

The Confessions of a “Buddhist Catholic”: Religion in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the representation of and role played by religion in the works of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie over a period of almost fifteen years, from her first published book, the collection of poems *Decisions* (1997), to one of her most recent short stories, “Miracle” (2011). By establishing a dialogue between Adichie’s creative writing, her nonfictional texts, and statements from interviews, this article outlines the development of the writer’s reflections on her own Catholic faith, but also on Islam, Pentecostalism, and traditional Igbo religion. It is argued that the recurrent features and evolutions discerned in Adichie’s work variously testify to her growing awareness of the interaction between the ethnic, religious, social, and political forces that have shaped postcolonial Nigeria; to her willingness to denounce religious extremism in all its guises; and to her suspicion that the main role of spiritual movements may be to help human beings in the repression of their metaphysical anxieties. As this final item indicates, Adichie’s approach to the divine, and especially to the Catholic faith, is far from straightforward and bespeaks an ambiguity that is examined throughout the essay.

Lord, in this solemn season of Lent
May we know that for us you sent
Your blessed son to pay the price
That at the end we may all rise.
(ADICHIE, “LENTEN SONG” 41)

But have you ever wondered why? Why did He
have to murder his own son so we would be saved?
Why didn’t He just go ahead and save us?
(ADICHIE, *PURPLE HIBISCUS* 289)

Anyone who opens a recent encyclopedia of African literatures is bound to come across an entry on the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The text will start by mentioning her year of birth, 1977; it may or may not list her early publications, the collection of poems *Decisions* (1997) and the play *For Love of Biafra* (1998), but it will most certainly recount her rise to fame with her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). The entry will perhaps briefly state that this particular book explores the topic of Catholic fanaticism and that the narrative promotes a moderate brand of Christianity that is respectful of ancestral Igbo traditions. These observations may be followed by a remark to the effect that Eugene Achike, the staunchly Catholic patriarch of Adichie's novel, has much in common with Okonkwo, the proud and stubborn traditionalist at the center of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The entry, now neatly packaged with an intertextual reference, will go on to comment on Adichie's continued engagement with issues such as the Biafran war, immigration to the United States, and the role of women in Nigerian society.

Admittedly, encyclopedia entries contain, by definition, simplified accounts of writers' lives and careers, but in Adichie's case, they systematically fail to include certain considerations that have remained blind spots in academic research too. For instance, while dozens of published essays have addressed—or at least broached—the theme of religion in *Purple Hibiscus*, none has raised the question as to whether Adichie's views on Christianity had always been similar to those suggested in her first novel or whether they have evolved since. It goes without saying that one should not blame the authors of these scholarly essays—or, dare I say, cast the first stone at them—for failing to conduct a diachronic study of the theme of religion in Adichie's writing, if only because her early works, especially her collection of poems, are hardly available at all. Moreover, reading Adichie's dismissive description of her volume *Decisions* as “[r]eally bad poetry” (Adichie, “Write the Power”) and of her play *For Love of Biafra* as “very poor” (Patterson) and “awfully melodramatic” (Adichie, “The Story”), one may wonder why one should even bother trying to locate books of such presumably limited, or indeed inexistent, literary value. A dip into Adichie's juvenilia, however, can bring its own reward.

The intention of this study is not to dwell on the potential flaws of the texts written by a gifted but understandably naive teenager, but rather to establish how examining Adichie's work over a period of almost fifteen years, from her first published book, the aforementioned *Decisions*, to one of her most recent short stories, “Miracle” (2011), can help to outline the abiding features, evolutions, and indecisions that have pervaded her fiction, poetry, drama, and essays, especially in regard to the author's views on religion. As this enumeration of genres suggests, this essay will attempt to foster a dialogue between Adichie's creative writing and her nonfiction texts and, in turn, confront this material with statements collected from interviews. My contention is that, despite the absence of a strictly linear evolution in the religious worldview presented in Adichie's works, the writer's reflections can be regarded as increasingly political, metaphysical, and, more intriguingly perhaps, impatient and iconoclastic.¹ Only a careful examination of some selected texts can shape this series of motley adjectives into a full-fledged argument.

While the decision to conduct an extensive analysis of religion in Adichie's writing may need no justification in the eyes of the author's enthusiastic readers, the wider ramifications of the initiative might perhaps be gauged more accurately by briefly reaffirming the importance of its subject—that is, religion—in Nigeria's historical and literary contexts. It is commonly known that the colonial confrontation between African spiritual traditions and Christianity, along with its aftermath in postcolonial times, has been prominently featured in Nigerian writing for over fifty years. Several major literary figures, including Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka, have developed aesthetic visions revolving around the interplay between African and Christian cosmologies; other artists, such as Chinua Achebe, have rather explored the social and political consequences of the clash between indigenous and European religious spheres. Many critics, when asked to situate Adichie in relation to these two schools of thought—the former leaning toward universalism, the latter toward cultural relativism—place the younger writer firmly in the Achebe camp. This essay, however, will ultimately argue that Adichie's worldview has become largely independent of either trend.

Regardless of Adichie's idiosyncratic evolution, a constant feature in her work has been her concern with the excesses caused by religion in her home country. This interest has found expression in imaginative explorations of many of Nigeria's faith-related woes, from the overzealousness of Christian converts in the colonial period to the questionable attitude of Pentecostals in contemporary times; from the ethno-religious violence that sparked the Nigerian civil war to the riots between Christians and Muslims that have intermittently erupted in the country's northern and central states since the 1980s. Arguably, Adichie's compulsive engagement with Nigeria's troubled ethnic and religious situation—an uneasy state that owes as much to the nation's colonial past as to its present mismanagement—bespeaks her deep-seated belief in the ability of literature to act as a medium of social and political change. In the writer's words, "change occurs through ideas. Literature is an essential repository of ideas. Literature can lead to change" ("The Role of Literature"). This statement alone provides ample justification as to why Adichie's stance on such an important topic as religion deserves to be given careful attention. Yet, to an extent, the author's eloquent syllogism is also deceptively simple, for it omits the potential role of literary criticism in the chain of social transformation. Writers' ideas are not discrete items neatly stored in unambiguous texts, available for straightforward retrieval—on the contrary, it is precisely from the jostling of insights that complement, refine, or even contradict each other that sophisticated artistic visions emerge. This essay is, thus, an attempt to establish connections between Adichie's manifold, disseminated writerly thoughts.

