Journal of the Council for Research on Religion

Onye Agbataobim (My Neighbour) – One Who Finds Refuge in My Heart: On the Significance of Igbo Theological Anthropology for Theological Education in our Time (Keynote Address)

Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi

Volume 4, Number 2, Spring–Summer 2023

Who is My Neighbour? Interfaith Dialogue and Theological Education in the Global Village

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109995ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.26443/jcreor.v4i2.94

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Council for Research on Religion

ISSN

2563-0288 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Atansi, C. (2023). Onye Agbataobim (My Neighbour) – One Who Finds Refuge in My Heart: On the Significance of Igbo Theological Anthropology for Theological Education in our Time (Keynote Address). *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion, 4*(2), 114–127. https://doi.org/10.26443/jcreor.v4i2.94

Article abstract

In fashioning a response to the question “Who is my neighbour?” – which informs the subject of the symposium on “Theological Education in the Global Village of the 21st Century” – this essay explores the contributions of the Igbo theological anthropology of the neighbour. Igbo theological anthropology considers the neighbour, not simply as one with whom my home shares a boundary, but as one who finds refuge in my heart (onye agbataobim), that is, one with whom there is mutual dependence, vulnerability, and support. This relational understanding of the neighbour in Igbo theological anthropology further derives from the Igbo conception of the human person as “the beauty of life” (mmadụ), and the corresponding attitude of love, “the act of beholding” (ịfunanya), which the sight of, or rather, the encounter with every human person, ought to evoke. The article will outline the significance of these insights for theological education in our time. Such education, the essay argues, ought to take seriously again the fact that there is something irreducibly astonishing about the human person – each and every human being – regardless of geographical boundaries, physical proximity, as well as social, political, and economic connections.

Doi: https://www.doi.org/10.26443/jcreor.v4i2.94

Onye Agbataobim (My Neighbour) – One Who Finds Refuge in My Heart: On the Significance of Igbo Theological Anthropology for Theological Education in our Time[1]

Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi, *McGill University*

Abstract: In fashioning a response to the question "Who is my neighbour?" – which informs the subject of the symposium on "Theological Education in the Global Village of the 21st Century" – this essay explores the contributions of the Igbo theological anthropology of the neighbour. Igbo theological anthropology considers the neighbour, not simply as one with whom my home shares a boundary, but as one who finds refuge in my heart (*onye agbataobim*), that is, one with whom there is mutual dependence, vulnerability, and support. This relational understanding of the neighbour in Igbo theological anthropology further derives from the Igbo conception of the human person as "the beauty of life" (*mmadụ*), and the corresponding attitude of love, "the act of beholding" (*ịfunanya*), which the sight of, or rather, the encounter with every human person, ought to evoke. The article will outline the significance of these insights for theological education in our time. Such education, the essay argues, ought to take seriously again the fact that there is something irreducibly astonishing about the human person – each and every human being – regardless of geographical boundaries, physical proximity, as well as social, political, and economic connections.

Keywords: *Onye agbataobim* (my neighbour), *mmadụ* (beauty of life), *ịfunanya* (love), Igbo, theological anthropology, theological education

This essay brings an Igbo theological-anthropological vision to our understanding of who a neighbour is and fleshes out its significance for theological education in today's world.[2] The essay argues that how we understand a neighbour has enormous implications for our talk about God, life, and the world.[3] More specifically, the understanding of the neighbour has consequences for "theological education for the global village of the twenty-first century," to advert the theme of the symposia. Addressing the

1. This essay is based on the keynote lecture I gave at the *Who is My Neighbour? Interfaith Dialogue & Theological Education in the Global Village of the 21st Century* Symposia organized by the McGill School of Religious Studies in collaboration with The Canadian Centre for Ecumenism, held on October 19th and 21st, 2022, at the School of Religious Studies, McGill University, Canada.

2. Igbo is an ethnic group in south-eastern Nigeria. The Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria with a total population estimated in 2022 to be around 40.2 million (21% of Nigeria's total population). They are natively found in five states of Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States. A sizeable Igbo population is also found in other parts of Africa, like Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and the Benin Republic, as well as outside of Africa.

