There is nothing in our view to argue against such a conclusion. This is because Jesus, the Galilean clothed his thoughts in the garment of his homeland.³⁵ The way Jesus fashioned his parables using the language pattern and cultural values of Palestine is clear testimony to his acceptance of the divine as immanent in the human environment where he was born. What remains to be investigated is the way we are to understand the will of God that should be done on earth.

UNDERSTANDING THE WILL OF GOD IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

Having seen how the Lord's Prayer effectively fits into Jewish piety before and during the time of the earthly Jesus, it serves to investigate how Matthew's Jesus understands doing the will of God. Matthew's Gospel is strongly marked by the use of the father as referent to God. God as Father is applied in no less than 31 times compared to Mark and Luke where the term appears only 3 and 4 times respectively. In the same way the expression 'the will of the father (God)' has a regular occurrence in Matthew. Apart from its presence in the Lord's Prayer, we also encounter it in Matthew 7:21; 12:50 and 21:31. In all these cases, the will of God is the direct object of the verb 'to do'. This shows the importance of doing the will of God for the first evangelist. Again Matthew is more prominent than his synoptic counterparts in the use of the substantive *thelema* (will).³⁶ Semantically, the noun *thelema* is

O.S.B. a l'occasion de son 70e anniversaire (LD 123; Publications de Saint André. Paris, 1985), 28.

³⁵ See A. Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (1.Bd.). (Leipzig/Tübingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 1898), 145.

³⁶ See R. Onyenali, *The Trilogy of Parables in Mt 21:28-22:14: From a Matthean Perspective*. (Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2013), 68f.

related to the verb *thélo* (to will) which is used in Matthew 42 times.³⁷ The importance of doing the will of God is shown in Matthew 7:21 as the primary condition for entrance into the kingdom of heaven. Hence, just like in the Lord's Prayer, we see a connection between the kingdom of heaven and the will of God. It is only those who do the will of God that will enter the kingdom of God.

Before we could approximate what the New Testament in general or the Matthean Gospel in particular asserts about the will of God, we need a clearer position on the meaning of the will of God in the Jewish Testament, especially as employed in the LXX which was the Scripture of the early Christians. The LXX uses the word *thelēmata/thelēma* to translate several Hebrew words.³⁸ For instance, *ḥep-šê*/pleasure (in Ps 110:2) is translated with *thelēmata*, while *ḥā-pāš*/delight (in Jer 9:24) is translated with *thelēma*. Although the word *thelēma* in the LXX sometimes signifies the element of the will of men (cf. 2 Chr. 9:12; Jer. 23:17) in most cases it refers to the divine will (cf. Ps 39:9; Sir 43: 16; 1 Esdras 9:9; etc.). Apart from representing God's creative designs for the universe and his salvific plan for mankind, it does concretely express the commandments to be obeyed.³⁹ Obedience to this will of God is not restricted to the Israelites since the Bible names king Cyrus as having done the will of God by rebuilding the Temple and the city of Jerusalem (cf. Isa 44:28;

³⁷ Against Mark (24x) and Luke (28x).

³⁸ Cf. M. Palachuvattil, "The One who does the Will of the Father" *Distinguishing Character of Disciples According to Matthew: An Exegetical Theological Study*. Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Teologia, 154 (Roma, Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2007), 47.

³⁹ Cf. R. E. Brown, *The Pater Noster as Eschatological Prayer*. (St Mary's Seminary, Baltimore), 236 n. 73.

48:14).⁴⁰ Again the psalmist understands that the doing of the will of God, which is not ethnically restricted, is also better than burnt offering (cf. Ps 39). The doing of God's will also carries with it a reward since there is a tree of life for those who do his will in 4 Macc. 18:16. Matthew seems to follow these O.T texts in espousing the importance of adherence to the will of God.

