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**Religion, Language and the Functional Necessity of
Philosophy**

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Abstract

Language is indeed the very fabric of any culture, with it culture is transmitted thoughts are conceptualized and information disseminated. It is hardly conceivable to imagine a learning process without effective communication. For instance how would a mother transmit her knowledge to her children, what variety of thought are possible without language. How can there be continuity of culture. Religion is an integral part of culture, so is philosophy. The paper x-rays the importance of language to religion and philosophy and argues that there exist an inevitable link between religion philosophy and language. It concludes that philosophy is necessary in any society if that society must replicate itself.

Introduction

Religion has engaged the attention of man from the ancient times. This can be explained in man's attempt to answer questions that he finds enigmatic. It is man's attempt to find answers to problems that are mysterious that

brought recurs to religion. Man seeks God's intervention in every aspect of his existence. This has led to his desire to seek him in all places, at all times and to worship him everywhere. It has also moulded his understanding and philosophy.

Our problem resides in the enigma that "No creature can take aim at the unknown hidden God. In the last resort, we base cognition of God or the sacrosanct recipient of our veneration, on the form of revelation between Him and His creature. That is, on the manifestation of God in something else and not on a relation between Him and Himself"; a duality that has thrown up some confusion. A confusion which Scholars propose are ultimately equivalents. The need to comprehend the purpose of religion and how this clearly makes philosophy necessary forms the subject matter of this paper.

Conceptual Clarification

Philosophers have the penchant for defining crucial terms/concepts, because of the Aristotle's famous dictum "initio disputandi est definitio no minis" (meaning, for discussion to be intelligible, it must begin with definition of terms).

Religion

Religion has been defined as "a system of symbols which act to establish powerful pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in man by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing; these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. Durkheim (1935) defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community... all those who adhere to them".

These two definitions are characterized by the system of beliefs and practices or conceptions relative to a transcendent being which unite the people into one fervent moral community, a necessary ingredient for religious fanaticism.

The problem with religion is that it deals with physical and the metaphysical simultaneously. The scriptures stresses that God is a spirit and suggest that the material mortal who worship the spirit should do so in truth (John 4:24).

The simplest memory image that arises in us when we hear of an external invisible essence constitutes our concept of the mysterious. Hence, we always construe our visual impression of God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit,

Heaven or Hell beyond the physical to the metaphysical. This calls for special creative skills and intention in understanding the spiritual essence of religion.

There is no doubting the place of religion in the life of man. Indeed, religion is a universal phenomenon through which man generally has come in grips with the supernatural and the physical worlds especially the Supreme Being. Religion has contributed to man's understanding and interpretation of the incomprehensible mysteries and realities of life. Man himself is a complex being endowed with reasonable power to cope with the universe which itself is a multi-complex thing. Jaja (2012) has shown how the traditional Ibani religion became the bedrock of social morality in the Niger Delta. Natural phenomenon such as magic, myth, philosophy and science were adopted to comprehend the mysteries of the universe, yet none was in isolation.

Man therefore resorted to religion as a sensitive way to make impressive headway in the society he finds himself. Religion therefore permeates all human lives no matter the race colour or creed. The African is a religious animal as Jaja (1992; 2012) has shown. Jaja maintained that the African is a "religious animal" who believes in the inseparability of the spiritual and physical worlds. The Ibani is born religiously; he lives religiously and dies religiously. Jaja (1992) argued that the Ibani religion is built on the tripod gods, spirits and deities. Just as his religion seeks to explain the purpose, what, how where and when, of things through his religious enquiries, so his philosophy aims at explaining the physical world and the purpose of man. With the close marking religion play in African society, how is this passed on.

Language

Various scholars have defined language from various perspectives depending on their special interest at a particular point in time. They include linguists, social linguistics and ethno linguistics scholars. It is difficult to state what language is, in a single term, because of its multi-faceted nature. In reality no one definition can capture the essence of language, consequently, a cursory look at some definitions are germane to the understanding of this modest effort.

Duruoha (2001:22) posit that language is a principal tool for the communication of messages, and more often it is used for the transmission of the intentions and ideologies of the writer (if written).

Anyanwu, in Amadi et al (2001) states that “language is man’s most prized possessions”. According to her, language is man’s major vehicle for the expression of self and his mark of personal group identity and of course, without which he finds himself as belonging to nowhere. Max Anyanwu also in Amadi et al (2001) defines languages as “a complex and arbitrary system of sounds used by man for communication in a given community”. Stella Anyanwu emphasized that language is an arbitrarily selected and organized speech sounds common to a given culture and used in expressing meaning among members of that culture.

Emenanjo (1990) states that language is a purely human and non-instinctual method of communicating ideas, notions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols... (which) are in the first instance auditory”. Dannett (2006) argued that human beings may not be the most admirable species on the planet, but without any doubt, they are the most intelligent and the only species with language in a technical sense. Although animals use some form of communication instinctively to express their conditions at particular points in time (Akpan and Oluwabamude, 2006).