To approach the Nigerian author's multifarious reflections on religion, one might as well start from another assorted set of items, i.e., the list of adjectives cited above: political, metaphysical, impatient, and iconoclastic. Disparate as this series of qualifiers may seem, none of its components is likely to look entirely out of place to readers acquainted with Adichie's recent texts. On the other hand, those opening the slim bundle of poems published by the writer under the Americanized name "Amanda N. Adichie" will probably find the proposed list unsuitable beyond the first adjective. Whereas, in the opening section of the collection, the young poet already directs some remarkably sharp arrows at the

scourges of corruption and ethno-politics (e.g., “Our Man,” “Unity in Diversity”), the next part swaps ardent political protest for a different kind of fervor—one that leaves no room for metaphysical enquiry, impatience, or iconoclasm of any sort. The second section is indeed dedicated “To God” (31) and accordingly features a “Sonnet to God” followed by “A Christmas Prayer,” further flanked by pieces called “Our Lady” and “Soulful Prayer.” The Lord’s influence actually extends beyond this second part, as He is listed in first position in the collection’s acknowledgements (v)—a gesture of passionate devotion that, ironically, would probably strike many contemporary critics as most “un-Adichiean.” A similar verdict may be reached on reading the opening lines of the poem “Jesus,” dated February 10, 1995:

Jesus my Saviour, my Lord
 I wish to serve You of my own accord
 By making prayer my only sword
 To fight Satan and uphold Your word. (39)

The unshakable faith in the power of prayer expressed in this piece is more likely to gain the approval of the devout Eugene Achike than it is of the older Adichie today.² The poem’s somewhat surprising content is matched by an arresting feature at the level of form, since the final word of the stanza does not rhyme with the endings of the preceding lines in British or American English, but only in the Nigerian variety of the language, where the vowel sound contained in “word” often aligns itself with that present in “Lord” (Jowitt 74–75)—a phonetic trait that characterizes Adichie’s oral speech to this day. This slightly incongruous characteristic makes the stanza read like an example of Bhabhaesque mimicry despite itself: even though the passage apparently lacks any willful display of ironic distance, its final rhyme is “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 127) and may be said to effect an act of linguistic appropriation that, in retrospect, one is tempted to read as an early breach in a largely colonized discourse.

Admirers of Adichie’s later writing may readily assign her seemingly uncritical expression of Christian devotion in *Decisions* to her youthful age, but they may, at first sight, find it slightly more difficult to reconcile the early poems with the following statement from her 2009 memoir “Father Chinedu”: “for as long as I can remember,” Adichie reveals, “I have struggled with faith” (92). No such inner conflict transpires from a poem such as “Jesus,” yet this apparent discrepancy may be resolved by considering the quotation from the autobiographical piece in context. In this short essay, the author indeed also states that

I have always wanted to capture God and put God in a bottle and close the cap tight. . . . I have wanted to believe more than I do, longed for the kind of certainty that I saw in people who did not ever think to question the illogicalities of religious teaching. (91–92)

In light of this confession, one may very well posit that the early religious poems are, at least to some extent, the expression of the overzealous Adichie’s wish to “put God in a bottle and close the cap tight” (91). In other words, she may have been performing a trick of self-deception designed to satisfy both her “long[ing]” for “certainty” (92) and the expectations created by her Catholic upbringing.

Cynics may object that this interpretation is a mere analytical backflip designed to absolve the writer from reinventing her past in her recent nonfiction. Yet the proposed theory gains in probability when one considers how hard the young Adichie used to try to convince herself that society's expectations of her reflected her own wishes. For example, she studied medicine in college for two years because, "if you're smart in school you're supposed to be a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer. It was just assumed I would be a doctor" (Patterson). Similarly, after moving to the United States to study communications and political science, she wrote an unpublished novel about Nigerian immigrants in America, propelled not by a sudden urge to explore her diasporic condition, but by the fact that she was "very keen to get published" and "noticed that the cool thing to do was the ethnic thing" (Patterson).

Adichie's erstwhile obsession with conformity reflects a yearning for both private and public approval and it ultimately betrays an urgent desire to belong, be it in Nigerian society or among the American literati. This behavioral pattern also seems to inform her approach to religion. The writer has never hidden the fact that, despite her constant "struggl[e] with faith" ("Father Chinedu" 92), she has always "loved Mass" (91): "the drama, the ritual" of it (92). Such statements seem to suggest that it is the participation in the ceremonies of the Church, more than religious conviction itself, that has shaped her identity, which is deeply rooted in her attachment to her Catholic family and her Igbo community. The early religious poems, therefore, may be said to partake of this performance of faith designed to inscribe the young woman into her social and cultural environment.

The profound irony entailed in the act of claiming an African identity by mimicking the religion of the colonizer may have eluded the young Amanda N., but it did not escape her older counterpart Chimamanda Ngozi, who, in the short story "The Scarf" (2002), lent a minor character, Nnedi, the observation that "Christianity is our most nominal and most colonised identity" (29). The statement is blunt to the point of verging on didacticism, yet the short piece that contains it offers subtle considerations on the role played by religion in postcolonial Nigeria. Set in the northern city of Kano, the narrative—which was later published in multiple revised versions as "A Private Experience" (2004, 2008, 2009)—relates the encounter between Chika, a Christian Igbo who studies medicine at the University of Lagos, and an unnamed Muslim Hausa trader, as the two women take shelter in an abandoned shop during a riot involving their respective kinsmen.³ "The Scarf" is not Adichie's first exploration of the ethnic and religious violence that has plagued Nigerian history since independence, as this topic was at the center of her poem "May Massacre," about "the May 1966 Massacre of about three thousand Ibos in Northern Nigeria" (*Decisions* 22), and of her play *For Love of Biafra*, which additionally covers the ensuing Nigerian civil war. However, the impossibility of reconciliation between Adaobi, the Igbo heroine of the early play, and her many "gullible" and "stupid" Hausa compatriots (*For Love of Biafra* 37, 72), is discarded in the later short story in favor of a more nuanced and hopeful vision of Nigeria's cultural and religious diversity. The story lends itself to an unobtrusive, but clearly discernible, symbolic reading, as the Hausa woman who initially brings Chika into safety invites the latter to sit on her wrapper and later gives her Igbo companion her headscarf to cover a wound.⁴ Crucially, the narrative suggests that the most entrenched division between the medical student and the trader is neither

linked to their religious background nor to their ethnic denomination, but rather to their different social status: the Igbo protagonist is chauffeured around by her "Aunty's driver" (29), while the Hausa woman "take[s] two buses" to get to work (29). The exploration of the divisive nature of class, but also of the circumstances that lead individuals to fleetingly reach across these social chasms, was to become a leitmotif in Adichie's fiction.

As the artistic qualities of the author's prose were enhanced by her refined perception of the multiple forces at work in Nigerian society, so her need to move outside her own religious comfort zone by exploring her characters' spiritual uncertainties seemed to become more pressing. In "The Scarf," the Christian protagonist Chika watches her Muslim companion pray and

wishes . . . that she too could believe in the idea of a God, could see an omniscient presence in the still air of the store. She fingers the crucifix around her neck. . . . Chika cannot remember when her idea of God has not been cloudy like the reflection from a steamy bathroom mirror and she cannot remember ever wanting to try and clean the mirror. (29)

While one should refrain from systematically conflating Adichie's views with those of her characters, one can hardly deny the similarities between the thoughts entertained by Chika in this passage and the musings of the author in the longer excerpt from "Father Chinedu" quoted above. However, the extract from the story betrays more than a simple correspondence with Adichie's nonfictional expression of frustration at the ungraspable nature of God, as it also offers a reflection on the reassuring role of religious rituals, regardless of the creed to which they belong. The Muslim woman's unshakable faith, presented as a desirable and sacred "private experience" (29), is what persuades Chika, whose sister Nnedi disappeared during the riot, to "change her mind about telling her mother that offering Masses" for Nnedi to be found alive "is a waste of money, unofficial fundraising for the church" (29). In other words, the sense of purpose and hope provided by religious ceremonies, even if based on some form of delusion, is portrayed as preferable to aimless emotional despondency. Chika's indulgence of her mother's desperate offerings is ostensibly depicted as an act of compassion, but the text invites a parallel reading in which her gesture also serves to repress her own anxieties. The heroine's life-long refusal to "clean the mirror" of her faith (29), I would suggest, is largely guided by the intuition that this spiritual sanitizing may not reveal a clear image of God, but, instead, a frightening metaphysical void.