Adherence to the will of God carries with it the sense of pleasing and humble obedient attitude of those subjecting themselves to God's authority.⁴¹ This could explain why Matthew's Jesus allows the Sabbath laws (12:1–14) and sees his baptism from the Baptist as the fulfilment of all righteousness (3:15). Seen from this perspective, one has to admit that the fulfilment passages in Matthew (1:22; 2:15.17.23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 27:9) are programmed to reflect that in Jesus, all that is written by the Jewish prophets about the will of God has found its completion in Jesus. We may effectively argue that the fulfilment of the Law is a concrete expression of the will of God in Matthew's narrative. When this is correctly integrated in the lives of a people, we see the merging of the divine will with the tradition of the people.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expressly stated: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil" (Matt 5:17). Since the verb *plērōō* could mean "to bring to a designed end,"⁴² we

⁴⁰ See J. D. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66*, WBC (vol.24/25). (Nashville, TN, 2005), 700.

⁴¹ Cf. M. Palachuvattil, "The Will of the Father," 51.

⁴² See W., Arndt/F. W. Danker & W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature [BDAG]*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000).

understand it to mean that the Law finds its full realization in the teaching and life of Jesus.⁴³ It is instructive that this statement comes before the apparent antitheses introduced by Jesus with the statement “you have heard how it was said to the men of old, but I say to you...” (Matt 5:21.27.31.38.43).⁴⁴ This could mean that the teaching of Jesus on the Mount is only but an explanation of what it means to fulfil the Law given to Moses. This has led scholars to argue that the gospel of Matthew is the clearest expression of a law-affirming Jewish Christianity. His theology is characterised by obedience to the Law just as seen in Old Testament theology.⁴⁵ One would not be wrong in affirming that obedience to this Law given to Moses and handed down as the Jewish tradition is the expression of the will of God for the Jewish nation. This means that in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus did not abrogate the Law. What he did was to give the Law an interpretation that agrees with the original will of God the Father. Fulfilment of the original meaning of the Law becomes the doing of the will of God which forms the epilogue to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 7:21–23).

⁴³ For a summary of scholarly discussion on the meaning of *plērōō* see B. M. Trout, *The Nature of the Law's Fulfilment in Matthew 5:17: An Exegetical and theological study*, In *Skriflig* (Online) vol.49 n.1 Pretoria 2015 <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/IDS.V49I1.1910>.

⁴⁴ This is against the conclusion of Jeremias who claims that in Matthew 5:21–28, Jesus, with his *ego de lego hymin* set himself in opposition to the Torah. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology. Part One: The Proclamation of Jesus*. (London: SCM, 1971), 253. Jeremias is also supported by R. G. Hamerton-Kelly who claims that Matthew 5:21–48 does precisely what Matthew 5:17–19 prohibits, namely, it declares certain parts of the law invalid. R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, “Attitudes .to the Law in Matthew's Gospel: A Discussion of Matthew 5:18,” *BR* 17 (1972) 19–32, 21.

⁴⁵ H. Frankemölle, *Jahwebund und Kirche Christi*, NTA.NF 10 (Münster, Aschendorf, 1974); U. Luz, *Studies in Matthew*. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, Pub. Co., 2005), 185.

Just as the Church recognises the beginning of her faith and election in the Jewish religion,⁴⁶ she also acknowledges that correct observance of the traditions of other nations could manifest the will of God for these other nations. The operative clause here is "correct observance". This is because Jesus attacked the scribal accretions to the Law given to Moses and not the Law of Moses per se. A typical example of where Jesus makes the distinction between the word of God and that of the Jewish teachers is in the discussion about eating with unwashed hands (cf. Matt 15:1-9). In this pericope, Jesus emphasized that the washing of hands, which is not part of the Decalogue, is only an expression of the will of the elders and not an expression of the will of God.⁴⁷ An incorrect application of the divine Law turns the will of God into the will of men. This could be the argument behind *Nostra Aetate's* assertion that the Church rejects nothing that is true and holy of other religions. The following words of *Nostra Aetate* represent a summary of the current missiology of the church: "The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men" (NA §2).

