THE "MAY HIS SOUL REST IN PERFECT PEACE" PRAYER IN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN AFRICAN CONTEXT

John Clerk Koko
Department of Religious and Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Humanities of Rivers State University, Port-Harcourt,
+2348037101793; +2348039179303
johnclerk1@yahoo.com

Abstract
This paper examines philosophical and moral issues associated with the traditional religious prayer "May his soul rest in perfect peace," with particular reference to Christianity and Islam. The paper argues that though such a religious prayer is usually said during the burial of a deceased with the intention of consoling the living members of the deceased's family and goodwill for the deceased, the fact that it refers to something beyond the natural world creates a huge conflict between anthropomorphism and supernaturalism. A discursive and analytical approach was used in analysing data gathered through participatory observation and reading of philosophical texts. The entire discussion was placed against the backdrop of logical positivists' theory on religious language. After a careful digestion of the available data, the paper discusses both philosophical and moral problems associated with such a traditional religious prayer. Philosophical problems include the issues of non-applicability and non-verifiability of language while the moral problems include issues of over-assumption, and distortion of the moral equilibrium of society. Overall, the paper concludes that the moral lapses accruing from the use of such a religious prayer outweighs its moral benefits. Thus, there is need for a reconsideration of the use of this religious prayer during burial of a deceased person, especially if the deceased is perceived to have lived a questionable life while on earth.

Keywords: Precarious nature, rest in perfect peace, Christians and Muslims, African context, philosophical and moral issues,

Introduction
        Over time, the religious statement "May his soul rest in perfect peace" has formed part of human language and usually recited whenever a person dies. Thus, it is commonplace for Christians and Muslims, for

instance, to say such a religious prayer during a burial occasion of a loved one. Unarguably, this is usually done with the expectation that the deceased for which such a religious prayer is offered, will eventually rest in peace in the world beyond. Ordinarily, this should not pose any serious problem since the statement tends to offer some ray of hope for the living members of the deceased's family and especially if the deceased died a natural death. However, the very fact that such a religious statement appears to refer to an event expected to take place beyond the natural world poses a serious concern. The philosophical question that arises centers on whether human language can adequately describe a metaphysical event without making it less than it supposed to be? Even the fact that in some cases such a religious prayer is offered to persons whose lives were cut short by insurgency, religious crises, road accidents, armed bandits, communal clashes, jungle justice, etc. as the case may be in Nigeria, for instance, casts doubt on the propriety of it. The purpose of this paper is to examine some philosophical and moral issues associated with such a Christian and Muslim religious prayer when offered in a typical traditional African context. To achieve this, the paper adopts a descriptive and discursive approach to discuss the data gathered through participant observation and readings from philosophical texts. Also, the entire discussion is hinged on the logical positivist's position. Logical positivism is a theory that uses verifiability principle as a chief tool for measuring the meaningfulness and non-meaningfulness of a given proposition or statement.

Conceptualizing the Problem of Religious Language

Generally, by definition, the term "religious language" refers to religious assertions or claims made about God or gods. It could also refer to propositions used in expressing, ascribing, or attributing certain human attributes to God or gods. This could manifest in form of commandments, questions, moral judgments, historical statements, praise, prayer, and so on according to Sturch.[1]Ordinarily, the problem of religious language has been variously theorized by scholars. One of the most influential approaches is the *logical positivists*' position. According to Brown, this approach is an anti-metaphysical movement that has roots in David Hume's empirical skepticism of the eighteenth century.[2]Logical positivists used "verification principle" as the chief tool for measuring propositions that are meaningful from those that are not. It argues that the meaning and real nature of a proposition is disclosed by its method of verification or lack of it. Thus, it concludes that since religious propositions can hardly

be verified, it follows that they are mostly meaningless. A leading figure of the logical positivism approach is Ayer who argues that a "sentence is factually significant to any given person if and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express".[3]However, he made a distinction between practical verifiability and verifiability in principle noting that whereas the former may not be possible due to certain difficult circumstances, the latter is possible in the future (possibly after death).[4]