Whatever the evolution of Adichie's private spiritual convictions between the writing of *Decisions* and "The Scarf," the above discussion has shown these two works to be different in at least one major respect: whereas the poems are markedly performative, in that the I-persona's Christian faith is literally enacted through the texts—two of whose titles contain the tell-tale word "prayer" (34, 40)—the short story offers reflections *on* religion and, perhaps slightly provocatively, presents spiritual beliefs and holy rituals as dissociated concepts. That this split is verbalized much less equivocally in the nonfictional "Father Chinedu" (where the doubting Adichie admits that she nonetheless delights in the "drama" of Christian rituals) indicates that the gap between religious belief and performance discernable in "The Scarf" is not merely the product of a passing crisis of faith. Significantly, by

the time Adichie published the third version of her short piece in 2008, the symbol of devotion sported by Chika, the “crucifix around her neck” (29), had morphed into a reluctantly worn token more readily associated with religious *performance*: “a finger rosary” put on only “to please her mother.” In this new version of the story, Chika’s outspoken sister Nnedi follows a parallel movement away from religious orthodoxy, since she “no longer wears hers.” In addition, Nnedi swaps her earlier observation about Christianity’s status as “our most . . . colonised identity” (29) for a revealing, even more provocative, comparison: “Rosaries are really magical potions, and I don’t need those, thank you.”

One year prior to Nnedi’s impudent remark, Adichie declared in an interview: “I don’t think that it [magic] is much different from believing in a Christian God. I mean, if magic is unreasonable, then so is faith in a Christian God, because you can’t see either” (Interview by Páraic Breathnach). This statement already echoes an observation made by one of the protagonists in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), the intellectual Odenigbo, who maintains that traditional medicine is “[n]o more irrational than belief in a Christian God you cannot see” (253). The writer’s point in the interview, however, is slightly different from her two characters’. By aligning Christian and traditional forms of worship, Adichie does not intend to discredit either approach, but rather to deplore the fact that “we [Nigerians] have been brainwashed to see our traditional religious beliefs as magic to be dismissed, and I don’t think it is” (Interview by Páraic Breathnach). The need for African Christians to respect their ancestors’ spiritual values is one of the main insights imparted by *Purple Hibiscus*, a novel that, simultaneously, rejects conservative and monolithic interpretations of the Christian doctrine. Aptly summarizing the critical consensus around the book, Cheryl Stobie points out that the narrative overtly denounces the “hypocrisy, extremism, and abuse” (421) found in the Catholic Church and “endorses values such as . . . hybridity in terms of religion” (422).

The well-trodden path of religious syncretism presented in *Purple Hibiscus* need not be followed here once more, yet it is worth a short detour by virtue of its very existence. Indeed, one of the most remarkable aspects of Adichie’s first novel is that, for all its criticism of the Catholic Church, it “does not abandon its Christian base” (Cooper 113) and still largely embraces “Catholicism, albeit of a different [Africanized] kind” (122). At the same time, Igbo traditionalism—represented by Papa-Nnukwu, the paternal grandfather of the Catholic narrator, Kambili—is assigned a comparable aura of sacredness, which positions the generic category of the religious as the default mode of attaining, or at least gesturing toward, spiritual wholeness. The novel, in short, seems infused with a desire to capture the best of both religious worlds: be it the “smil[e]” (169) on Papa-Nnukwu’s face after his ritualistic “declaration of innocence” (166) or the “uplifting Igbo songs” performed by Kambili’s cousin, Amaka, while reciting the rosary (125), all indicate that seeking communion with one’s chosen deity is still the most direct road to happiness, provided that one simply follows the right signposts.

To a large extent, then, *Purple Hibiscus* glosses over the metaphysical conflict and adjoining discrepancy between faith and ritual intimated in “The Scarf”; much of the novel may even be said to convey a syncretized religious ideal as “stubbornly romanticized” as the memories of Nigeria created by the homesick Adichie at the time when she was writing her first novel (Adichie, “*Purple Hibiscus*: Author Q&A”). Nevertheless, this idealized picture does not mark a return to the

Christian ventriloquism of *Decisions*, since *Purple Hibiscus* acknowledges that even the very faith that it promotes is an ideological construction. For instance, Papa-Nnukwu's description of Jesus as "the person that hangs on the wood outside the mission" (84) is a factually accurate depiction of the crucified Christ, but one that carries mildly blasphemous associations by virtue of its failure to recognize the sacred nature of his ordeal in Christian thought. Similarly, the old man's dismissal of the precept whereby "the son and the father are equal" as a sign of the white man's "mad[ness]" (84) puts into perspective the fundamental Christian principle of the Trinity. Such positioning of the religion imported from Europe as a relative rather than axiomatic discourse is not groundbreaking in itself since, almost half a century before *Purple Hibiscus*, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* already underlined "the mad logic of the Trinity" (104).

However, what seems to demarcate Adichie from her literary predecessor is the note of restlessness or, indeed exasperation that slowly creeps into her work. The heroine of her novel, Kambili, may be content to accept the tenet that "God works in mysterious ways" (289), but her brother, Jaja, does not leave this principle unchallenged. In the short passage from the novel quoted as a second epigraph to this essay, the young man sneeringly asks why God "ha[d] to murder his own son so we would be saved" and why He "didn't . . . just go ahead and save us" (289). By voicing this bold question, Jaja not only reacts against the hypocrisy of his father's tunnel vision of Catholicism, but he also expresses his irritation at having to abide by established, but arguably questionable, religious precepts. The tension between, on the one hand, the skeptical attitude to the scriptures embodied in Jaja's isolated comment and, on the other, the need expressed in most of the novel to cling to a liberal and indigenized form of Christianity is what makes *Purple Hibiscus* a pivotal—rather than representative—text in Adichie's work. Contrary to what is generally assumed, the picture of religion offered in the novel is by no means metonymic for the writer's entire corpus—as much should already be clear in relation to the early *Decisions*, but differences will also transpire when examining her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