This being the case, one is tempted towards the view that just as Jesus accepted the tradition of his fathers as an authentic expression of the will of his Father in heaven, an African theologian would not be accused of syncretism when he

⁴⁶ Cf. *Nostra Aetate*, § 4.

⁴⁷ For a fuller analysis of our position on this, see R. Onyenali, *Paying of Tithe*, 106-110. Our conclusion to the passage is that "what Jesus set aside was the scribal outgrowths to the Laws of the Torah and not the Mosaic Law per se." See especially page 110.

accepts the traditions of the African elders or ancestors as an African expression of the will of the God who made the universe. Failure to accept that the core cultural values of Africans could bear marks of divine revelation is only a limitation of God's omnipotence who desires that all humanity will be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). And in order to escape the accusation of syncretism it might be better to accept the core cultural values of Africa and re-interpret them as God's answer to the prayer of Jesus that God's will be done on earth as it is already done in heaven. In this state of affairs, what we need is only a new interpretation of the African culture as God's will just as Jesus reinterpreted the Jewish culture as the expression of the divine will. This helps us to avoid the old missionary trend of classifying almost every aspect of African culture as pagan. These cultural values are so important for the Africans that neglecting them could amount to a neglect of the very existence of the African Christians. Accepting them and integrating them into mainline Christianity serves a more veritable inculturating value than the age-long attempt at inculturating the external aspects of African culture into Christianity.

IMPORTANCE OF TRADITION IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

By African tradition, we mean those cultural values which are dear to the Africans. These are the values that are kept by the indigenous Africans and transmitted from one generation to the other. These cultural values are guarded jealously by Africans since they ensure the continued existence and preservation of African peoples. Since they are group morals, every member of the society must participate in them. Mbiti summed it up well when he noted that "since the morals of each society are embedded in its customs, traditions, rituals, beliefs and practices, people assimilate them as they grow up

and become participant members of their community and society."⁴⁸ These cultural values could be said to have a divine origin since they "are directed towards strengthening the moral life of each society."⁴⁹ They form the hinge or fulcrum on which the society revolves and once there is a moral breakdown, every other thing disintegrates. This explains why every traditional African society has a set of measures to punish those who contravene the moral codes of the society. Without this punishment, the moral fabric of the society will be a total chaos. This is current in every traditional African society.

There are many things in traditional African morality that mirror what we read from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Mbiti has captured the soul of our disputation very well when he noted the things that are held to be morally right and good by the Africans. These include "kindness, politeness, showing respect, being truthful and honest, being reliable, keeping promises, working hard, being hospitable, being considerate, helping others, looking after the homestead, practicing justice in public life, keeping the good traditions and customs... Whoever follows these precepts is approved by society and considered to be a good person."⁵⁰ If the above values summarize the core of African morality, there is no way these would not easily represent the core teachings of African Christianity. And this is only but one side of the story. Writing further, Mbiti clarifies that "there are many things held to be morally wrong and evil, such as robbery, murder, rape, telling lies, stealing, being cruel, saying bad words, showing disrespect, practicing sorcery or witchcraft,

⁴⁸ J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*. (London, Heinemann, 1991), 180.

⁴⁹ J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 188.

⁵⁰ J. S. Mbiti *Introduction to African Religion*, 178-180.

interfering with public rights, backbiting, being lazy or greedy or selfish, breaking promises, and so on. Whoever, does them is condemned to be bad or evil person...”⁵¹ We are of the opinion that once these cultural values are exploited by Christianity in Africa, the message of Christ would be more meaningful to the indigenous Africans. It would serve the special need of the African Christians if these values which they are already at home with are vigorously pursued as manifestation of the will of God for the Africans.