3. This is a central idea in many works of theological anthropology. See, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985); Ray Sherman Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991); Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018); and the contributions in the recent work by Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology* (London: T&T Clark, 2021).

question "Who is my neighbour" and exploring its significance for theological education in our time is an invitation to discover something more about our common humanity. In doing so, "we enter into the world that faith creates or the world that faith trains [us] to inhabit," as Rowans Williams perceptively points out.[4] This world, "the new creation," is a world in which we cultivate an alternative consciousness, a consciousness which enables us, according to Williams, to "see, sense, and relate differently" with one another, with God, and with the world itself.[5]

This train of reasoning will be developed in four steps. First, I will tease out in broad strokes the problem to be addressed, which is the limited and limiting sense of who my neighbour is that we find in most sociological and anthropological resources and in the conversations that relate directly or indirectly to the issue of the neighbour. I will also explore briefly how various scholars and practitioners of faith and Christian theology have tried to grapple with the problem. Building on their efforts, in the second section, I will further expand the understanding of neighbour by retrieving a uniquely relational dynamic found in the Igbo understanding of my neighbour as "*onye agbataobim*." In the third section, I will further develop this Igbo theological anthropology of the neighbour with two Igbo words, *mmadụ* and *ịfunanya* – the human person as the beauty of life to be *seen*, to be loved. Fourth, I will present the significance of these insights for theological education in our time under three coordinates – language, style, and means.

The Problem to be Addressed: Our Limited and Limiting Sense of the Neighbour

"And who is my neighbour?", the rich young man asked Jesus in the Gospel of Luke chapter 10 verse 29. In raising this question, the young man participated in one of humanity's oldest and perennial tasks – of seeking to understand oneself and the other, of oneself in relation to the other, of the other in relation to myself, and, very importantly, of oneself and the other in relation to that Other, namely God, who is the ground of every being. Philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and politicians have pursued this question endlessly, producing myriad answers and perspectives. However, we might well wonder why this question is such a complex one to answer even in our day despite its seeming simplicity. Of course, we know who a neighbour is. We have neighbours and we live in neighbourhoods. Thus, the concept of neighbour is a familiar one. Despite our intimate familiarity with the concept, with the experience of having neighbours and being neighbours ourselves, we continue to be plagued with uncertainty about "who my neighbour is" and what it means to be neighbours in today's world.

For many persons, there is no identifiable reality or entity that is a point of reference or that constitutes *the* answer to the question. Instead, the entity is a fragmented and continuously shifting compilation of experiences and relationships.[6] We know this, for instance, when we think of the politics of identity, particularly in the many, often-charged conversations relating to the protection of national borders

4. Rowan Williams, "Theological Education is for Everyone," *Christianity Today*, August 21, 2020, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/august-web-only/rowan-williams-theological-education-for-everyone.html.

5. Williams, "Theological Education."

6. I am indebted to Marc Cortez for this line of reasoning, even though he pursues this in the broader but related context of the search for an understanding of the human person. Cortez's ideas help to shed light on the problem I seek to address in this section. See Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 1–3, esp. 2.

and the debates on migration.[7]

In our times, similar to the time of the rich young man, the understanding of a neighbour is often rendered in relation to socio-cultural and geographical boundaries along the lines of North and South, black and white; political alliances of all sorts between the progressives and conservatives, liberals vs. traditionalists, lefts and rights; economic connections; religious belongingness and ethnic groups. These designations come under what Rosemary Carbine aptly refers to as "negative relations."[8] There is also the understanding of neighbour in relation to one's sexuality leading to what I could describe as the "letterization" or "alphabetization" of human beings – L, G, B, T, Q, I, A…the letters go on. Such ways of referring to a human person work against the Igbo theological anthropological vision of *the human person as the beauty of life*, a beauty that defies categorization in terms of a given experience, be it sexual, colour, class, religion, political affiliation, or ethnicity.

Thus, I find all these constructions limiting in a way that makes us feel more uncertain about our ability to answer the question "Who is my neighbour?". The categories employed for an understanding of neighbour in relation to the aforementioned blocks have overtaken broader, inclusive, integrative and empathetic ideas of who my neighbour is. We have built walls rather than bridges. What we have is an increasing anti-immigrant sentiment, diverse shades of xenophobic attacks, rioting on college campuses, and the return of open white supremacy to our politics. These are some of the consequences amongst many others that we witness on a daily basis in our world as a result of the limited and limiting sense of who my neighbour is.[9]

The limited and limiting sense of neighbour prevents us from *seeing* what links me to children starving in Southern Madagascar, the victims of the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, or the tremendous burdens laid on women in many parts of the Middle East. The narrow and narrowing understandings of neighbour in terms of boundaries and/or borders bear the potential of inhibiting one from seeing what implicates them in the fate of the unemployed, the homeless, the poor in one's own society, and even in one's own neighbourhood. Hence, we see in our time a growing lack of interest in the encounter with a neighbour. A simple example is what I find in some multicultural societies I have lived in. I think here of my experience living in Belgium, the United Kingdom, and now in Canada. In these places, one could live in an apartment for years without really getting to encounter or at least know the person who lives next door, even when they happen to run into each other time and again in the same building.