If Adichie's Orange Prize-winning narrative may be said to be more ambitious in scope than *Purple Hibiscus*, it above all marks a substantial improvement on *For Love of Biafra*, the author's first book-length attempt at tackling the sensitive topic of the Nigerian civil war. While the young Adichie "ma[d]e no apologies" for "tak[ing] . . . the Biafran side" in her early play (*For Love of Biafra* viii), her later novel, although still told from the Biafran perspective, presents a far more nuanced view. Accordingly, the narrative has been praised for its "lucid intelligence" (Jaggi) and its "deliberate desire to give a balanced picture, to show both good and bad aspects of . . . beleaguered Biafra" (Palmborg and Holst Petersen 96). One critic has even applauded, perhaps a little over enthusiastically, the work's "impartiality" and its "refusal to take sides" (Nnolim 149). *Half of a Yellow Sun* is by no means objective—a fact readily acknowledged by Adichie herself ("Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with Binyavanga Wainaina")—but the novel conspicuously steers clear of the partisan politics that precipitated the war itself. In a manner reminiscent of "The Scarf," the text avoids fossilizing the putative "Hausa Muslim" versus "Christian Igbo" divide by also foregrounding issues of class; nevertheless, *Half of a Yellow Sun* does not unsettle these traditional ethno-religious pairings as Chris Abani does in *Song for Night*.⁵ As a consequence, the religious and/or ethnic motivations

behind the violence depicted in the novel cannot always be clearly disentangled, but this seems to be precisely the point in a book where the characters witness how the resentment provoked by an alleged "Igbo coup" (125) develops into "an infidel versus righteous thing" (125). Adichie's analysis, however, was not always as level-headed as this; a brief look back at *For Love of Biafra* will show how she once struggled to find her way out of this particular ideological bog. This short examination of the play will incorporate reflections on class, ethnicity, and Islam and, thus, stray from the almost exclusive focus on Christianity in this essay so far, but the analysis of the early text will prove most useful in establishing contrasts and parallels with Adichie's depiction of religion in some of her later works, especially *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

For Love of Biafra is not devoid of laudable intentions, as it makes a brave attempt at rejecting ethnic and religious Manichaeism by staging a love affair between a Christian Igbo, Adaobi, and a kind, wealthy, and visibly intelligent Muslim Hausa, Mohammed. Even before the war, the young lovers are aware that they are separated by "culture, language, religion" (8), all of which are again invoked by Adaobi's father when he refuses to grant the couple permission to get married (14–15). The fact that these three factors are repeatedly mentioned in a single breath intimates that the play tends to consider the "many gaps and differences" (17) that divide Adaobi and Mohammed as assorted items in a unique package. It is therefore not surprising that, when the first troubles arise in 1966, the characters freely slip from the ethnic to the religious (and back again) in their discussions of the massacres. This is illustrated in the following passage, in which Adaobi's brother Nduka finds his sister showing a photograph of her boyfriend Mohammed to their cousin Ona:

NDUKA. . . . What is that photograph . . . ? . . .

ADAOBI. It is a picture of Mohammed.

NDUKA. Mohammed? Oh, your Hausa friend. I was wondering if you meant the prophet, that sort of blasphemy can attract death, especially since the moslems forbid images of their holy ones. What is happening in Kano? I heard Papa and Papa Ona [their uncle] discussing, they are not sounding optimistic, the Hausa people seem to really have a grudge against us. (27–28)

Nduka initially confuses the name "Mohammed" with that of the Prophet of Islam, before realizing that Adaobi is talking about her "Hausa friend" (27, emphasis added). He then slides back into the religious by lecturing his sister (and, perhaps, the reader) on the Muslim blasphemy of creating pictorial representations of the Prophet and eventually concludes that "the Hausa people" (27) have a grudge against "us" (28)—a pronoun that, as the context makes clear, refers to the Igbo. Nduka's muddled ethno-religious speech is symptomatic of the young Adichie's somewhat hesitant grasp on the events, as is Adaobi's explanation for the reasons behind the Hausas' "grudge":

It is envy, my big brother, they envy us, they resent our education, they resent the fact that we are hardworking, that it is our people who have the good jobs, attend the good schools. . . . It is our people who have the money and the property. They say we have taken everything from them, but did they ever have anything? It is only a few rich ones that send their children to school, they do

not want to progress and do not want others to progress. It runs deeper than the killing of Balewa and Bello in the so called Ibo coup. (28)

Even if Adaobi is careful enough to mention the exception of "a few" Hausas seemingly enlightened by their wealth and education, her analysis is still marked by sweeping simplifications and dubious judgments about her enemies' backwardness.

Of course, the protagonist's tirade should not be mistaken for an authorial statement. In the above passage, the young Adichie's aim is most likely to expose the social motivations underlying the ethnic tensions building up in Nigeria, while also expressing her character's passionate response to the events. However, it is striking that the play hardly offers any penetrating insights to complement Adaobi's rather monochromatic pro-Igbo discourse. This generalized lack of nuance and subtlety, along with the play's tendency to tell rather than show, is the main weakness of the text, which nonetheless timidly restores a sense of balance by mentioning Biafran corruption (90, 102) and the crimes committed by the Igbo against ethnic minorities in the east (63). At the end of the play, the heroine's retreat into a rejection of the "genocidal Hausas" (91, 102) is similarly counterbalanced by her mother's more open-minded recommendation to "let go" of her "[b]itterness" (109). But her mother's pleas are made in vain, for, by then, Adaobi has made up her mind and her inflexible position tinges the play's conclusion with a sense of doomed finality. In the closing scene, set shortly after the end of the war, Mohammed returns from England where he had been pursuing his education and reiterates his offer of marriage to Adaobi. The young woman emphatically refuses, citing their ethnic differences and her inability to put the past behind: "Mohammed, I am a Biafran first, a Biafran last, a Biafran always, don't ever make the mistake of calling me a Nigerian again" (106). The play thus ends with a dramatic emphasis on ethnic and political divides and broadly refrains from pursuing its initial evocations of the role played by social and religious factors in the Nigerian conflict.

Half of a Yellow Sun negotiates this ethnic, political, social, and religious maze much more successfully, without entirely discarding the characters and events found in the play. For example, Mohammed is reincarnated in the novel as the wealthy ex-boyfriend of one of the Igbo protagonists, Olanna; like his earlier counterpart, the young man is presented as a likeable character, but one who, just as in *For Love of Biafra*, loses touch with the reality of war-torn Nigeria by fleeing to Europe.⁶ A crucial difference between the play and the novel, however, is that the latter presents Olanna's affluent parents as taking the same escape route as Mohammed does. In doing so, the book clearly dissociates voluntary exile from ethnicity or religion and more clearly links the possibility of flight with the characters' social status. It is also the arrogance of the rich—not of the Hausas or of the Muslims—that is denounced when, near the end of the war, Mohammed sends Olanna a parcel with luxury items and a note commenting on his much-improved "polo game" (376). The fact that minor characters from both sides of the ethnic divide are shown to be alienated from their devastated country is a testimony to the author's more confident and sophisticated craft, as is her handling of the ethno-religious amalgamation so clumsily endorsed by Nduka in the play. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the slip from "Igbo" to "infidel" is put in the mouth of at least two murderous Hausas (147, 152), while angry Igbo characters indulge in similar

amalgamations about the “bloody Muslim Hausa[s]” (191) and the “Muslim Hausa people, those black-as-he-goats Northerners . . .” (157). In sum, Adichie tells us, the rejection of the enemy on hazy ethno-religious grounds goes both ways, a fact that evidences the pervasiveness of reductive discourses of “othering.”

