

Freedom of Worship: Interpreting Joshua 24:1-28 in African-Igbo Traditional Religious Context

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The news media are often replete with sad stories of religious intolerance, with some gory pictures of the victims thereof. In Joshua 24:1-28, the Israelites were asked by Joshua to choose whom they would like to serve. It smacks of religious freedom. Using the text as a theological fulcrum, this study emphasises the fundamental human right of *freedom of worship* in the context of the religious freedom embedded African-Igbo religious tradition. Given the diverse religious views in the world, it is dialogue and mutual respect which would make religious peace possible. Bad religious leaders and teachers mislead their adherents to do violent and bloody proselytization. But people should not be held under duress to accept a particular religious idea or to adhere to a particular group of worshippers, sometimes with only one alternative, that is death! Indeed, every religion should recommend itself by the amount of love and peace it engenders in the world.

Keywords: freedom of worship, respect for diverse religious views, religious pluralism, Igbo religious tradition

Introduction

This paper studies the text of Josh 24:1-28 in the context of the Igbo¹ traditional religious plurality and religious freedom. The study aims at emphasising the fundamental human right of *freedom of worship* as a remedy for the current ugly phenomenon of forcing people to be of a particular religious affiliation or face various forms of indignity, deprivations, and even violent death. Such ugly incidents depend heavily on how the tenets of particular religious groups are presented or explained, and how they are assimilated by their audiences. Indeed, very much depends on religious leaders and teachers. Because there is much diversity in world cultures, there are bound to be different ways of relating to the divine and therefore different religions. When well directed, each religion is capable of fostering good inter-personal relationships, but the opposite is the case when misdirected. In other words, religion has the potentials to promote either peace or conflict (Umaru, 2019; Kanu, 2017), mutual respect and acceptance or unhealthy rigidity and exclusivity, depending on whether the religious teachers and their audience are cool-headed or fanatical in mind. Often religious fanatics hold the view that everybody must belong to their own religion, and they go ahead to justify it theologically by saying that it is how God revealed it to them. They then act as the *policemen of God*, maltreating, maiming, and even killing those not belonging to their religion or those they regard as not being believers enough according to their own standard of judgement. For instance, from the eastern parts of the globe, e.g., Syria, one gets very

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¹ *Igbo* is the name of a very large ethnic group in the eastern part of Nigeria in West Africa, numbering over forty million people. Their language is known as *Igbo* language, which has up to six different dialects. Igbo people are very religious in nature.

gory videos and pictures of people being beheaded, because they failed to accept a particular religion. In Nigeria, there is ongoing discussion about one girl called *Leah Shaibu*² who was abducted with other 105 schoolgirls by the Islamic extremist group known as Boko Haram³. She has not yet been released, and is even feared to have been tortured to death, simply because she refused to give up her Christian religion and convert to Islam, though her 105 co-victims who agreed to those terms were released when the Nigerian Government paid the demanded ransom for them. Besides her case, many people, especially in northern parts of Nigeria daily suffer deprivation of their houses and property in the hands of the Boko Haram and also in the hands of the more recent Islamic terrorists known as the Fulani Herdsmen⁴. It is hoped that a good understanding of the import of freedom of worship in the text, and the light from Igbo traditional religious freedom will help religious teachers and preachers to do a good job by teaching their audience (especially the fanatics or extremists) to have respect for diverse religious views. We shall now cast an exegetical look at Josh 24:1-28, using narrative and literary analytical approach. This will be followed by a discussion on the African-Igbo traditional religious practice, and by a correlation of the two, so as to get a synthesis for an informed conclusion.

Exegesis and Theology of Joshua 24:1-28

Before concentrating on the most pertinent statement in Josh 24:1-28 (“choose today for yourselves whom you will serve”, v. 15), it is necessary to look at the text *en globo*. The text deals with the assembly of the Israelites at Shechem under the guidance of Joshua, for the renewal of their covenant with Yahweh, their God (cf. Exod 20:1-7; 24:1-11). The assembly happened at the end of their occupation of the Promised Land and shortly before the death of Joshua (cf. 24:29). Josh 24:1-28 is a long text that is divisible into four parts: (1) verse 1 is introductory (the assembly was convoked by Joshua); (2) verses 2-13 present Joshua’s survey of Yahweh’s redemptive acts for the Israelites; (3) verses 14-24 contain Joshua’s exhortation and the people’s positive response; and (4) verses 25-28 present the covenant and its documentation.