The Jewish rabbi and scholar Jonathan Sacks recognize that such experiences and the categorizations of the human person accruing from a limited and limiting understanding of the neighbour wither our capacity for social responsibility.[10] According to Sacks, they have led to an ethic, even sometimes, regrettably so, a Christian ethic, "that has tended to turn inward, becoming a matter of personal

---

7. Francis Fukuyama captures it in his book *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2018). Theologians have also wrestled with the question "Who is my neighbour?" in the context of their particular engagement with the issue of migration. See, for example, William Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). See also Daniel Groody and Gioacchino Campese, eds., *Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) and Daniel G. Groody, *A Theology of Migration: The Bodies of Refugees and the Body of Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022).

8. Rosemary P. Carbine, "The Relational Turn in Theological Anthropology," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 71–72.

9. See Fukuyama's engagement with some of these issues in *Identity*, particularly in the eleventh chapter of the book entitled "From Identity to Identities," 105–123.

10. Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 7.

choice rather than collective responsibility. In the case that we have grown used to delegating such responsibilities to governments, in return for which we pay taxes – substituting politics for ethics, law for moral obligation, and impersonal agencies for personal involvement."[11] To cite one example, in recent times, those who are opposed to migration (mis)use the concept of Christian identity, which according to them needs to be protected from strangers.[12] Those who uphold such a view tend to forget the fact that "encounters with strangers" as the world historian William H. MacNeill once put it, are "the main drive wheel of [positive] social change."[13]

Besides, what is most striking about the word "neighbour," particularly in its New Testament usage, as seen in the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man, is the extent to which the word defies the logic of conventional geographical, psycho-social, political, economic, and religious taxonomies. This is how Benedict XVI accounts for this problem in an attempt to trace the path to a new understanding of the concept of neighbour. According to him:

> Until that time [the time of Jesus], the concept of "neighbour" was understood as referring essentially to one's countrymen and to foreigners who had settled in the land of Israel, in other words, to the closely-knit community of a single country or people. This limit is now abolished. Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour. The concept of "neighbour" is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now.[14]

A similar effort to deal with the problem is found in the recent social encyclical of Pope Francis *Fratelli Tutti* on Fraternity and Social Friendship. The word "neighbour," in the society of Jesus' time, usually meant those nearest to us. It was felt that help should be given primarily to those of one's own group and race. For some Jews of that time, Samaritans were looked down upon, and considered impure. They were not among those to be helped. Jesus, himself a Jew, completely transforms this approach. He asks us not to decide who is close enough to be our neighbour, but rather that we ourselves become a neighbour to all."[15]

But I didn't come across this profoundly relational understanding of neighbour first from the New Testament, nor from the Popes' appropriation of the biblical pericope under consideration. I came across it first from my indigenous context and worldview, precisely in the Igbo expression for neighbour and experience of neighbourly encounters, growing up with my grandmothers, Chijioke and Udego, both of blessed memories. This brings me to the second section of my contribution where I discuss the Igbo understanding of the neighbour in response to the question of our reflection.

---

11. Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World*, 7
12. For a detailed discussion of this problem in the European context, see Stephan van Erp, "Christ, the Stranger: The Theological Relevance of Migration," in *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, ed. Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 273.
13. William H. McNeill, "The Changing Shape of World History," *History and Theory* 34, no. 2 (May 1995): 18.
14. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* [Encyclical Letter on Christian Love], The Holy See, December 25, 2005, no. 15, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.
15. Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* [Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship], The Holy See, October 3, 2020, no. 80, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

Expanding the Understanding of a Neighbour: Of a Relational Dynamic with "*OnyeAgbataobim*"

As already hinted above, a theological anthropological perspective on the concept of "my neighbour" is radically different from a sociological or geographical one, and should have consequences for theological education in the twenty-first century. The perspective is informed and formed by the appreciation of the fact that there is something irreducibly astonishing about the human person – each and every human being – regardless of geographical boundaries, physical proximity, and social, political, and economic connections. Even though these nomenclatures may be employed in describing a neighbour (the other human person), they do not capture nor exhaust what makes us human persons. In other words, the human person, my neighbour, cannot be reduced to these categorizations even when they happen to be true about him or her. There is always *something more* about my neighbour. And this something more is based upon the fundamental understanding that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God.[16] What is more, the Igbo theological anthropological perspective of neighbour emphasizes the interrelatedness of every human person, which speaks to the core of the Igbo view of human life and relations.