The author’s sharpened critical acumen in *Half of a Yellow Sun* also enables her to offer perceptive comments on the hijacking of religious principles to legitimize the thoughtless violence that characterized the 1966 massacres. To convey her point, Adichie portrays an uneducated Hausa, Abdulmalik, as a willing participant in the horrendous crimes perpetrated to allegedly obey “Allah’s will” (148), but she counterbalances the man’s brutal act with Mohammed’s horrified observation that “Allah does not allow this, . . . Allah will *never* forgive this” (148). Abdulmalik’s and Mohammed’s radically divergent invocations of Allah in the same circumstances have the double effect, on the one hand, of acknowledging that crimes have been committed in the name of Islam in Nigeria and, on the other, of vigorously rejecting the intolerant views that present the entire Muslim community as bloodthirsty and irrational. It is unclear whether Mohammed’s evocative (but very common) first name is meant to trigger a symbolic association with the Prophet, as in *For Love of Biafra*, a connection that would lead readers to view the moral rectitude of the character during the massacres as indicative of his religion’s potential for peacefulness. What can more safely be asserted is that the uneducated Abdulmalik is instrumental in allowing the author to reaffirm, more skillfully than in the play, her belief that the absence of formal schooling favors intellectual malleability and, consequently, the turning of mild prejudice into murderous resentment.

It may initially come as a surprise that *Half of a Yellow Sun*’s depiction of Islam as a religion that can either serve violent agendas or provide moral guidance is, in substance, not so different from the double image of Catholicism presented in *Purple Hibiscus*, where the doctrine is called on by Eugene to justify domestic abuse, but is more positively embodied in the tolerant and progressive Father Amadi. This acknowledgement of the Janus-faced nature of different spiritual movements is symptomatic of Adichie’s increasingly frequent tendency to engage with Islam, Christianity, and traditional Igbo religion on equal terms. For instance, in a 2008 essay criticizing the hypocrisy of Nigerians who condemn supposedly provocative women’s clothing, the writer denounces “the *Judaeo-Christian-Islamic* notion of controlling the female temptress” (“Nigeria’s Immorality,” emphasis added). Similarly, in her short story “The Headstrong Historian,” she wryly comments both on the excessive zeal of the first Christian Igbo converts and on the greed of some traditional healers (Tunca 241–42). Most recently, following attacks by the extremist Islamist group Boko Haram in Nigeria, the author has appealed to “Christian and Muslim leaders” alike to “preach peace and togetherness” (Shariatmadari).

These examples illustrate Adichie’s growing awareness of the common moralizing excesses and institutional flaws, but also of the overwhelming spiritual influence, of Nigeria’s various religious movements. The particulars of this cross-confessional vision are set out, once again, in *Half of a Yellow Sun* in tiny fragments disseminated throughout the 433–page novel. Some of these pieces, such as the “irrational” nature of the Christian religion and of traditional Igbo beliefs, were already identified above and need not be discussed further. Others, however, are worth elaborating as they infuse some of the patterns found in Adichie’s previous

work with new insights. One such motif can be discerned in a passage set before the massacres but after the coup in which the Premier of Northern Nigeria, Ahmadu Bello (also known under the honorific title of *Sardauna*), was killed. Olanna is on her way from the airport in Kano to her relatives' compound and discusses the event with a Muslim (presumably Hausa) taxi driver, who tells her:

"But the *Sardauna* was not killed, madam," he whispered. "He escaped with Allah's help and is now in Mecca." Olanna smiled gently and said nothing because she knew that this man, with his prayer beads dangling from his rear-view mirror, needed to believe that. The *Sardauna*, after all, had not only been premier of the North, he had also been the spiritual leader for this man and so many Muslims like him. (128)

The taxi driver's deluded hope that a godly intervention has saved his "spiritual leader" is reminiscent of Chika's mother's refusal to face Nnedi's probable death in "The Scarf," while Olanna's decision not to upset the man strongly echoes Chika's choice not to distress her mother in the same short story. Beside a sense of thematic continuity, these intertextual parallels show that the author increasingly engages with the similar psychological mechanisms that inform her country's different brands of faith. Equally striking in the above passage is the fact that Olanna's reaction, despite its benevolence, is imbued with mild condescension: from her conviction that "this man . . . needed to believe that" (128), one can infer that she, at this stage a moderate Catholic, considers herself to be above such faith-induced fallacies. The full significance of this incident becomes clear only at the very end of the novel when, after the disappearance of her twin, Kainene, Olanna refuses to come to terms with the idea that her sister was most likely killed while trading across enemy lines. Having seemingly given up on the power of a "good" Christian God (253), Olanna instead seeks solace in the powers of the traditional medicines that she had earlier dismissed as "supernatural fetishes" that "meant nothing to her" (105). Thus, much like the taxi driver (and Chika's mother in "The Scarf"), the desperate Olanna buries herself in the thought that celestial forces will allow her sister to be found alive. Predictably, neither the rituals she performs nor the payments she makes to the *dibias* and oracles produce the desired result, which may indicate that Igbo religion, just like its Christian and Islamic counterparts, essentially serves to comfort human beings in desperate situations.

In a moving final statement, Olanna hints at her own awareness of this fact when she admits that she "believe[s] in anything that will bring [her] sister home" (433). She eventually tries to find consolation in the Igbo notion that "we all reincarnate. . . . When I come back in my next life, Kainene will be my sister" (433). Her declaration is deeply ambiguous, self-defeating even, since her hope to be reunited with her sister only after her own death betrays her conviction that the traditional rituals to which she desperately clings do not have the power to bring back Kainene in this life. Because of the emotional impact of the scene, this paradox is easily missed; most likely, it is unconsciously resolved by readers who recognize in this apparent contradiction the widely held belief that worldly injustice does not constitute proof of the nonexistence of one or several deities. But the crux of the matter is this; the suggested paradox encourages an interpretation whereby traditional Igbo cosmology is presented as a dignified *spiritual*

response to difficult life situations, but not necessarily one that is endorsed as being *metaphysically* valid. To a certain extent, this refusal to unconditionally promote or entirely discredit traditional religion partakes of Adichie's previously discussed strategy of presenting ancestral Igbo beliefs as equally legitimate but also as ungraspable as the Christian alternative. However, I would argue that this ambivalence also betrays the author's increasing skepticism toward the divine as a guiding philosophical principle.

Admittedly, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the indications that this may be the case are discreet; in fact, the text initially seems to nip in the bud any form of religious questioning. When Richard, Kainene's English boyfriend, visits a refugee camp during the war and meets two "selfless Holy Ghost priests" who enthusiastically tell him about "the good work God is doing here" (319), the character expresses some doubts, which he then quickly brushes away: "Richard wanted to ask why God had allowed the war to happen in the first place. Yet their faith moved him. If God could make them care so genuinely, God was a worthy concept" (319). At first sight, Richard's reassuring conclusion seems to be a toned-down variant of Acha's reflections in *For Love of Biafra*, where the heroine wonders "[w]hy . . . God let this [the war] happen" (90), but praises the work of His representatives on Biafran soil: "The white people in the world council of churches and *caritas internationalis* will forever be blessed" (58). *Half of a Yellow Sun*, without downplaying the vital humanitarian role of these organizations during the war, nevertheless puts their members' selflessness into perspective by insinuating that Caritas might have been "more generous to Catholics" than to other Biafrans (283). Such fleeting statements, along with several other isolated incidents in the novel, could have passed for selective attacks against the Church rather than against the Catholic faith itself (much like the criticism directed against the conservative wings of the institution in *Purple Hibiscus*), if not for the fact that the two priests who restore Richard's belief in the worthiness of God end up being severely compromised. One of them is revealed to have sexually abused female refugees in exchange for food, while the other is suspected of turning a blind eye to his colleague's reprehensible activities (398). Thus, the foundation for Richard's affirmation that "God [i]s a worthy concept" (namely, his certainty that the two priests "care . . . genuinely") crumbles entirely, but the novel refrains from commenting on whether the collapse of this premise entails a similar disavowal of the deduction that was drawn from it. Whatever the answer, this clearly demonstrates that, whereas a novel like *Purple Hibiscus* embodied a quest for spiritual harmony, *Half of a Yellow Sun* is pervaded by a sense of epistemological uncertainty.