The logical positivist's proposition has attracted fierce reactions from various scholars. For example, Hick maintains that religious propositions are meaningful since they are eschatologically verifiable. He notes for example that religious propositions such as "God exists" or "there is life after death" could be verified at the long run by the individual when he or she dies.[5] Thus, for him, religious statements are meaningful because they are verifiable in principle. This position is also held by Swinburne who on his part has argued that the premise on which weak verification is formulated is faulty. Therefore, he upholds that metaphysical assertions about God cannot be totally seen as meaningless.[6]In the same vein, Church has debunked the principle of verification claiming that it is self-contradictory because all statements are verifiable.[7]Even the possibility of eschatological verification has been questioned by Omoregbe who has faulted logical positivists' position on two major grounds. The first is that eschatological verification is at its best conditional. For example, if there is no life after death, the individual will not be able to verify whether or not God actually exists. Second, is that empirical verification alone is inadequate to serve as a litmus test for the meaningfulness of a phenomenon. Therefore, he believes that personal religious experiences that are life-changing also count.[8] Brown has even contended further that the problem with logical positivism is the fact that the verification principle itself had not been verified.[9]Others like the pragmatists have argued that the meaningfulness of a religious statement should be judged by its relation and practical effects on human life. Williams James cited by Omoregbe is a prominent member of this school of thought.[10]

Aside that, some scholars like Anthony Flew cited by Omoregbe believe that theological propositions have pseudo character and as such say nothing.[11]Flew came to this conclusion on the basis that an assertion can always be negated by another assertion which the former assertion itself denies. The implication as Geisler and Feinberg observe is that religious statements are pseudo-statements.[12]In his essay, "An Empiricist view of the Nature of Religious Belief", Braithwaite argues that religious

assertions or beliefs are essentially moral assertions. He maintains that "the primary use of religious assertions is to announce allegiance to a set of moral principle. He points out for example that to say that "God is love" is not really to assert anything about transcendent being but to announce the speaker's intention to follow an agapeistic way of life.[13]

On another note, Ramsey has attempted to tackle the problem associated with Tillich's symbolism by suggesting that language functions like a working model. Along that line, Ramsey argues that in the context of religious language, a model is "a situation with which we are familiar, and which can be used for reaching another situation with which we are not so familiar; one which without the model, we would not recognize so easily. He concludes that such models are often accompanied by what he calls qualifiers.[14]One would agree with that, and with Weed[15] and Maimon[16] who are of the view that religious statements used to describe God apply differently to human beings. Otherwise, a person may be accused of anthropomorphism.

The aforementioned position has however been rejected by those who hold that religious language is to be applied in entirely the same way, when used in reference to God and when used in reference to human beings.[17] As a way forward, Aquinas had proposed a mid-way position between equivocal solution and univocal solution by noting that when terms are used to describe God and his attributes, those terms are used in the same sense but it signifies things in different modes.[18] In contemporary times, Mclnerny has endorsed this position as well.[19]It is important to remark that despite the virtues of Aquinas' approach, there still emerge some undeniable limitations of his view. In particular, his view requires a metaphysics that most contemporary philosophers would find problematic. In this case, the problem of religious language remains unresolved. But before delving into the real issues associated with the statement: "May his soul rest in perfect peace," it is crucial to provide an overview of such a religious prayer.

An Overview of the Statement in Christianity and Islam within African Context

Clearly, the traditional religious prayer "May his soul rest in perfect peace," which is usually offered during the internment of a deceased person came with Christianity and Islam but has now become popular and formed part of daily human language in many African contexts. In Christianity, its origin is traceable to some Christian liturgical and funerary practices. However, today, it has become a widespread

funeral practice of both mainstream and Pentecostal Christianity, probably with exception of a few evangelical churches. The story is not different in Islam, where Muslims are also known for praying for the dead and wishing him or her *Aljannat Firdaus-* blissful heaven. Thus, it is commonplace today to hear Christians and Muslims offer such a religious prayer at the occasion of the death and burial of a loved one. Unfortunately, they do so within African context without taking into cognizance the cause and nature of death, age of the deceased and the life he or she lived while alive in this world, whether it was a good life or a bad life.