Speaking of interrelatedness, in my Igbo community, one of the first things an Igbo person does when he or she moves into a new home is to visit or, at least, get to know those who live next to his or her home.[17] It is the typical Igbo way of settling into a new neighbourhood. Living with my grandmothers offered me the opportunity to experience the joy and grace of relating with neighbours. For instance, my grandmother, Udego, on some occasions would send me to Mama Nkechi's house to ask if she could offer her some *ogili* for the soup she was preparing since she had run out of some in her *ekwu* (kitchen).[18] Mama Nkechi would gladly give her that. In joyful gratitude, my grandmother would offer her some soup at the end of the cooking. Some may wrongly describe this as a transactional economy, but it is more of a relational experience. With it I had and still have the grace of discovering how one can be dependent without humiliation, to ask for help without fear of being demeaned. It was an experience that opened my heart to *the beauty of life*, which every human being is. It increased my appreciation of the world and confidence about it as, indeed, one "global village," a theatre of relationships. This introduced me to the splendour of living and thriving with others together. The experience further revealed to me one of the essential conditions and dimensions of human life, which is interdependence, and if you like, graceful vulnerability, and the human capacity for mutual support.

Hence, the Igbo expression for "my neighbour" is "*agbataobim*." *Agbataobim* is a composite of two words: *agbata* and *obim*. *Agbataobim* has two semantic renditions. In the first rendition, *agbataobim* would consist of *agbata* (boundary/threshold) *óbím* (my home). In this sense, *agbataobim* would mean "one

16. For a fresh and refreshing discussion of this foundational and universal notion about the human person, see Michelle A. Gonzalez, "Created for God and for Each Other: Our Imago Dei," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, ed. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 61–70.
17. See: Patrick Anene Mmuo, *Igbo People and Igbo Culture* (Enugu: Snaap Press, 2013), 26; Simon Ottenberg, "A Moslem Igbo Village," in *Igbo Religion, Social Life and Other Essays by Simon Ottenberg*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006), 143–176; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "The Clustering of Igbo in the Americas," in *Igbo in the Atlantic World: African Origins and Diasporic Destinations*, ed. Toyin Falola and Raphael Chijioke Njoku (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 135–146. Hall begins his essay by citing an eighteenth-century description of the Igbo people by Moreau de St. Méry who observed that "the newly arrived [Igbo] find help, care, and example from those who have come before them" (135).
18. *Ogili* is a special homemade condiment for cooking a kind of soup called *ofe onugbu*, bitter leaf soup.

with whom my home shares a boundary." In the second complimentary rendition, *agbataobim* would mean *agbata* (to run) *óbìm* (my heart). In this sense, *agbataobim* would mean *one who runs into my heart, one who finds and takes refuge in my heart*.

The synchronization of these two renditions of *agbataobim* is potentially available in the rendering of the word *agbataobim* as "the threshold of my heart." And this synchronization achieves dual purposes. It marks my personalness, while at the same time opening up the possibility of a relational encounter with the "other." At the threshold of my heart, my personalness opens up to my relationality. This exciting matrix is enacted in the heart (*obi*) – the space where the beauty of life (*mmadụ*) and the act of beholding this beauty (*ịfunanya*) are well projected. In effect, my neighbour "*onye agbataobim*" becomes the one who, standing at the threshold of my heart, reinforces both my personality and relationality or better still, relationality-in-personalness.[19] There is a sense of "co-inherence" in this understanding of my neighbour as one who inhabits in me and I in him or her.[20] We participate in each other's life. My existence or identity is inextricably entangled with the existence or identity of the other, my neighbour. I can bear your burdens and you can bear mine for we exist and live in each other, and never as isolated individuals.