Verse 1 (introductory): Chapter 23 serves as the immediate, preparatory context for the assembly and the covenant renewal, because in 23:1-8, Joshua made a call to the people to be obedient to the covenant, in 23:9-13, he reiterated the call for obedience to the covenant, and finally in 23:14-16, he announced his impending death and made a third call for obedience, followed by the assembly at Shechem (24:1-28). Hence, the *waw* that begins 24:1 is better rendered as *waw consecutivum* (afterwards or then) rather than as *waw conjunctivum* (and), such that the phrase *wayye “esōph yehōshua”* will be: “Then Joshua gathered” (cf. *RSV*), not “And Joshua gathered” (cf. *KJV*, following the *kai* in the *Septuagint*, *LXX*). Because the gathering was *before God* (*liphn Ūhā’ēlōhīm*) the *LXX* tends to do an emendation by locating this assembly at Shiloh, the sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant was. However, the emendation is not necessary, because Shechem is an ancient city in Canaan where Abraham built an altar to Yahweh, thereby making the place holy too (Gen 12:6-7). Also, Jacob bought a piece of land there where he built an altar also (Gen 33:18-18-20). Even Josh 24:26 explicitly calls Shechem “the holy place of the Lord”. So, the expression (*before God*) “is

² Cf. such news item as: Nigeria, Security News (2019) and Omokir (2019). The debate continues while the innocent girl suffers agony in the hands of the *Boko Haram*, or *rests in peace* among the brutally killed people.

³ The *Boko Haram* extremists have killed hundreds of innocent people through shootings, beheadings and suicide bombings, as part of their “faithful service” to Allah, their God, see ElombahNews. (2018). They are even waxing stronger daily, as Ukwu (2019).

⁴ There are constantly such bad news items about them: Ochei (2019).

sufficiently accounted for through Shechem's sacred associations going back to patriarchal times" (Woudstra, 1981, p. 342).

Verses 2-13: Joshua's long survey of Yahweh's redemptive acts for the Israelites: It was a case of a covenant renewal, so the people needed to be clearly told what they were undertaking and why they were to do so. One can describe a covenant (*b'rit*, Hebrew, *diathēkē*, Greek) as an agreement between two persons or two parties which binds or bonds them together. A covenant is different from a contract, because a covenant involves an exchange of persons ("I am yours, you are mine"; "I am your God, and you are my people", cf. Jer 24:7; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 34:24), but in a contract things or services are exchanged (*do ut des*, "I give you this, you give me that") (Obinwa, 2018, p. 230). In the Old Testament, the term covenant occurs about 245 times, embracing fresh covenants and their renewals between God and human beings, and among human beings⁵. It has been noted by scholars that there exist some resemblances between biblical covenants and some Ancient Near Eastern treaties, such as the Hittite suzerainty treaties of the Late Bronze Age. In the Hittite suzerainty treaties, one sees the following features: (a) Identification of the Covenant Giver (his self-introduction); (b) The Historical Prologue (narrating past deeds); (c) The Stipulations (commands and prohibitions which must be accepted); (d) The Provision for Deposit and Periodic Public Reading; (e) The List of Witnesses to the Treaty; (f) The Blessings and Curses; (g) The Ratification Ceremony; and (h) The Imposition of the Curses (Mendenhall & Herion, 1992).

Though biblical covenants are unique in their formulations, some of the features of the extra-biblical treaties are found in the Sinai covenant (Exod 20:1-7; 24:1-11) and in its renewal in Josh 24:1-28. For instance, Josh 24: 2-13 would serve as the identification of the covenant giver and the historical prologue. Then, the stipulations and the people's acceptance thereof can be found in verses 14-18 and 23-25, verses 19-20 implicitly contain the imposition of the curses, verse 26 takes care of the provision for deposit and periodic public reading, while 21-22 and 27-28 bear the list of witnesses. In the Hittite suzerainty treaties, the witnesses were the deities of the land. But since Israel worships only Yahweh, the people themselves, and even a huge stone nearby, were called upon to serve as witnesses (cf. Josh 24:21-22, 27). Unlike the Sinai covenant which was ratified in Exod 24:1-11 with two covenant ritual-acts of a sacred meal and a blood ritual (Obinwa, 2019; Mendenhall & Herion, 1992), the covenant renewal at Shechem has no such ratification ceremonies, perhaps because the original ratification (Exod 24:1-11) was still valid.