SOME TRADITIONAL IGBO VALUES TO EXPLICATE DIVINE WILL

We intend to bring the main argument in our thesis closer by looking at a particular African culture. This is based on the fact that the African culture is not monolithic. So we intend to focus on the Igbo culture of South-East Nigeria. We begin by acknowledging the remarks of Amandikwa that just like any other African society, “norms, customs, and values are at the very heart of Igbo society and are important for the survival of Igbo communitarian life.”⁵² This means that every facet of the people’s existence is governed by a set of norms without which their lives would have no direction. This is the reason behind the assertion of Mbiti that “African peoples have a deep sense of right and wrong. In the course of the years, this moral sense has produced customs, rules, traditions and taboos which can be observed in each society. Their morals are embedded in these systems of behaviour and conduct.”⁵³

One of the most important values in the world of the Igbo Africans is the premium placed on honesty. This makes the

⁵¹ J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 178-180.

⁵² A. Amandikwa, *Education as Character Formation: Agwa bu Mma: The Case of Igbo Traditional Education*. (Enugu, San Press, 2013), 104.

⁵³ J. S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 175.

Igbo people to believe that truth is life. Commenting on this Onwu asserts that "traditional Igbo society is built on truth and the basis of this is trust which is primarily dependent on the ability of the individual members to tell the truth to one another... the greater the tendency to lie in a society, the greater will be the social disorder..."⁵⁴ The important position allotted truth in the Igbo society is captured by the Igbo aphorism that *eziokwu bu ndu* (truth is life). Anyone identified as a custodian of truth in the Igbo society is always revered. His words are always weighty and people long to hear him speak. In most cases, disputes between peoples are not settled until such a person has spoken. This is a value that is fast eroding from the Igbo society.

Another very important fabric of the Igbo society is justice. This is closely related to honesty. The just person does all in his/her power to ensure that everyone gets his due. Justice is built on the principle of live and let live. The principle of justice relates to the relationship between people and also the relationship between humans and the gods. As a basic principle of morality, justice ensures that anyone who infringes on the moral fabric of the Igbo society gets an appropriate punishment so as to restore the moral equilibrium. The restoration of the moral equilibrium employs traditional approaches which see crimes not as the infringement of abstract laws "but as an offense against another person and the community whose rules have been violated and the resulting damage seen as damage to the community."⁵⁵ The symbol for

⁵⁴ Onwu, *Uzo Ndu na Eziokwu, Ahaiajoku Lecture Series*, 2002, 11, quoted in A. Amandikwa, *Education*, 97.

⁵⁵ Buckley-Zistel Susannae, "Transitional Justice als Weg zu Frieden und Sicherheit". *Möglichkeiten und Grenzen*, 2008, 13,: Working Paper 15 in Sonderforschungsbereich 700 "Governance in Räumen begrenzter Staatlichkeit."

justice is the *ofo* which is always in the custody of the family head, titled men, priests and diviners. It is believed that whoever holds this *ofo* must make just pronouncements at all times.⁵⁶ Anyone who uses the *ofo* unjustly attracts the severe wrath of the gods who, it is believed, will surely avenge their cause. *Ofo* is so important for the Igbo society that many children are given names derived from *ofo*. Such names include *Ejim ofo* (I am with *Ofo*), *Ofoma* (*Ofo* Knows), *Ofomata* (Let *ofo* Know), *Ofojekwu* (*Ofo* will talk), etc. If Christianity could borrow a leaf from the Igbo society to restore the twin values of honesty and justice, the message of Christ would find some renewed footing in the Igbo society.

Just as the Jewish scriptures extoll the value of hospitality,⁵⁷ the Igbo people also prize hospitality highly. In the words of Uchendu, “the Igbo are nothing if not hospitable. To them hospitality is a major social obligation. Inability to meet it is a humiliating experience for the Igbo.”⁵⁸ An unannounced visit to any typical Igbo family bears this out. The Igbo people do not need to be notified of the impending arrival of any visitor to prepare for such a visit. The kola nut becomes the symbol of Igbo hospitality. Once kola nuts are blessed with prayers, the visitors know that they are welcome. It is highly believed that the kola nut symbolizes pure intention. This is why people who are not in good terms will never share kola nut with one another. Other cultural values include, conformity to social

⁵⁶ Further analysis of the importance of the *ofo* symbol can be found in C. I. Ejizu, *Ofo: Igbo Ritual Symbol*. (Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1986).