It is to affirm the clearly human nature of language that informs Chomsky’s (1992) argument that language is the very essence of human existence and also the distinctive qualities of the human (mind) that are so far as we know, unique to man.

Functions of Language

- 1) Language is used in the expression of personal or group identity.
- 2) Language performs or may be exploited for its sonic function. The rhythmic effect of language is overt in the chant of prisoners when they work, labourers in the plantation and even religious groups in their chants.
- 3) Language is also exploited to control reality. This is exemplified in man’s interactions with forces that are supernatural or higher than him. Generally, facts, information and communication are recorded in language; records which include treaties will agreements, white paper, scientific reports etc.
- 4) Language also performs emotive function as well as imaginative functions. Amadi et al (2001) states that language is a means through which knowledge and information is communicated to

the learner, meaning that learning and teaching is not possible without language. They argue also that information, aid, research finding are conched in language, which means that without language, which means that without language, it may be difficult to keep these records.

In essence, it is the way a group of people will normally do everything they do. And for the continuity of that group, these ways of doing things (culture) has to be passed on to the younger generations. It is through language that this is made possible. The education of any culture is an offspring of the same culture. It is through that, this is carried on. Language performs the function of transmission of ethics, the norms and the totality of the way of life of any people.

Rosman and Rubel (1989:90) maintain that language is “the anthropological investigation of how language demonstrates cultural logic in making classification.

Functionalism

Functionalism is as old as the founders of sociology. Indeed, the founders are pioneers like Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkhiem, Talcott Parson etc (Coser, 1976). From its inception in the 1940 and 1950’s it dominated the field of sociology, in spite of the damaging criticism it received by other theorists.

The central focus of the theory is that society was seen as a “system of interrelated parts which together forms a whole” drawing analogy between society and an organism, the functionalist argues that an understanding of any part of an organ in the body (such as the human body) involves one’s understanding of its relationships to other parts. In essence the various parts of society can be understood primarily in terms of their functions within the whole.

By necessary implication of this research, functionalists would like to examine the part played by religion in terms of their contributions to the maintenance of the social system. In practice, the term function is usually used to indicate the contribution an institution makes to the maintenance of the social system. This assumption demonstrates why functionalism is best suited to explain the role of religion and language in the necessary understanding of philosophy. It is certain that without religion which is

cultural and language which is the medium through which it is transmitted philosophy will cease to exist, and stability and continuity will be threatened.

Another basic assumption of the functionalist theory is that society has certain basic needs or prerequisites which must be met if they are to survive. These include goal attainment, adaptation, integration and pattern of maintenance (Haralambos, 2004:204). It is no gain saying that at the heart of these four functional basic needs lies the role of religion, its attributes, features and functions.

Inevitable Links between Religion, Language and Philosophy

The links between these various concepts are germane to the appreciation of the attempt to explore the relationship between religion language and philosophy. Womack (2001:154) saw language as the human ability to encode culturally defined meanings in sound and with it, users can generate infinite new meanings through the application of rules. The underlining factor, in Womack's assumption is the fact that it is conventional, because it is agreed upon by the people. This is an essential feature of language religion and philosophy.

Language is the medium through which religion and philosophy are transmitted from generation to generation. Philosophy is part of culture, and of course it is socially transmitted. It is part of that total repertoire of human actions and their products. The accumulation of propagation, transmission of knowledge, information and other social values from one generation to another constitute a culture function (Akpan and Oluwabamide, 2006). It is proper to conclude this section with the assertion that man can only create, develop preserve and transmit the other aspects of his culture with the means of communication using language.

The Role of Language in Philosophy

The role of language in the proper understanding of philosophy deserves mention here whether indigenous (entoglossic) or foreign (exoglossic). It is imperative for students or children for that matter to understand what they are being taught, at the same time be able to communicate with others. This subsection underscores the importance of philosophical questions such as:

- a) What varieties of thought (if any) are possible without language?
- b) How do we express our views and emotions?

- c) How can the inner recesses of a teacher be tapped by his students.

The clue lies in language/communication. Language here include verbal, non verbal, emotional, and or “body language”. Lack of language is partly responsible for the high rate of failure to effectively communicate and appreciate the philosophy of a people. It is also applicable in other subjects. This is more so when such subjects do not have exact words and meaning in the local languages. At best, attempts are made to describe in local languages which are grossly inadequate to capture the essence. When words are translated they may alter meanings. For example, translation of Chukwu, as a person’s name may mean God. Again in some local languages in Nigeria to switch off a light may translate to “kill the light”, but this is not what the user intended.

Philosophical terms are often confusing as we do not have adequate replacement for them in local languages thus making it difficult for students to understand such concepts. Chukwu (2008) believes that what makes learning difficult is the abstract nature of concepts.

It is evident that teaching by nature is dynamic and involves a teacher’s conscious and deliberate act of teaching a pupil or student some material information or knowledge. It is important to note that any teaching method that denies the student the freedom (of expression) to develop their potentials or suppresses their reasoning faculty is philosophically derelict and indeed everything but teaching.