In v. 2, Joshua speaks prophetically, employing the messenger formula: "Thus says the Lord", (*kō- 'āmar 'ādōnai/yhwh*), showing that God is now speaking to the people through Joshua⁶. From verses 2-13, therefore Joshua speaks in the first person singular rather than in the third person form of speech. Yahweh, the covenant giver, narrates through Joshua all he did right from the time of Abraham and Terah, his father, up to his bringing the descendants of Abraham, the Israelites, out of their Egyptian bondage, and giving them the Promised Land. The redemptive history was geared towards making them see the reason why they should bind themselves anew in a covenant to serve Yahweh.

Verses 14-24: Joshua's exhortation and the people's positive response: After narrating the benevolence of God for the people (historical prologue), Joshua now speaks in his own person, exhorting them to be loyal to God alone and neither get back to the deities served by their ancestor Terah before his son Abraham was called

⁵ For such covenants or treaties between God and human beings and between human beings and their fellow human beings cf. Gen 9:9-17; Gen 15:18; 17:2-21; 21:27-32; 26:25-29; Exod 19:ff; 24:1-11, and Josh 24:1-28.

⁶ Regarding this messenger formula, see Obinwa (2012, p. 290).

from his family⁷ nor to the deities they served in Egypt and beyond River Jordan (v. 14). Joshua then adds: “And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve ... but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (v 15, RSV)⁸. So, the people were granted the freedom of choice, to worship Yahweh their God or to worship other gods (Auld, 1984)⁹. Joshua himself decided for his household to serve Yahweh, and the people did the same.

This freedom of worship in Josh 24:15 sounds rather unusual vis-à-vis some other “divine instructions” in the Deuteronomistic corpus (Noth, 1991)¹⁰. For instance, there is this draconian instruction of extermination attributed to Moses:

... in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded; that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices which they have done in the service of their gods, and so to sin against the LORD your God. (Deut 20:16-18)

In this text, the Hebrew verb *hāram* (*to ban, to destroy*, v. 17, used here in the *hiphil*) is intensively doubled (*kî-haḥārēm taḥārīmēm*), meaning literally; “but destroy them, you shall destroy them”. It shows that there would be no compromise in carrying out the instruction. Also, in Deut 7:2-6, we read:

... when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them; then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them. ... you shall break down their altars ... and burn their graven images with fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God.

It is really hard to explain why God would give such instruction. As Luke Ijezie (2011-2012) rightly remarked,

The most disturbing thing about some religious beliefs is that God is said to have revealed them. But when, as sometimes happens, such beliefs turn out to be very oppressive one runs into the crisis of theologically defending their divine origin. (p. 12)

It needs to be noted, however, that the Deuteronomistic history of Israel (stretching from the Book of Deuteronomy to that of 2 Kings) is a theological history, in the sense that normal historiographical events were given theological interpretation. Where Israel defeated their enemies, it was thanks to the help of their God. Where they were defeated, it was interpreted as being a result of their sin of unfaithfulness to the covenant stipulations. When, for instance, they were defeated and taken captive to Babylon as exiles, they suffered the emotional shock of fearing that perhaps the Babylonian god (Marduk) had defeated Yahweh, their God. But Ezekiel had to tell them that it was rather a result of their covenantal unfaithfulness (cf. Ezek 36:16-19) (Obinwa, 2012). They needed then to be removed from anything or anybody that might lead them into unfaithfulness to the covenant, hence the purported divine genocidal instruction in Deut 20:16-18. As Zevit (2007) has noted, “The Deuteronomistic justification for the genocide is twofold: culture contaminates and culture seduces. Canaanites and their religion were held to be so alluring that if left alive, they would inevitably entice seducible Israelites into the worship of their gods” (p. 26).

⁷ Perhaps Abraham also joined his former relatives in serving idols before he knew Yahweh.

⁸ The Revised Standard Version (RSV) is employed in this paper because it is very close to the Hebrew original in its translations.

⁹ Asking the people here (Josh 24:15) to choose whom to worship is then a special privilege. Usually, choice belongs to God (cf. Ps 33:12; 2 Sam 6:21; 1 Chron 28:4; Ezek 20:5).

¹⁰ This corpus stretches from the Book of Deuteronomy to the end of 2 Kings.