The Igbo understandings of a neighbour in these relational terms say something about the concept not just in reference to the other person but very importantly in relation to oneself. *Onye agbataobim*, the one who runs into my heart, who finds and takes refuge in my heart, can only be so because I have such a heart that the other could run into and find refuge in. This is another way of saying that I am implicated in my neighbour. It calls to mind one of South Africa's sublime concepts, *ubuntu*, which I shall return to in the final section of this contribution. The concept comes from the Zulu phrase "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*," which literally means that "a person is only a person through other people." Another translation of *ubuntu* is, "I am because you are, and I am who I am because we are who we are." But what are the conditions of the possibility of this Igbo understanding and experience of my neighbour as one who runs into the threshold of my heart and finds refuge in it? A response to this question leads me to the next section where I think further with the Igbo conception of the human person and the corresponding act of love, which the sight of a neighbour evokes.

---

19. I am grateful to John Bosco Igwe for drawing my attention to this idea. On the subject of person and personality in African thought and life see Charles Nyamiti, "The Incarnation Viewed from the African Understanding of Person," *African Christian Studies* 7, no. 1 (March 1991): 29–52; Mika Vähäkangas, "Person and Personality: A Synthesis between African and Thomistic Thought?", in *In Search of Foundations for African Catholicism: Charles Nyamiti's Theological Methodology* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 157–166. See also Rowan William's "What is a Person," in *Being Human*, 28–48. Relationality has also become a very central notion in recent explorations in theological anthropology. See, for instance, Carbine, "The Relational Turn." According to Carbine, "human beings are fundamentally relational not ruggedly individualist, self-asserting, self-aggrandizing, self-made or self-sufficient beings." They are so because "we are divinely created in and for *relationship* with God, ourselves, others and the Earth, even unto the cosmos" (71, emphasis mine).

20. The early twentieth-century British intellectual, Charles Williams, substantiates this idea in his many writings. The idea of "co-inherence" has long been recognized as an important contribution of Charles Williams to theology in general. It is based on the conviction that human persons "inhere" or "dwell" both in each other and in the triune God. The human person's inherence in the triune God is what affects and sustains the inherence of human persons in each other. See Paul S. Fiddes, *Friends in Co-inherence: Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), and Alice Mary Hadfield, *Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

Thinking Further from the Igbo Theological Anthropology: *Mmadụ* and *ịfunanya*

The Igbo theological anthropology of neighbour is further captured, or rather, grounded in the understanding of the human person as the beauty of life (*mmadụ*), and the corresponding attitude of love, the act of beholding this beauty (*ịfunanya*), which the sight of every human person ought to evoke. An authentically Christian theological anthropology of neighbour – and its implications for theological education in our time – must begin from and always uphold the wisdom that there is something irreducibly astonishing, something beautiful and awe-striking about the human person (cf. Psalm 139:13-14). Charles Nyamiti identifies this "something" as "the sacred vital force" or "the sacred vitality," which each and every human being *is*, regardless of origin, race, gender, sexuality, religion, physical proximity or those "negative relations" that we have set up and employed to exclude and subjugate one another.[21] Such a theological anthropology is set against the backdrop of, and engages, the dominant politicization and ideologization of the human person and his or her identity in categories that often diminish the whole mystery of a human person.

The Igbo word for human being, *mmadụ*, helps in shedding light on the theological anthropological depth of neighbour. It is another composite term made up of two words: *mma* and *ndụ*. *Mma* means beauty and *ndụ* means life. So *mmadụ* means the beauty of life. A human being is the beauty of life. Underlying these Igbo conceptions of the human person is one very basic theological assumption. It is this: the Igbos uphold that the beauty of life, which the human being is, is grounded in the Being that is ultimately beautiful, which our forebears refer to as *Chukwu*, the Supreme Being. According to Nyamiti, it is also "grounded on the idea of life – or, more exactly, fullness of life."[22] "Such vital plenitude," Nyamiti reflects, comprises various items: fecundity, wisdom, rights, beauty, etc."[23] One readily sees this Igbo African conception of the human being in some of the given names, like *Chukwuamaka* or *Chiamaka* (God is beautiful); *Chibumma* (God is beauty). This beauty of life shines out more in human lives that are attuned to the Being that is ultimately beautiful, namely God.[24] And what this beauty of life ought to evoke in every other life is a sense of awe at the entire reality of a being, my neighbour, whom I am extremely privileged to encounter. This is to say that the only response or attitude that is deserving of my neighbour is love. It is an attitude towards the other, those strangers, our neighbours, that acknowledges that there is more to anyone I encounter than I can scrutinize, understand, or control. Because as Igbo forebears say in simple translation, awe means love and love means awe – which is the capacity to behold. Hence the Igbo word for love is *Ifunanya*. *Ifunanya* means "I behold you." Its expanded meaning is "I see myself in seeing you."