It is tempting, and not entirely unreasonable, to consider this absence of a clearly delineated metaphysical foothold as yet another sign of the 2006 novel's "unfinished dialectic," that is, its tendency to let the "questions of history, identity, and community" that it raises "remain in a constant state of negotiation" (Krishnan 190). Nevertheless, I would contend that Adichie's enduring spiritual interrogations are quite distinct from her concern with the historically specific episode of the Biafran war, as suggested by her insistent revisiting of religious matters in her fiction set in later times. Among such works is "The Shivering," a piece in which the writer directly and repeatedly expresses her metaphysical frustrations through the voice of her main character.

"The Shivering" is the most recent text included in the collection *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009). According to Adichie, the writing of this story was driven by the same impulse that I attributed to *Decisions*, namely that of "captur[ing] God in a bottle" ("A Conversation" 95–96). Importantly, the author's description of her fictional piece echoes not just my own verdict on her early poems, but also the struggle with faith that she describes in the autobiographical essay "Father Chinedu." Indeed, the memoir and the short story have obvious common features: the protagonist of the fictional narrative, a young woman called Ukamaka, is somewhat similar to Adichie, since she teaches at Princeton University, just as the author did during the 2005–2006 academic year. Moreover, as the writer points out, she and her character have similar religious backgrounds: Ukamaka "grew up Catholic, very much like me, and went through the establishment religion and its routines, and I think that can be quite comforting to some people, but eventually it didn't work for her" ("A Conversation" 96). Judging by the author's skepticism at the "numbingly mechanical repetitions of Confession" in "Father Chinedu" (92), and her opinion of Purgatory as "childish" (92), one can easily guess that the "establishment religion" that let down Ukamaka did not quite satisfy Adichie either.

The opening scene of "The Shivering" is set on the day that a plane crashes in Nigeria and President Olusegun Obasanjo's wife dies in a Spanish hospital.⁷ Following these events, one of Ukamaka's compatriots and neighbors in her apartment block, a Pentecostalist named Chinedu, knocks on her door to suggest that they pray together "about what is happening in our country" (143).⁸ Ukamaka agrees and Chinedu leads an intense prayer session that makes her feel "awkward" (144), but which also provokes in her a shivering that makes her wonder about the possible presence of God. This incident sets the tone for the entire story, which insistently investigates the nature of the divine and the role of religion in satisfying the human desire for metaphysical answers. A revealing conversation around these topics takes place when, sometime after their prayer, Ukamaka shares with Chinedu her fear that her ex-boyfriend Udenna may have died in the plane crash. When news arrives that he has in fact missed the flight and survived, Chinedu exclaims:

"I knew my God would deliver! I have been praying in my heart for God to keep him safe," Chinedu said. . . .

Later, after she had asked Chinedu to stay for lunch and as she heated up some stew in the microwave, she asked him, "If you say God is responsible for keeping Udenna safe, then it means God is responsible for the people who died, because God could have kept them safe, too. Does it mean God prefers some people to others? . . . If God prefers some people to others, it doesn't make sense that it would be Udenna who would be spared. Udenna could not have been the nicest or kindest person who was booked on that flight," she said.

"You can't use human reasoning for God." Chinedu held up the fork she had placed on his plate. "Please give me a spoon." (147–49)

In this extract, Ukamaka's doubts starkly contrast with Chinedu's self-assurance—two radically divergent approaches to religion that are perhaps best captured in the protagonists' first names, since "Ukamaka" means "dialogue is better" in

Igbo, while Chinedu signifies “God leads” in the same language. It is not difficult to discern with which character’s approach Adichie’s sympathies lie. Chinedu’s somewhat peremptory dismissal of Ukamaka’s doubts, and the fact that he steers the conversation away from the existential debate and toward a trivial domestic matter, invite readers to contemplate the thought that his adamant attitude might actually be a flight from legitimate philosophical enquiry. This is a key idea in the sense that Chinedu’s uncritical faith, although to some extent “a luxury” in Ukamaka’s eyes, is at the same time perceived to be “exceedingly fragile” in its inability to accommodate the possibility of a “middle ground” (165). Put differently, Ukamaka does not present religious steadfastness as a necessarily *desirable* haven of certitude in the way that Chika did in “The Scarf” when seeing the Muslim woman pray; rather, Ukamaka (and Adichie with her) seems bent on establishing whether metaphysical *uncertainty* can be a viable ground for religious faith.

Another important development found in “The Shivering,” when compared to Adichie’s earlier work, is that the narrative marks what I believe to be the writer’s first sustained exploration of Pentecostalism. This is not to say that this brand of Christianity had not appeared in her fiction before—for example, in *Purple Hibiscus*, both Eugene and his daughter Kambili deplored the proliferation of “mushroom” Pentecostal churches (5, 29, 208), but these passing remarks mainly served to emphasize the characters’ intolerance of non-Catholics. In “The Shivering,” Pentecostalism still has a functional purpose of sorts, in the sense that Chinedu’s confident beliefs and demonstrativeness—features typically associated with members of the Pentecostal movement—are set in opposition to Ukamaka’s hesitant and more reserved attitude. However, even if Chinedu’s overzealousness is mildly mocked throughout the story, occasionally leaving poor Ukamaka “[a] little alarmed” (147), Pentecostalism still emerges, all in all, relatively unscathed: not only is Chinedu an endearing figure, who is revealed to be an illegal resident and a homosexual previously involved in an emotionally abusive relationship, but his somewhat gruff rebuttal of Ukamaka’s spiritual perplexity turns out to illustrate a blinkered approach to religion that also extends to the Catholic Church. This becomes evident when, after another almost dialectical conversation on the essence of the divine, at the end of which Chinedu again insists that “God’s nature [is] different from human nature” (164), Ukamaka pretends to understand his point:

“I see what you mean,” she said, although she did not see at all, although it was answers like his that, years back, had made her decide to stop going to church, and kept her away until the Sunday Udenna . . . [broke up with her] in an ice-cream shop on Nassau Street. (165)

Because of its condescending inflexibility, the Catholic Church initially fails Ukamaka’s spiritual needs to the point of driving her away. It is only when she meets Father Patrick, a figure who, much like Father Chinedu in the eponymous memoir, readily admits that “life d[oes] not make sense but we all ha[ve] to have faith nonetheless” (“The Shivering” 148), that the young woman decides to attend Mass again. The character’s return to the Church after her breakup with Udenna tends to suggest that religious institutions do have a guiding role to play in times of personal crisis, provided that they privilege open-mindedness over indoctrination.

