



## **INTRODUCTION**

Given the spate of religious intolerance and its aftermath of indiscriminate destruction of lives and property in the globe today, there is no gain – saying that religious intolerance is more than a topical issue because of its relevance to the survival of the human race. In response to this exigency, various attempts have been made in a bid to fore-stall the re-occurrence of this ugly malady. Scholars of diverse intellectual background and outlook have written volumes of paper on the phenomenon of religious intolerance. It has been pointed out that social inequality, poverty, marginalization, unemployment and politics are at the base of this unfortunate fact of contemporary human society. These attempts as useful as they may be appear to be addressing the symptom of the problem instead of the disease itself. Thus the problems requires a more comprehensive solution as the cause appears to be deeper than we imagine.

The issue adumbrated above shall form the basis of this essay. However, the scope of the essay will be limited to the analysis of the phenomenon of religious intolerance from the lens of Asouzu's complementary ontology. This ontological approach to the problem of religious intolerance becomes inevitable in as much as the way we relate to the world and people around us depends on the way we conceptualize reality. This essay takes a critical look at the pre-deterministic, exclusivist ontological composition of most religious adherents as the propelling force behind religious intolerance. Our opinion in this essay is that religious intolerance in any human society would only be meaningfully overcome, if we deconstruct the present ontological mindset, which sees things in a polarized and completely isolated discreet unit of an independent non-relational existence. And adopt the new complementary ontological mindset, which sees things from the preceding condition of their intrinsic interrelatedness devoid of polarization and exclusiveness.

With this new ontological horizon, we will be able to develop a human consciousness through which individuals act towards one another in a spirit of mutual co-existence and complementary relationship. To put this issue in the proper context, it is pertinent to look critically at the concept and phenomenon of religion.

## **RELIGION AS A CONCEPT AND AS A PHENOMENON**

Religion, like other elastic and dynamic terms used in social discussions, has different meanings for different people. Etymologically, religion as a term is derived from the Latin word "**religio**" which means to '**bind**' or '**tie**'. Thus, religion is seen as the bond that ties different level of reality together to form a coherent unit. Religion binds the Supreme Being and man on the one hand, and man and man on the other hand. As such, religion in its entire ramifications is conceived as an instrument of unification.

The New Webster's Dictionary defines religion as  
*"man's expression of his acknowledgement of the divine".*

It adds that religion is  
*"a system of beliefs and practices relating to the sacred and uniting its adherents in a community".*

Emile Durkheim defines religion as

*a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them. (pg. 62-63).*

In what appears to be a summary of the basic elements of religion Morris Jastrow elucidates the concept of religion as follows:

*Religion consists of three elements:*

- (1) The natural recognition of a power or powers beyond our control;*
- (2) The feeling of dependence upon this power or powers;*
- (3) Entering into relations with this power or powers.*

*Uniting these elements into a single proposition, religion may be defined as the natural belief in a power or powers beyond our control, and upon whom we feel ourselves dependent; which belief and feeling of dependence prompt. (1) To organization, (2) to specific acts, and (3) to the regulation of conduct, with a view to establishing favourable relations between ourselves and the power or powers in question. (Configurations...pg 3).*

From the above conceptions of religion it is obvious that the idea of a supernatural being and his first position in the scheme of things is a common phenomenon to all forms of religious belief. In fact, no account of religion is complete without a belief in the existence of a supernatural being with absolute authority. Thus the supernatural being is at the center of worship in every religion. This explains why Max Muller sees religion as a mental faculty or disposition, which enables man to apprehend the infinite (**supreme being**) under different names; and under varying disguises. According to him, no religion, not even the lowest worship of idols and fetishes, would be possible; and if we will listen attentively, we can hear in all religions a groaning of the spirit, a struggle to conceive the inconceivable, to utter, a longing after the infinite, a love of God. As such the supreme being is named in different terms according to tongues and religions. This is the reason for which Christians call him God, Muslims call him Allah, the Yorubas; Edos, Igbos, Efiks call him Olodumare, Osanobua, Chineke and Abasi respectively.