The point is that the choice presented to the Israelites in Josh 24:15 is very unique, and the people responded positively that they would be faithful servants of Yahweh (vv. 16-18). Even when Joshua warned them of the bad consequences of their possible unfaithfulness, they insisted on their choice (vv. 19-24). Disturbing, however, is Joshua's statement about God: "He is a holy God; he is a jealous God" (v. 19), therefore there is need for some clarification on it. Jealousy is ordinarily a negative attribute, but while human jealousy entails resentment towards another person for some perceived superiority or advantage, God's jealousy is a demand for total submission and adherence to his ordinances, which are meant to engender peace and harmony in the world, for the benefit of human beings (Ex 20:1-17). Thus, Robertson (1990) says:

Generally jealousy conveys a negative image. The jealousy [of] man makes even his loved ones miserable. But God's jealousy must be seen in a different light. God is "jealous" or "zealous" that his own honor be maintained. A departure from wholehearted submission to God can only bring chaos into the world. Once a person creates in his mind another god, moral disorder follows inevitably. (p. 59)

Etymologically, the Hebrew verb *qānā*' (from which the adjective *qannā*', "jealous", is derived) can mean "to be jealous", "to be envious", and also "to be zealous for" (*Langenscheidt's Hebrew Dictionary to the Old Testament*, n.d., p. 801; Lambdin, 1988, p. 327). Therefore, the Hebrew phrase 'el *qannō*' (Josh 24:19) can be translated as "a jealous God" or "a zealous God". Woudstra (1981) described God's jealousy as God's zeal, saying:

Two things are said about God.... God is holy, and he is jealous. God's holiness (Heb. *qōdeš*) is that which makes him incomparable (1 Sam. 2:2).... When that holiness is violated by sinful man it expresses itself in "jealousy", God's zeal for the maintenance of his honor. This zeal can be shown through acts of punishment upon evildoers or through acts of vindication on behalf of God's people (cf. Exod. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 5:9). (p. 353)

When people disregard God, there reigns moral disorder, world peace is jeopardised, and harmony is automatically disarranged. So, God's zeal or God's jealousy in protecting his sovereignty is not necessarily advantageous to God but is really for the good of the world. Therefore, the disturbing words of Josh 24:19 are indeed pointing towards God's zeal to maintain his sovereignty and care over his creation, because his holiness hinders him from contaminating himself with evil of all kinds, e.g., oppression. Therefore, God protects his people zealously/jealously from those who oppress them. That is why he initiated the Exodus events saying: "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" (Ex 3:7-8).

Verses 25-28: The covenant and its documentation: Joshua finally made the covenant with the people, writing down its statute (vv. 25-26). He then set up a stone, to which he assigned the duty of serving as a witness (v. 27), together with the Israelites themselves (cf. v. 22). He then dismissed them (v. 28). It can be seen that the people were allowed to choose or reject adhering to the worship of Yahweh. All that Joshua did was to tell them why it was necessary for them to choose Yahweh among the various deities¹¹ mentioned, and also to remind them of the danger of their attempting to be syncretic about it because Yahweh would not brook any unfaithfulness. So, the religious freedom offered here is choosing either strict monolatry (Yahwism) or strict adherence to other deities, not polyatry in the sense of worshipping Yahweh and other deities. This is because of their covenant with Yahweh (cf. Ex 20:1-3).

¹¹ There is constant ambivalence in the OT as to whether the Jews regarded Yahweh as the only existent deity (monotheism), or whether other deities exist but only Yahweh should be worshipped (monolatry). For details on this, see Heiser (2008)

The Igbo Traditional Method of Practising Religion

Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, as in many other African traditional societies, there are deities for every local community, for villages and even for families. Indeed, there are often many of them in a particular locality. For instance, worshipped in Nnewi town (in Igboland), were/are¹² such deities as *Edo*, *Ezemewi*, *Ulas*, *Ubu*, *Uzukpe*, *Ogwugwu*, *Akpu* and *Ana*, all of them having priests and shrines. According to Ikenga-Metuh (1987), “Shrines and temples especially in West Africa are monuments of religious art. There are different kinds of shrines.... There are family, village and clan altars and shrines” (p. 27)¹³. All over Africa, there are various deities too, for instance, there is Sango deity in Yoruba part of Nigeria, as well as the deities *Tano* and *Ta Yao* in Ashanti, Ghana (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987). The African-Igbo deities appear not to be jealous against one another from the point of view of demanding monolatry or the exclusive loyalty of all those adherent to them. Many of them are served simultaneously by the same people, but for various purposes because the African-Igbo deities generally have utilitarian values, offering different helps to the people.