⁵⁷ Cf. Gen. 18:1-5; Gen 24:28-32, etc.

⁵⁸ V. C. Uchendu, *The Igbo of South-East Nigeria (Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology)*. (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1965), 71.

norms and customs, respect for age and seniority, industrious spirit and skill acquisition.⁵⁹

Concluding, we remark that it was the task of traditional education to nurture in each individual the tradition, the norm and custom of the people. In the words of C. Nwaogugu, "the ethical, legal, economic, political and social codes were alike indistinguishable facets of the [educational] curriculum from infancy and were expected to be consummated in the ordinary behaviour of the successful adult member of the society. The system made for stability because the successful "graduate" was ipso facto a guarantee of the existing order which in turn guaranteed his future by firmly anchoring it, in effect, on the past of the people. By the same token, those who "failed to graduate" represented a failure of the socialization process, and as such were a constant threat to the integrity and coherence of the system."⁶⁰ Hence, children are taught honesty, justice, hospitality, etc. from their infancy. And this is done by both the parents, peer groups, and the society at large. Living according to these cultural values amounts to living according to the will of God among the people. This is the full realization of the third petition in the Lord's Prayer. Neglect of these cultural values has become the bane of every traditional African society in the modern times. If Christianity must have relevance for the Igbo Africans, it must look into these important cultural norms and make them the centre of her teaching. This is the real inculturation of the Christian message. The Church should be in the forefront to inculcate these.

⁵⁹ These have been adequately analyzed in A. Amandikwa, *Education*, 104-118.

⁶⁰ Quoted in A. Amandikwa, *Education*, 109.

CONCLUSION

We have made a summary of some of the core African and Igbo cultural values and it is evident that these reveal to the Africans or the Igbo people the will of God for them. Just as Jesus saw the Jewish Law, made manifest in the prophets, as the expression of the will of the Father, we also see the traditional African cultural values as the expression of the will of God for the Africans. Hence, a real inculturation of Christianity in the African soil should first look at what the Christian religion could learn from the African way of life. Focusing on replacing the cross of Christ with the symbol of justice in Igbo land (the *ofò* symbol) is only a mockery of inculturation. The real inculturation is imbibing the cultural value of justice which the *ofò* symbolizes, and making it integral to Christian catechesis. It could also amount to religious externalism if Christianity is to focus much attention on replacing the Eucharistic celebration with the blessing of kola nut. Christianity should rather stress the virtue of hospitality which the kola nut signifies for the Igbo Christians. With these arguments in mind, we make bold to assert that the Igbo traditional values should be a core pedagogical tool for the teaching of Christian moral education to the Igbo Christians. This should include the provision of books where these traditional values are explained and given a Christian practicability for the modern man. This call has already been made by N. V. Uzodinma.⁶¹ Concentrating only on the inculturation of the external aspects of the African culture amounts to washing the outside of the dish while the inside remains dirty.

⁶¹ N. V. Uzodinma, *Igbo Traditional Values as Pedagogical Tool for the Teaching of Moral Education in Secondary Schools in Enugu – South LGA of Enugu State*. (Institute of Ecumenical Education, Thinkers Corner, Enugu, 2013).

But this does not preclude the existence of some other cultural practices that do not explicate the will of God for the Igbo Christians. The intractable *osu* caste system is a sore example. In considering some people as of lower caste, based on their belonging to a family perceived to be sold to some deities in the past, some Igbo African societies have forgotten that due to our common heritage as children of God, we now belong to the same family and should be seen as equals in the name of Christ. Just as the apostle Paul would tell the Galatians, Igbo African Christians should not forget that there are no more distinctions in the family of God (cf. Gal. 3:28).