Crucially, both Ukamaka's positive response to Father Patrick's modesty and Adichie's admiration of Father Chinedu point to a common spiritual aspiration: that of coming to terms with the fact that some things are ultimately unknowable. The short story, then, "becomes about how it is possible for her [Ukamaka] to find some kind of faith, a version of faith with which she can make peace" (Adichie, "A Conversation" 96).

Yet one may legitimately wonder to what extent the "peace" that Ukamaka eventually finds should be taken at face-value, as the text appears to criticize her conduct even as it empathizes with her emotional plight. Indeed, she is presented as a person who is particularly concerned with conforming to other people's likings and expectations, even if they are not her own. To give a few examples, she used to organize her entire life around her boyfriend Udenna; months after their breakup, she still cooks the spicy food that he loved but which leaves her indifferent, allegedly because she has gotten "used to it now" (152), but more tangibly because it symbolizes a relationship that she cannot let go. Furthermore, she occasionally lapses into socially based judgments that reflect Udenna's prejudices rather than her own (162). In similar, though less conspicuous, fashion, she seeks her friend Chinedu's approval by "over-nodding to the music from the radio to show that she was enjoying it as he seemed to be" (158) and by feigning astonishment when learning that he is gay "because she thought he expected her to show surprise" (159). Ukamaka's behavior is, thus, motivated by a series of interrelated factors, including her inability to break the mold of habit, her yearning for other people's real or imagined consent, and the repression of her emotional insecurities—all of which betray a desire to lull herself into safety. Arguably, it is a similar impulse to seek refuge from psychological distress that drives her to enter a church and resume her attendance at Mass. The personal and the spiritual, in short, follow similar dynamics, a fact that may lead readers to wonder if the latent pretence that characterizes some of Ukamaka's everyday interactions also haunts the rekindling of her relationship with the Catholic faith.⁹ In other words, the question worth pondering is whether her soul-searching leads her to find a genuine sense of spiritual relief or whether her reflections only drive her, via long detours of metaphysical frustration, to seek artificial shelter in religion, in a manner reminiscent of Olanna in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Unsurprisingly, the story offers no explicit answers, but there are reasons to believe that the narrative ends on what is actually a falsely reassuring note. When, in the final scene, Ukamaka and Chinedu attend a Catholic mass together, it has already been disclosed that Chinedu is an illegal immigrant who is bound to be deported because he "do[es]n't have a case" (163). However, once in church, Ukamaka somewhat absurdly reassures him that he is not going to be expelled: "We will find a way. We will" (165). The narrative then closes with a richly sensual evocation—not unlike those found in *Purple Hibiscus*—of what the ceremony would have been like if the two protagonists had been in Nigeria; at the end of this ritual, the narrator tells us the entire congregation "would have felt blessed" (166). It is impossible to ascertain whether this "blessed[ness]" evidences the spiritual wholeness that Ukamaka has been seeking all along or whether it should be interpreted as a mere nostalgic yearning for a deceitful *feeling* of belonging and security, akin to that evoked by Adichie in "Father Chinedu" when she is "brought . . . to tears" (92) by religious chants in the "incense-scented church at benediction"

(91). Significantly, the equivocal ending of the story does not allow readers to determine if Ukamaka's reassuring words to her friend are to be regarded as part of an elaborate fantasy or if by some miracle, legal or heavenly, Chinedu will be allowed to stay in the country after all.

This concept of "Miracle" gives its title to one of Adichie's most recent short stories, which treats this type of religious wonder with thinly veiled sarcasm.¹⁰ The word is used to describe the alleged good fortune of one of the female characters, Uju, who, after starting an affair with a married General, is appointed as a doctor in a hospital straight out of medical school, instead of "tumb[ing], like other recent graduates, into a parched wasteland of joblessness." In this story where corruption feeds on desperation, Uju is not the only protagonist faced with sacrificing her self-respect in exchange for work. Her older cousin, the father of the main character Ifemelu, is asked to call his new female boss "mummy" because the latter "had decided it was the best way to show her respect." Perceiving the "absurdity" and infantilizing nature of this request, he refuses to forfeit his pride, only for his resulting unemployment to rob him of his dignity instead. A broken man, he uncharacteristically abandons his displays of erudition and "beg[ins] to join in the morning prayers" conducted by his wife. The woman, Ifemelu's mother, had earlier abandoned her Catholic affiliation to join a church named "Revival Saints," then letting her "vision[s]" lead her from the parish of one greedy and whimsical pastor to the next. It is she who, when hearing that "[t]he hospital ha[d] no vacancy but the General made them create one for [Uju]," states that her relative's success can only be due to "a miracle."

"The Shivering," whose moderate criticism of Pentecostalism was outlined above, only indirectly suggests that Chinedu might be misguided in his belief that prayer is the answer to Nigerian corruption (152). By contrast, "Miracle" denounces, in no uncertain terms, the role played by religious zealotry in the evasion of responsibility for, and even the fueling of, political and financial immorality. At the same time, the story acknowledges that the religious movements that make emphatic promises of prosperity thrive precisely because of the dismal economic situation that results from corruption and nepotism. Although Pentecostalism is not literally named and shamed for its role in the perpetuation of this vicious cycle, it is abundantly clear from the descriptions of the churches attended by Ifemelu's mother that it is this particular type of Christianity that is being targeted. At the risk of alienating part of its Nigerian readership, "Miracle" unreservedly ridicules the Pentecostal movement—by mocking the "miracles" performed during services, by showing how Ifemelu's mother blindly obeys the nonsensical instructions of pastors, and even by venturing into iconoclastic territory. Indeed, when Ifemelu's mother warns her husband (then still his dignified self) that he should not undertake a journey east without praying first, she tells him that "we have to cover the roads with the blood of Jesus"; this metaphorical injunction is met with the reply that "the roads would be safer, less slippery, if not covered with blood." This remark, despite its humorous tone, cannot be mistaken for affectionate teasing of the Pentecostal idiom on Adichie's part. In interviews, the author has clearly expressed her distaste for the Nigerian incarnation of this religious movement, calling it "a strange fundamentalist brand" ("A Conversation" 96) that, bar "a few exceptions" (97), she finds "un-Christian" and "inward-looking" (96) and that, moreover, "uniformly demonise[s]" "the old ways" (Adichie, "In Conversation").