An Igbo community would go to another community and bring the relics of a deity known to specialise in one thing or another and establish a shrine of that deity within the community, with the hope of gaining from it what it was known for. For instance, an Igbo male deity called *Ufiojioku* was known for granting bumper farm harvest while *Ogwugwu* (a female deity) was known for facilitating human fertility. Each of the deities was expected to concentrate on its own area of specialization, *zealously* providing for the people in that area, without feeling *jealous* when its worshippers turn to other deities for their needs which are related to the areas of specialization of the other deities. It is then this provident zeal, the nuance of *zealousness* in the Hebrew word *qānā*, rather than that of jealousy, that is easily applicable to the African-Igbo deities, because they were believed to be very *zealous* in providing good things for their adherents in their areas of specialization.

The nuance of *jealousy* may only come in when one thinks of the protective *jealousy* of the deities in Igboland for their *Osu*, i.e., persons “sacrificed alive” or dedicated to deities without immolation (Alutu, 1985; Arinze, 1970). Nobody would dare to harm an *Osu* for fear of incurring the *jealous* wrath of the particular deity that owns him/her. But *jealousy* meaning *exclusive loyalty* to a particular deity is far from Igbo world-view since polylatry was freely practised in the area before Christianity brought the idea of monolatry, and no traditional deity frowned at it.

The Exegetical Findings on Josh 24:1-28 and the Igbo Method of Practising Religion

The above exegetical discussion of the text of Joshua 24:1-28 shows that a covenant was made between Yahweh and the Israelites, thereby establishing a special relationship between them. It was then *ad rem* that the people chose to worship Yahweh even when they were given room to choose between Yahweh and the deities mentioned in v. 15, unlike in some other biblical texts¹⁴. The point emanating from the text is that though the Israelites were bound to a special relationship of exclusive allegiance to Yahweh (monolatry) through their

¹² *Past and present tenses* are used because the effects of Christianity have ousted and obliterated some of the deities while some still have a few adherents, especially with the recrudescence of traditional religious sentiments in some parts of Igboland and African in general.

¹³ For the numerous deities found within the towns of Nnewi North and Nnewi South Local Government Areas, see Okeke (2019), 24-27.

¹⁴ In Deut 17:2-7, for instance, any person accused of worshipping or sacrificing to idols was subjected to scrutiny, and if found guilty of the offence, he/she was condemned to death by stoning.

covenant (Ex 20:1-3), they freely chose to remain in it, such that they were declared witnesses to the fact of their avowed exclusive faithfulness to Yahweh (vv. 19-27).

In the Igbo cultural milieu, covenants also create special relationships like in the OT¹⁵. Thus, according to Patrick (2015), “Covenant is responsible for relationships: person to person; divinity to persons; as much as it also serves as a preventive measure against the potential threat to peace and tranquillity” (p. 34). However, human beings and deities hardly make covenants in Igboland. The only semblance of such a divine-human covenant would be the case of voluntary *Osu* system in which one would willingly dedicate oneself to a deity with the effect that the deity owns and protects the person while the person serves the deity, but the person has still the freedom to seek favour from another that is deity specialised in something. Such a protection-oriented pact was done during inter-tribal wars in the olden days. But in covenants made among human beings, the divine is always the chief witness and so punishes any of the covenant parties that eventually breaches the terms of the covenant. Thus, Nyoyoko (2003) said that

in any case of making a covenant in Africa, the human party is enjoined to be in a perfect state of active goodness towards one another in both the religious and social endeavours. The divine party sees to it that the terms of the covenant are kept strictly and in event of a breach it punishes the offender. (Nyoyoko, 2003, p. viii, as cited in Patrick, 2015, p. 27)

As for religious freedom, there was no coercion at all in traditional Igbo society regarding which deity to serve and which to repudiate. Polylatry was allowed since deities have various specialisations or what they were believed to be capable of providing for their worshippers. The number of deities a community would have would then depend on the number of them that could solve the people’s problems. Also, nobody was traditionally maltreated because he/she refused to join in the worshipping ceremonies of any particular deity. People joined in public worship very freely and naturally out of the joy of being parts of their local community.

Religious Plurality and Conflicts in Nigeria: Recommendations from Josh 24:1-28

Religious Plurality in Nigeria

There is plurality of religions in Nigeria, to which Igbo people belong. The major ones are Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion (ATR). While Christianity and Islam preach monotheism and practise monolatry, for the Igbo traditional religionists, and indeed for most Africans, the issue is polylatry or the worship of many deities, even when they believe that there is only one God, known as *the Supreme Being* (*Chukwu* in Igbo language), to whom the other deities minister (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987). Their regard for this God is expressed mainly in the theophoric names they bear, such as *Chukwuka* (God is supreme), *Chukwuneke* (God creates), *Chukwuma* (God knows [everything]), and *Chukwuebuka* (God is great). The relationship among the three major religions is not always cordial, although freedom of worship is enshrined in the Constitution.