Another important idea that runs through the above conceptions of religion is that of the interaction between man and the supernatural world. Religion in this sense, signifies the totality of relations that exist between man and the supernatural world. This interaction is necessitated with the perceived need of man to enter into communication with the invisible forces. Faced with the harsh realities of life, the human race has turned to religion for answer to the unsolved riddles of the human predicament. Given the unlimitedness and profundity of the supreme-being which is at the center of all religious convictions; and given the mysteries of the human existential condition, religion, then, offers man, a way out of the ontological prison from which there seems to be no escape. Thus, we cannot but agree with Christian James, when he observes that;

*Religion is human kind's profoundly human response to this unacceptable condition. It is in religion that the bitter truth of human existence is confronted by human spirit, mind and heart. Like all our creations, religion is a mechanism of survival, and without it the human species might not have survived. (pg. 557).*

The idea of interaction in religion is not limited to the relationship between the supernatural world and natural world. It is also extended to its social dimension, that is, the relationship between man and man in the society. This aspect of interaction enables us to see religion beyond purely transcendental affair. It brings religion to the social interaction among men. Religion at this level is a phenomenon that inspires man to develop the consciousness of the highest social values. This provides a divine platform for the cordial relationship among human beings in order to ensure peaceful co-existence. It gives man the awareness of the divine dimension of his social actions.

Given the basic dimensions of religion, it is undoubtedly a very sensitive phenomenon in human life. It is such a potent instrument for the integration of different levels of realities into a unified whole. Religion is everything to man, it is according to Karl Marx the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their happiness. August Sabatier corroborates this position when he submits;

*Religion is intimate prayer and deliverance, It is so inherent in man that he would be unable to tear it from his heart without condemning himself to be separated from himself And to kill that which constitutes his very humanity (Configurations... pg. 2 )*

## **ASOUZU'S COMPLEMENTARY ONTOLOGY BACKGROUND**

Professor Innocent Izuchukwu Asouzu is undoubtedly one of the few contemporary African philosophers blessed with an immense and genuine intellectual stamina. This has given him the ability to develop a new philosophical and authentic African current of thought with a global patronage. Thus Prof. Asouzu is the founder and main proponent of complementary reflection as a philosophical movement in contemporary African philosophy.

Professor Asouzu obtained his Ph.D. in Philosophy and Sociology at Leopold Franzens University, Innsbruck, Austria (EU). He currently lectures at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. He has been working conscientiously over the years in formulating and articulating the fundamental principles and methodological framework of a new philosophical current of thought known as “**complementary reflection**”. This system of thought aims at presenting a comprehensive understanding of reality from a complementary perspective as against the existing Aristotelian Elitist ontology of class distinction and polarization.

In his recent books: *Effective Leadership and the Ambivalence of Human interest. The Nigerian Paradox in a Complementary Perspective (2003); The Method and Principles of Complementary Reflection: In and Beyond African Philosophy (2004) and Ibuanyidanda-New Complementary Ontology (2007)*, Professor Asouzu presents a detailed methodological and systematic outline of complementary reflection. Adopting the speculative understanding of what he calls Anonymous Traditional African Philosophers

of the complementary direction, he cleverly articulates the method and principle of complementary reflection to a systematic methodological philosophical trend with a universal appeal. With this effort professor Asouzu presents a synoptic approach to the solution of human existential problems.

### **AN OVERVIEW OF ASOUZU'S COMPLEMENTARY ONTOLOGY**

Asouzu's conception of reality is heavily indebted to the traditional African idea of transcendent complementary unity of consciousness. Asouzu himself acknowledges this indebtedness when he declares that.

*Complementary ontological reflection is built on the foundation of the general ontology of traditional African philosophers of the complementary direction. (Method and Principles... pg. 327).*

Using the general Igbo ontology as a paradigm of explanation Asouzu constructs a complementary ontology based on the idea that all units are important aspects of missing links of reality.