The final element in this description is bound to summon associations with Eugene Achike's rejection of Igbo traditionalism in *Purple Hibiscus*. This connection confirms, if need be, that Adichie does not specifically take issue with Pentecostalism, but with all types of religious extremism. More subtly perhaps, her description of the Pentecostal movement as "un-Christian" betrays her belief in a Christian ideal that seems to have persisted in her consciousness despite her rejection of establishment Catholicism. This ideological affinity with Christianity, nonetheless, does not allow for an unproblematic recuperation of the writer by the Catholic faith. Hers is an ambiguous allegiance that she is unable to fully celebrate:

The good thing—actually, it's not a good thing—the remarkable thing about growing up Catholic is that you can never get rid of it. It's in you. Catholics will leave the church, but it's still there. I don't know that I can ever run away from it. ("A Conversation" 91)

Adichie's initial slip of the tongue—"good" instead of "remarkable"—is revealing, as it illustrates precisely the point that she makes in the rest of her statement, namely that, despite her awareness of the insidious workings of the colonial religion, she is unable to entirely let go of her attachment to the Church. Thus, Catholicism is a deeply ingrained cultural identity for Adichie, and, to some extent, a stabilizing force. Yet her relationship to its foundational beliefs is ambivalent at best:

I find that I am interested in the idea of faith, but I don't know if I have faith. There are times when I am certain that I will never believe in anything, and there are other times when I find this odd longing and I think there has to be something. ("A Conversation" 90)

Adichie's alternating periods of confident atheism and "odd longing" for "something" go a long way toward explaining the multifaceted representations of religion across her oeuvre. As this essay has attempted to show, her Catholic faith is, in turn, emphatically displayed (*Decisions*); examined critically, but nevertheless romanticized (*Purple Hibiscus*); and presented as a comforting, if delusional, escape from metaphysical anxieties that are either suppressed ("The Scarf") or explored through impatient questionings of God ("The Shivering"). To a large extent, all spiritual movements, including Islam and Igbo traditionalism, are at some point presented by the writer as cultivating elaborate forms of self-deception (especially in *Half of a Yellow Sun*); religious discourses are, moreover, fraught with ethnic and political ideologies, which Adichie's texts either embody despite themselves (*For Love of Biafra*) or subtly expose (*Half of a Yellow Sun* once more). Finally, extremist forms of religion are denounced throughout the author's work, sometimes with a caustically iconoclastic touch ("Miracle").

In this short synthesis of my argument, the various adjectives introduced at the beginning of this essay to describe the writer's reflections on religion—i.e., political, metaphysical, impatient, and iconoclastic—have fallen into a series of recognizable patterns. The different motifs discussed throughout this study, by virtue of their sheer quantity and inner complexities, reveal that Adichie's spiritual outlook is far more ambiguous than the simple label "Catholic" suggests. The richness and contradictions of her religious identity, then, are perhaps best

captured using the author's own creative description of herself as a "Buddhist Catholic"—a nonsensical phrase obviously uttered in jest, but which she significantly used to skew a journalist's question about her Christian affiliation (Adichie, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Meets Chika Unigwe"). The writer may have meant that her primary allegiance was to humanism rather than to Catholicism or that her spiritual identity was not a monolithic entity defined by one single faith, but rather a series of fluid conceptions that had evolved over the course of her literary journey. Ultimately, Adichie's playful refusal to offer a straightforward reply perfectly illustrates another set of beliefs central to her life: those about her art. As she once said in another context, "what literature should do is to ask questions, and not give answers" ("Out of Nigeria").

NOTES

1. The author's development is evoked with caution, considering that dates of publication are only loosely indicative of the chronological order of writing. In Adichie's case, this is complicated by the fact that some of her short stories have been published in up to four different versions at wide intervals.

2. Though I hasten to add that the young Adichie's apparent piousness in *Decisions* should not be equated with Eugene's Christian fundamentalism, since the writer, unlike the character, displays no signs of cultural or religious intolerance, even in the pieces dealing with sensitive topics such as ethnicity and politics. In all fairness to the author, it should also be underlined that the poem quoted here is designed to buttress my argument rather than provide a nuanced aesthetic appreciation of her collection. Indeed, in spite of the book's youthful ingenuousness, some of its pieces herald the passionate outspokenness and beautiful rhythmical quality that were to become trademarks of Adichie's later writing.

3. "The Scarf" and its first revised version, "A Private Experience" (2004), contain no precise indications as to the temporal frame of the story. The subsequent 2008 and 2009 versions, on the other hand, unambiguously set the narrative during the Abacha regime of the 1990s. In all variants of the piece, the riot that leads the two protagonists to hide in a shop is sparked by an incident that has a clear religious component. The 2002 version reads, "a man drove over a copy of the Holy Koran on the roadside, a man who happened to be Igbo and Christian. And the Muslims nearby pulled him out of his pick-up truck, and cut his head off with one flash of a machete and carried it around the town of Kano, asking others to join in; the Christian Igbo had desecrated the Holy Book" ("The Scarf" 27).

4. The symbolism of the Muslim headscarf is more obvious than that of the wrapper, but the latter piece of clothing, which is "bright yellow" (27) in the 2002 story, significantly becomes "green"—that is, the national color of Nigeria—in the 2008 version. The fact that the Muslim woman is not given a name (although the daughter she talks about is) may also encourage a generic or symbolic reading of the character. Alternatively, this namelessness could signify that some aspects of the woman's identity remain ungraspable for Chika.

5. In *Song for Night*, the narrator's father is an Igbo man who has become an Imam, but is nevertheless murdered during the massacres before the war. The presence of this character highlights the ethnic motivations behind the killings, which are, however, also inextricably linked with religion, since the people whom the murderers cannot identify as Igbo on the basis of their appearance are asked to recite "obscure sura from the Koran" (93). Adichie, even though she does not introduce Igbo Muslim characters in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, highlights a similar link between religion, ethnicity, and language

by staging a scene where an Igbo man is ordered to say "Allahu Akbar" ("Allah is the Greatest"), but refuses to do so because "his accent would give him away" (152).

6. Other echoes between the two texts include, but are not restricted to, the fact that both books are partly set on the campus of the University of Nigeria in Nsukka and that the main female character has a twin (who is male in the play, but female in the novel). Several details of the protagonists' war-time experiences are also common to both texts.

7. In real life, these accidents occurred on successive days, on October 22nd and 23rd in 2005.

8. This opening scene is based on a true story that happened to Adichie's brother while he was alone in her Princeton flat (see Adichie's explanations in "The Short Story"). Moreover, it may not be a coincidence that the male protagonist in "The Shivering" has the same first name as the priest in Adichie's essay "Father Chinedu," even if the character in the short story that bears the closest resemblance to the non-fictional cleric is Father Patrick, a Catholic priest. Perhaps the author chose to call her Pentecostalist character "Chinedu" because of the meaning of the name (see below).

9. One may actually speculate (though perhaps not demonstrate entirely conclusively, for lack of sufficient textual indicators) that the story establishes a metaphorical link between the workings of romantic relationships and religious faith. It is indeed striking that both Ukamaka and Chinedu were involved with domineering partners who dealt out happiness only as it suited them, much like God (who "loves you," or so the saying goes) may bestow earthly happiness on humans only as He sees fit. Thus, one may wonder if this frustrating logic is targeted by Ukamaka when she asks, "How can you love somebody and yet want to manage the amount of happiness that person is allowed?" (153), a question that she later reiterates in another form: "How can a person claim to love you and yet want you to do things that suit only them?" (161). This echo between the personal and the religious realms, though perhaps fortuitous, remains striking.

10. A revised version of this piece is included in Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah* (41–54, 74–79).

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