Religious Conflicts in Nigeria

There are two forms of religious conflicts in Nigeria. First, there is sometimes non-bloody but unhealthy rivalry or competition among various Christian denominations. Some Christian fanatics also engage sometimes in non-bloody religious violence by destroying the shrines of some traditional deities, feeling happy that they are serving God thereby. But that cannot be proper unless there is no longer any single adherent to the particular deities owning the shrines, or that the few remaining adherents have willingly given away their

¹⁵ Von Rad (1975) where he notes that a covenant may “designate the relationship of communion between two partners” (p. 129).

shrines for destruction. Otherwise, it would be uncharitable destroying something which is valuable to somebody or some people. The freedom of choice offered in Josh 24:15 and in traditional Igbo religious ideology of freedom of worship can help ameliorate the tendency towards religious intolerance.

Secondly, there is the bloody type of religious fanaticism which is very worrisome. Such is found among members of the Islamic extremist groups, like the ISIS in some Asian countries and the Boko Haram in Nigeria, including more recently also the murderous Fulani Herdsmen. They believe in violent and bloody conversion of people to Islam. So, they abduct and torture those they regard as infidels, killing many of them brutally, and sacking thousands of people from their ancestral homes. They tend to work under the motto: convert to Islam or face indignities and even death! It is recommended that the teachers and leaders of religious groups in Nigeria, and in other parts of the world, should be people trained in religious serenity. Otherwise, they would mislead their youthful audience into thinking that bloody violence is part of religious piety. It is such brain-washing in the name of teaching that can make a sane person to load himself/herself with lethal explosives and act as a suicide bomber, killing and dying with the victims. Good teachers of religion have the duty of letting people know that all human beings are children of the same God, and no one can really serve God aright by killing fellow children of God.

The Holy Bible and the Holy Qur'an have a lot of helpful passages. For instance, the *Holy Qur'an, Sūra ii, 115* states: "To God belong the East and the West: whithersoever ye turn, there is the Presence of God. For God is All-Pervading, All-Knowing". In *Sūra v. 77*, one reads: "Why turn they not to God, and seek His forgiveness? For God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful", while *Sūra lxxxv, 14* says of God: "And He is the Oft-Forgiving, full of loving-kindness". The Holy Bible begins thus: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1), an assertion that it is God who created everything and everybody, and therefore he owns everything and everybody. Such passages which show that all human beings belong to God who is *merciful* should be read with emphasis so as to induce universal brotherhood and sisterhood as well as loving actions among people. Any passage that encourages religious violence should be read *with due explanation* of its ancient socio-cultural background, emphasising its obsolescence or its non-literal application. The Governments have also a major role to play in fostering religious peace. Where a Government is perceived as favouring a particular religion to the detriment of others, religious anarchy is inevitable. Peter Tanko (2015) had rightly proffered dialogue as a solution to religious conflicts saying that *Dialogue* should be made a compulsory subject in schools and universities, and that Government should sponsor Nollywood film producers to produce home videos which present the positive outcomes of dialogue in resolving conflicts. Positively, Matthew Kukah (2013) said that Obasanjo Administration in Nigeria did well by "Breaking New Grounds for Dialogue: From Belligerence to Accommodation" (p. 13). Every religion should aim at engendering peace and harmonious co-existence among human beings (God's children), and not violence and acrimony.

Conclusion

It is clear that both from the biblical text (Josh 24:1-28) and from the Igbo religious context, there is freedom of worship. The Israelites were offered the opportunity of declaring: "The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey" (v. 24). The Igbo people were traditionally allowed to choose the deities they felt would solve their problems, and no individual or group was forced to pay allegiance to any particular deity. It was all a free-choice issue. This mentality made the early Igbo adherents to Christianity not to be disturbed much about the various Christian denominations that came as missionaries to their localities. They joined

anyone one of their choice, especially the one that provided school education. The early converts to Christianity did not go against those who still held to the traditional religion of their local communities. Even the more recent “charismatic Christians” (fanatics) who sometimes try to destroy some shrines of traditional deities are cautioned by the local Church authorities against such. Some Igbo Christians, however, tend to be syncretic by going back to their traditional religious practices when they meet life challenges. The local Church frowns and teaches against such because Christians have entered into a covenant with God through their baptism and communion in Christ (cf. Gal 3:27; 1Cor 11:25), and are therefore bound to God as was the case with the Jews.

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