Simply put, both teaching and learning depend on teachers, for there can be no meaningful philosophical education, not to talk of socio-economic and political development in any society without teachers, and the process involved in teaching is largely socio-culturally derived.

The point being made here is that language is an important instrument of communication and for a teacher to be effective; he must effectively pass his ideas to his students. Since education is a cultural action which integrates peoples and ideas into the larger society, and for philosophy to be effectively impacted, the teacher must of necessity be a master of the means of communication – language. But then is philosophy necessary?

Necessity of Philosophy

Philosophers attempt an engagement with the natural world, and also try to reveal the meaning of the whole and direct human behaviour. For the first philosophers the world is alive and divine, it is “thou”. They inquire into the whole world and desire to know the whole, but such knowledge postulates an engagement. In the proper sense philosophy is love of wisdom. The attitude of a lover cannot be that of indifference. The philosophical attitude is a devotion, an effective engagement. Emphasis is no longer placed on the supernatural but rather on the pursuit of knowledge of the whole world and an understanding of its substance and its principles.

Philosophy defined as pursuit of wisdom can be understood as the desire to arrive at ultimate knowledge – the knowledge of the whole but it is neither the knowledge of the whole or the devotional engagement towards itself. It can be subjected to critical, objective and unsympathetic examination. Philosophy is the love of wisdom which presupposes effective engagement with the world, but which may be rejected by an indifferent or cynic sophist. In the end, philosophy suffers. In order to persevere, this two survival methods were developed. First, philosophers like Heraclitus, Plato, Hegel or Heidegger developed highly ambiguous language and non penetrable esoteric content. Second, philosophers like Aristotle, Descartes, Kant and Husserl aimed at becoming scientific and thus established an unshaken ground on which it could protect itself from possible criticism. In both cases, the goal was the same - the defense of the poverty and profane philosophical writings. However, there is no doubt that when we scrutinize the writing of some writers, with great surprise, we discover ideas of key importance to our lives.

The beauty of philosophy like history is their attempt to interpret the world (past or present) the challenge of changing it is still an uphill task in both fields. But historians would say “we have changed the world too much by our actions” but I presume the point is to understand it deeper and better. Contemporary analytical and rational philosophy is proud of its sharpness, exactitude and rationality. Rationality has become “excess baggage”, a destructive weapon, a bizarre development. While philosophers are busy analyzing minutely, leaves on the trees, the whole forest is burning.

It is my considered view that rationality should be holistic, even when this may be difficult to satisfy because of its complexities. This is because rationality cannot be objective, for objectivity is a mirage, a myth; it does not exist even in nature. Objectivity is a construction of the human mind. It is

meant to help us read the universe better, more objectively, more humanely. But objectivity does not have any objective justification. It is man's postulation of human knowledge which can easily be replaced by another construct. Objectivity is a human value which suppresses and often invalidates other values, while claiming superiority over other values.

It must be pointed out that rationality have some values and some human interests. To live in dignity, we must be responsible. Human responsibility is a defining characteristic of our existence. We must be responsible for our lives and for all creations because together they complete the planetary system. Assuming responsibility is important for the preservation of our existence and the existence of the planet. It also accounts for the dignity, integrity and identity. We do things ourselves because we want to maintain our identity and dignity.

Finally, our new holistic rationality must be tolerant of the divine. I have not said must be religious or be identified with a particular concept of god or any church. The mysterious or miraculous nature of the universe deserves to be treated as divine. Evolution itself is divine, or can be seen as divine, art is divine and our particular individual lives are divine. Note that it is not a call for the return to religious slavery but an attempt to liberate the human mind from all that captivates man.

Conclusion

One has in this brief intellectual survey explored the place of religion in society. One has established the fact that religion is beneficial as it tries to make meaning out of the mysteries of life and give man a foundation from which to view and interpret the perplexing encounters he undergoes. It has become apparent that to effectively do so, the means of communication-language becomes an important instrument. To be effective as a teacher of knowledge or to pass on mores, traditions, and culture, communication is only effective when both parties understand each other.

For a culture group to be cohesive in thought, words and deeds the local language must be "living". When learning is done in some languages other than that which the pupil is conversant, thorough understanding or grounding becomes difficult to attain. This underscores the importance of protecting our cultural heritages especially languages.

The central theme in this paper is philosophy as a cultural action with emphasis on the part played by religion and language. The paper adopted the functionalist perspective. The theory demonstrated that philosophy, religion and language are necessary ingredients in the construction of philosophical realities. The paper also reveals the impact of language on learning. Conclusively therefore, the continuous existence of philosophy as a cultural instrument is couched on the role of language, whether indigenous or not and philosophy cannot continue to exist without language, largely because of its inevitable roles.

There is no doubting the importance of philosophy as a tool in the development of society. For any society to continue to replicate itself, its philosophy must be transmitted consciously and unconsciously for the benefit of its people. It is through the peoples everyday encounter and activities that the philosophy are espoused and transmitted from generation to generation.

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