This idea of complementary holds that units live from the consciousness of mutual indebtedness. Explaining the principle of complementarity within the framework of traditional African idea of solidarity Asouzu alludes to the Igbo metaphor of IBU ANYI DANDA. He writes

*one of the most common metaphors or imageries that the traditional Igbo uses to express the idea of complementarity is that of the collective effort needed by ants (danda) to lift heavy crumbs or loads (lbu) that would otherwise remain insurmountable task. This is the Ibu anyi danda approach or the traditional Igbo spirit and understanding of complementarity. For the traditional Ibo danda (ants) can surmount the most difficult challenges if and only if they work in a harmonious complementary unified manner (Method and Principle... pg 108).*

The central methodological thesis of Asouzu's complementary ontology is therefore, the assertion that **anything that exists serves a missing link of reality**. This in his view constitutes the point of demarcation between all forms of exclusive, polarizing and bifurcating ontology and complementary ontology. In class ontology, reality is conceived as a composition of a completely isolated discrete unit with non-relational existence. This form of thinking is obtained from Aristotle's doctrine of the categories, which explains how we think about things. Here, whenever we think of a particular subject matter, we think of a subject and its predicates, or of some substance and its accidents. The mind separates a thing from all its qualities and focuses upon what a thing really is, upon its essential nature.

Thus, Aristotle sees substance as that which is not asserted of a subject but of which everything else is asserted. This implies that without substance there is no accident. This according to Asouzu is an abstract abstruse and bifurcating mode of conceptualizing being, which give the impression that substance and accidents lie in diverse regions of being. This apparently is the Genesis of class-consciousness in western thought, which was developed into an ideology; exported and enforced into the thinking process of other parts of the world through colonialism and imperialism. And ever since, the human

consciousness has always being directed towards giving primacy to a group over and above others.

This is the consciousness complementary ontology seeks to deconstruct, using the idea of missing links with practical implications in all aspect of human life. Complementary ontology is of the opinion that the existence of substance and accident is a case of mutual complementary relationship rather than the understanding of cause and effect relationship. Reality is to be conceived from the idea that anything that exists serves a missing link of reality. The idea of missing link does not presuppose the existence of a vacuum, it is a recognition of differences in a mutual complementary relationship. Thereby breaking the bifurcation of reality in the Aristotelian tradition. In this lengthy quotation, Asouzu explains the idea of missing links as follows:

*The missing links are the diverse components or entities of which any existing reality is constituted... if the component that make up a system are viewed in isolation and singly, we can say that they are missing in relation to one another in a way. They are missing in the sense that, as discrete entities, each can be viewed in isolation to each and in total disregard to each other. When this happens, a unit can be unaware of the other and in this moment, the one that it is unaware of is missing. To conceptualizing them as a system, they have to be brought in relation to each other, such that these missing links serve each other towards becoming mutually aware of each other. (Effective leadership... Pg. 58-59).*

Within this complementary framework, to be is not to be alone; to be, is the capacity to be in mutual complementary relationship with all things that exists. It is the ability of the mind to discover itself as part of missing links of reality and endeavours to establish its unity through recourse to other missing links of which it is a part. In complementary ontology, the mind wishes to captures reality in its endlessness, immeasurability yet in fragmentation and in relationship of missing links to each other and in a future oriented way. This according to Asouzu is what is referred to in complementary ontology as **anything that exists serves a missing link of reality**. It is at this level that the mind experiences all missing links as complements in a moment of transcendent complementary unity of consciousness.

## **RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE IN THE FACE OF ASOUZU'S COMPLEMENTARY ONTOLOGY**

Simply put, intolerance means “**unwillingness to tolerate.**” Religious intolerance is therefore an act of not willing to accommodate or recognize a contrary or opposing religious ideas or beliefs. As a phenomenon, religious intolerance connotes a consistent refusal to recognize the necessity of co-existence of diverse religious beliefs in spite of human insufficiency. It is non-recognition of the fragmentation of human historicity as necessary dimension of human existence. Given this mindset, any human society is prone to all forms contradiction and conflict. This is an undeniable characteristic of most contemporary human society of which Nigeria is a living example.

As it was earlier stated in the introduction of this work, the cause of religious intolerance appears to be deeper than we imagine. This position will be better appreciated if religious intolerance is examined from the ontological composition of the individuals that makes up the various religious sects. This approach becomes inevitable in as much as the way we relate to the world and people around us depends on the way we conceptualize reality.