With the conception of the human person as the beauty of life (*mmadụ*) and the fitting attitude of seeing this beauty as an act of love (*ịfunanya*), the Igbo theological anthropology of my neighbour (*agbataobim*) can provide theological education in our time with fresh insights and new orientations. It could do so in three ways which I reflect on in what follows in the final section of this essay.

---

21. Nyamiti, "The Incarnation," 35.
22. Nyamiti, "The Incarnation," 31, 33–34.
23. Nyamiti, "The Incarnation," 31.
24. Stan Chu Ilo, a Catholic theologian of Igbo descent, engages this idea in his book *Someone Beautiful to God: Finding the Light of Faith in a Wounded World* (New York: Paulist Press, 2020).

Significance for Theological Education in our Time: Language, Style, and Means

The understanding of neighbour in Igbo theological anthropology which we have been exploring in the preceding two sections using three closely related Igbo terminologies – *agbataobim*, *mmadụ* and *ịfunanya* – obviously bears enormous implications for theological education in our time. It inspires new approaches to theological education and opens new avenues for the kind of theological education that is urgently needed for reimagining the global village of the twenty-first century, to advert to the theme of this gathering. I would flesh the significance out on three levels – language, style, and means of theological education.

Language – Embracing Humanity

Theological education in and for the global village of the twenty-first century must, in the light of our reflections on the Igbo meaning of neighbour, seek to broaden or even reimagine its language to become more inclusive and embracing. The task of recreating and employing inclusive language inspired by a relational understanding of my neighbour in Igbo vocabularyis a critical and urgent one. For the American essayist, Marilynne Robinson, the task entails creating "a conceptual space large enough to accommodate human dignity" in all his or her beauty and "entire complex of subjective experience without diminishing translation into veiled self-interest."[25] This task of theological education is demanded since for a very long time inour education and human interactions we have employed languages that treated systems, ideologies and even doctrines as if their terms were sufficient to reality or offered a complete representation of human experience and of the world.[26] Thus, a theological education for our time, as Robinson perceptively writes, "would recover its old magisterial scale and confidence. It would address anything and relation among things, and give the world a supple, inclusive language, far more adequate to what we know, less restricted in what we acknowledge, than any we have at present."[27]

But we shouldn't think of this task as something that theologians just have to do withinthe ivory towers of their research and learning in the case that such languages would become what scholars have excogitated themselves. The theological task here can be properly carried out and accomplished within the context of what I call relational encounter, which the Igbo theological anthropology of neighbour inspires. This brings me to the second significance of the Igbo theological anthropology for theological education in our time in which I discuss relational encounter as a new theological style.

Style – Relational Encounter

The Igbo theological anthropology of neighbour bears the potential of fostering a new way of theological education in contemporary society. It is the way of relational encounters. This relational encounter is inspired by the neighbourly experience, which I first had with my grandmothers and their

25. Marilynne Robinson, "Theology for the Moment," in *What Are We Doing Here? Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 37.
26. Robinson, "Theology for the Moment," 37.
27. Robinson, "Theology for the Moment," 36. Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar explored this idea in his *A Theological Anthropology*, particularly in the chapters titled "Man as the Language of God" and "Christ as the Language of God" (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 239–305.

neighbours, as I presented above. *Agbatobim* inspires an African ethics of community affirming that a person is only a person through other persons. My neighbour is indeed a neighbour because I bear a heart that he or she can take refuge in.

The Igbo theological anthropology of neighbour, which grounds the relational encounter as a style of theological education in our time, begins with a recognition that we are all related through a bond of beauty and love. Thus, theological anthropology is one of the encounters that ought to move people to *see* our connectivity in the life and future of each other. It is only in encountering each other and affirming the sacred vitality of each other with respect and reverence that we can create conditions for human and cosmic flourishing. And many theologians, like Stan Chu Ilo, Laurenti Magesa, Miroslav Volf, and Emmanuel Katongole, have considered that advancing this human and cosmic flourishing – humanity's deepest longing for abundant life – ought to be the main goal of theological education in our time.[28]

But how can this human and cosmic flourishing be pursued within the context of theological education without becoming mere activism? This brings me to a discussion of the third significance of the Igbo theological anthropology of neighbour for theological education in our time.