Looking at religious intolerance through the lens of Asouzu's complementary ontology, it becomes clear that religious conflicts break out as a result of the wrong perception of most religious adherents of their relationship with others. Today, most religious adherents act ignorantly toward others under the influence of a heavy dose of exclusivist ontological mindset. Within this ambience, the human mind is incapacitated in becoming aware of its sharing a common complementary horizon with other units and missing links within a given framework.

From the various conceptions of religion presented earlier, it is evident that human beings seek fulfillment and self-understanding in the transcendent. This is something that has to do with the foundation of our being outside of ourselves. As such, the human mind is called to duty, as it is the instrument with which we pierce into the transcendental world, which is not empirically assessable. But in a situation where the mind has been distorted in conceptualizing adequately the relationship between parts to the whole, the resultant effect is a misconception of the absolute. It is in this situation that human beings start to construct an idea of an absolute being of their ideals and imaginations, which may not be in consonance with that of others. And the tendency is to lord it over others as the ideal picture of God, an attempt that is bound to be fatal. The moment we are unaware of this ambivalent nature of our mind in conceiving the absolute, that is the moment we construct an image of our self-imagined God, which falls short of the immensity of its determination and in determination.

Asouzu captures this point clearly when he writes

*In most cases involving claims to clear insight about the nature and existence of God, the human mind fails to understand that no designation is adequate enough to capture the essence of God in the ultimacy of its immensity. (Ibuanyidanda... Pg. 339).*

In a bid to simplify the issue of the limitation of the human mind in comprehending the totality and immensity of God, Asira adopted a legend about a big elephant. According to him, God is like a big elephant; different people (religions) approach it from different dimensions. Those who approach the 'elephant' from the ear would say it is a big fan, others who approach the 'elephant' from the legs would say it is a big stick, yet others who approach the 'elephant' from the tail would say it is made up of strands. When an argument ensues as to the real nature of the 'elephant' each of these groups of people will express itself from the angle or direction it approached the 'elephant', and because of their limitation to comprehend the totality of the elephant misunderstanding and self-destruction begins as each group thinks its own description is the real picture of the elephant. The same is true about the nature of God and the various religious attempts at comprehending His immensity.

Within the ambience of complementary ontology, such confusion and misunderstanding is out of place as the mind becomes aware of its tendencies of picturing reality in an incomplete and naïve manner. This self-realization results in the dire need for complementation from other units of reality. Hence, the assertion **anything that exists serves a missing link of reality**. It is in this way we can uphold a healthy relationship between parts and the whole in mutual complementary spirit. And thereby making the limitations of being the cause of our joy in view of the totality that gives unity to all missing links of reality. In effect, religious intolerance within a complementary ontological mindset would be a thing of the past as different religious experiences will be seen as forms of the diverse manifestations of God. As such, religion turns into a mechanism for the

harmonization of the diverse manifestations of God for a full appreciation of His immensity and incomprehensiveness.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the foregoing, it is clear that religion in its entire ramification involves a relationship between God and man on the one hand and man and man on the other hand. Thus, religion is a mechanism for the harmonization of these levels of interaction. From the standpoint of Asouzu's complementary ontology, it is argued, that religious intolerance is a product of the inability of the human mind to be aware of its ambivalence in conceptualizing the idea of God. This inability emanated from the heavy dose of an exclusivist, polarizing and bifurcating ontological mindset, which needs to be deconstructed in our contemporary life. Within such an ontological ambience, religious intolerance is a necessary occurrence with its destructive consequences.

It is therefore argued in this essay that, tolerance, which is the missing virtue in contemporary religious interaction, is a product of the mindset that is fundamentally structured to recognize its deficiency in comprehending the totality and immensity of God. This recognition empowers the individual to accommodate the opposing views of others in a spirit of mutual complementary understanding of the subject matter. With this new ontological horizon chances are that religion would return to its natural harmonizing and equilibrating platform of being. And as such, religious intolerance will give way to mutual co-existence and tolerance among religious adherents.



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