Means – Contemplative Practice

Drawing on the related insights from the Igbo conception of the human being as the beauty of life to behold, to be seen, Igbo theological anthropology of neighbour has the potential of opening new ways of seeing "the other" and cultivating not just our minds but our hearts in the theological education of today. There is a sense in which education, from its Latin word *educare*, means "to train or to mode." Therefore, theological education in the global village of the twenty-first century should be capable of instilling in us the aptitude to see, recognize, and acknowledge the other. This act of seeing is not simply done with the physical eyes but with the eyes of the heart. The act of seeing is presupposed by the fact that the one whom I am granted to see, my neighbour, has first been seen and is always seen by that Other whose gaze has been cast upon every human being.[29] It is also an act of seeing that is proceeded by allowing oneself to be seen by that Other who sees each and every one of us in and from eternity. The eyes required to see my neighbour in the way that he or she is seen by God are given to me in faith as that act of letting myself be seen. This act of faith is realized through the practice or discipline of contemplation, which a theological education in our time should foster.

Contemplation as a practice has the potential to overcome those "negative relations" and commonly perceived dichotomies in our encounters with others. It can engender new, practical forms of thought and action for more human and humane encounters in our time. Contemplation is "the practice of awe at Being," to use a phrase by Marilynne Robinson. It is the practice of awe at every being, especially those ones that our society, and all its hiding and silencing systems, do not allow us to see. What is more, it allows us to see only the image of Christ shining in others, the image of his beauty which transcends all our own

28. See: Stan Chu Ilo, Joseph Ogbonnaya, and Alex Ojacor, eds., *The Church as Salt and Light: Path to an African Ecclesiology of Abundant Life* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011); Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World: Theology that Makes a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019); Emmanuel Katongole, *Who Are My People? Love, Violence and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

29. Recall the experience of God by Hagar, the maidservant of Abraham and Stella, in Genesis 16:13. Hagar gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her while she was running away from her mistress who would not want to see her. And Hagar said to the Lord, "You are the God who sees me" for she said, "I have seen the One who sees me."

constructions and conceptualizations of a human person. As the Swiss theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar puts it: "Whoever does not come to know the face of God in contemplation will not recognize it…even when it reveals itself to him or her in the face of the oppressed and humiliated."[30] Still from Balthasar:

> If Christ has borne this least one and taken away his guilt, then I have to see him or her, through my faith in love, as he or she looks in the eyes of my Father in heaven; this image alone is true, and the one that I have, which seems so clear to me, is false. The Christian encounters Christ in his neighbour, not beyond him or above him; and only in this way does the encounter correspond to the incarnate and suffering love of the one who calls himself "Son of God," *and who is the nearest to us in all those who are near*.[31]

Indeed, contemplation is a profoundly theological-anthropological act. It not only brings us face to face with God, who has revealed the fullness of himself and of true humanity in Christ, it brings us, as well, face to face with humanity, with the world. It brings us face to face with ourselves in a way that is so awakening and transformative and opens us to see anew everything and everyone around us. In a way that enables us to carry the whole world in our hearts as we continue our theological education: we carry the terrible hunger of the starving women and children in Southern Madagascar, the suffering of the victims of flood in Florida, the sorrows of persecuted lives and displaced communities in southern Kaduna, Nigeria, the oppression of women in Iran, the vicious hostility against the people of Tigray, the raping of the earth, our common home. But we also carry the beauty of the colours of the changing leaves, the exhilarating joy of a smiling child, and the hope that adversaries may join hands and embrace again. A question that these thoughts challenge us to ask is: How do we make room for silence in our many theological conversations so that we are not only speaking to one another but empathetically listening, feeling, discerning, and commending the presence and action of God in the life of the other, the closest neighbour before me?

Conclusion

In this essay I have explored the Igbo theological anthropology of neighbour drawing on insights from the particular Igbo expression of neighbour as *onye agbatobim* and its related concepts, *mmadụ* and *ịfunanya* – the human person as the beauty of life to be seen, to be loved. These concepts have been shown to offer a new way of understanding who my neighbour is, one that is different from what we find in most sociological and anthropological resources. It is the understanding of neighbour in terms of relationality. A relationality that doesn't diminish individuality but enhances it by virtue of our inherent interdependence. From these understandings of "my neighbour," I delineated the significance of theological education in our time under three coordinates – language, style, and means – which correspond to the notions of "embracing humanity," "relational encounter," and "contemplative practice."

Thus, theological education for the global village of the twenty-first century should be one that inspires us to embrace, encounter, and contemplate the beauty of life that is already embraced, encountered, and seen by the Other, God, who embraces, encounters and sees us all. Such theological education challenges any reductive picture of who my neighbour is or what his or her identity amounts to. It brings us to know that my neighbour is the one who could find and take refuge in my heart. Such knowledge

30. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, trans. D.C. Schindler (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), 109.
31. Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, 114. Emphasis mine.

causes me to rejoice at the sight of the other person. Consequently, the theological education for our time ought to be one that challenges me to examine my heart to know if there is a space for the other, especially those who have been beaten down and left half-dead by the roadside in our world (cf. Luke 10:35). The theological education would aim at forming not only the mind but the heart, thereby increasing our capacity for an encounter with our neighbours, with those who are different from us. The encounter, in turn, allows us to gain deeper insight into the fundamental object of theology, God. And the insights gained there from enable us better to understand and interact with others,ourselves, and the world around us.

Bibliography

Anderson, Ray Sherman. *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991.

Benedict XVI. *Deus Caritas Est* [Encyclical Letter on Christian Love]. The Holy See. December 25, 2005. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.

Carbine, Rosemary P. "The Relational Turn in Theological Anthropology." In *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, edited by Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey, 71–86. London: T&T Clark, 2021.

Cavanaugh, William. *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

Cortez, Marc. *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: T&T Clark International, 2010.

Fiddes, Paul S. *Friends in Co-inherence: Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Francis. *Fratelli Tutti* [Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship]. The Holy See, October 3, 2020. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

Fukuyama, Francis. *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*. London: Profile Books Ltd., 2018.

Gonzalez, Michelle A. "Created for God and for Each Other: Our Imago Dei." In *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, edited by Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey, 61–70. London: T&T Clarke, 2021.

Groody, Daniel, G. and Gioacchino Campese, eds. *Promised Land, A Perilous Journey: Theological Perspectives on Migration*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.

Groody, Daniel G. *A Theology of Migration: The Bodies of Refugees and the Body of Christ*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2022.

Hadfield, Alice Mary. *Charles Williams: An Exploration of His Life and Work.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. "The Clustering of Igbo in the Americas." In *Igbo in the Atlantic World: African*

Origins and Diasporic Destinations, edited by Toyin Falola and Raphael Chijioke Njoku, 135–146. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016.

Hinsdale, Mary Ann, and Stephen Okey, eds. *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*. London: T&T Clark, 2021.

Ilo, Stan Chu, Joseph Ogbonnaya, and Alex Ojacor, eds. *The Church as Salt and Light: Path to an African Ecclesiology of Abundant Life*. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011.

Ilo, Stan Chu. *Someone Beautiful to God: Finding the Light of Faith in a Wounded World*. New York: Paulist Press, 2020.

Katongole, Emmanuel. *Who Are My People? Love, Violence and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022.

Magesa, Laurenti. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997.

McNeill, William H. "The Changing Shape of World History." *History and Theory* 34, no. 2 (May 1995): 8–26.

Mmuo, Patrick Anene. *Igbo People and Igbo Culture*. Enugu: Snaap Press, 2013.

Nyamiti, Charles. "The Incarnation Viewed from the African Understanding of Person." *African Christian Studies* 7, no. 1 (March 1991): 29–52.

Ottenberg, Simon. "A Moslem Igbo Village." In *Igbo Religion, Social Life and Other Essays by Simon Ottenberg*, edited by Toyin Falola, 143–176. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006.

Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*. Translated Matthew J. O'Connell. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985.

Robinson, Marilynne. "Theology for the Moment." In *What Are We Doing Here? Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

Sacks, Jonathan. *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility*. New York: Schocken Books, 2005.

Vähäkangas, Mika. *In Search of Foundations for African Catholicism: Charles Nyamiti's Theological Methodology*. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

Van Erp, Stephan. "Christ, the Stranger: The Theological Relevance of Migration." In *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, edited by Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith, 265–279. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Volf, Miroslav, and Matthew Croasmun. *For the Life of the World: Theology that Makes a Difference*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2019.

Von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Love Alone is Credible.* Translated by D. C. Schindler. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004.

———. *A Theological Anthropology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010.

Williams, Rowan. *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons.* London: SPCK, 2018.

———. "Theological Education is for Everyone." *Christianity Today*, August 21, 2020. https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/august-web-only/rowan-williams-theological-education-for- everyone.html.