Like Christians and Muslims, traditional Africans also pray for the dead but would prefer to do so based on the perceived cause and nature of death, age of the deceased and in most cases, the kind of life he or she lived while alive on earth. Hence, they would lay curses on an evil or wicked person who dies but wish good for the dead who lived a good life while alive in this world. For example, in traditional Abua, in Rivers State, people usually curse an evil doer who dies, saying: *Keel ekana*, meaning: Go forever and never return, or *Kamiin igeyabirinipho narakeelpho*, which translates: You should not see anything good in the world beyond. In this light, a known criminal, cultist, murderer, witch or wizard, who dies, would likely not receive the usual Christian and Muslim's accolade of "May his soul rest in perfect peace," so to speak in a typical traditional African context. Quite on the contrary, traditional Africans would wish goodness for a person known to have lived a good life while alive by saying, *Keel repho*, meaning: Go in peace to the world beyond. It is also a fact that traditional Africans would most likely pray for "vengeance" and not simply "rest in perfect peace" for a deceased whose death is suspected to have been caused by the activities of enemies. In traditional Abua, for example, prayers such as: *Kanani epe nara keel pho*, or *Kamugh bin ape –* meaning: Do not sleep in the world beyond, or do not die and remain quite, respectively, are frequently made for a deceased whose death is suspected to have been caused by an enemy.

Given the above instances, it could be argued that traditional Africans would prefer to pray for a deceased based on the circumstances of his or her death and the life he or she lived while alive in this world, and not simply because they want to make wishes. This is so because they believe that such prayers have a way of directly or indirectly regulating the morality of the society. Regrettably, it appears that Christians and Muslims do not usually take the moral implication of such a religious prayer into cognizance each time they pray for a deceased in the

traditional African context. This raises serious philosophical and moral issues that require critical examination in the next section.

The Philosophical Problem of the Statement

What philosophical problem is there with the religious statement: "May his soul rest in perfect peace"? Or to what extent does this statement constitute a philosophical problem? Clearly, there are two philosophical problems that are discernable from this (religious) statement. The first borders on the traditional theistic belief that God is incorporeal, infinite and timeless, while humans are finite and corporeal.[20]If this is the case, then the question arises as to whether it is possible for human language which is a derivative of human experience (anthropomorphism) to adequately apply to a being that is outside the scope of human experience (supernaturalism) without apparently making such a being less than who he truly is? Obviously, this creates the problem of non-applicability of language. For instance, the fact that such a proclamation anticipates a metaphysical realm that is beyond the physical world makes this statement philosophically problematic. Geisler and Feinberg would therefore seem to be in order when they describe religious language as "pseudo-statements."[21]This is so insofar as religious statements by these scholars' opinion contradict in most cases what they actually portray. And if this is accepted as a *prima facie* position, then it logically follows that the pronouncement "May his soul rest in perfect peace" creates a conflict between anthropomorphism and supernaturalism.

Aside the foregoing, there is a second philosophical problem that emerges from this statement. For purpose of simplicity, it is safe to refer to this as the verification problem. For example, how can the prayer, "May his soul rest in perfect peace or rest in the bosom of the Lord" be verified? How can we ascertain that the soul of the deceased for which such prayers are offered would actually rest in perfect peace since the proposition points to something beyond the human sense experience or the physical world? Ayer, a leading proponent of the logical positivist's movement, has argued that a proposition is only factually significant if it can be verified either practically or in principle, otherwise it is meaningless.[22] Regrettably, in this case, there is no hope of verifying either in principle or practically whether the soul of the departed would actually rest in perfect peace or not. As Hick observed, it would take the individual who made such prayers to also die before he or she can ascertain whether the deceased is actually resting in peace or not.[23]But even if this were possible, it would also require those living to also die before they can

verify the validity of "the rest in perfect peace" of the first and second deceased. In this way, the process of verification will continue *ad infinitum*. Therefore, this creates a serious philosophical problem that can only be resolved by eschatological fulfillment, which cannot be readily ascertained.

Clearly, for some pragmatists, verification of such a religious assertion could be possible. For example, scholars like Omoregbe[24], Swinburne[25], Church[26], and Brown[27] have debunked the possibility of eschatological verification principle of the logical positivists, noting generally that religious language can be verified simply by examining personal religious experiences that are life changing. For example, a mystic who claims to have encountered God and as such experiences transformation of his whole life and that of others around him cannot simply be ignored on the ground that it is not empirically verifiable. Hence, as far as these scholars are concerned, religious propositions that have direct bearing with human life and can have practical effects on the lives of people are useful and meaningful.[28]However, it is pertinent to note that the fact that religious experience can have both transforming and practical effects in the lives of people do not adequately address these philosophical problems posed by such a religious language in question. But while these problems remain, the statement also appears to have serious moral problems that require a critical examination in the next subheading.

The Moral Problem of the Statement

Apart from the identified philosophical problems, the religious statement "May his soul rest in perfect peace" also raises moral questions. This is so because religious assertions as Braithwaite observes are usually moral assertions that seek to announce allegiance to a set of moral principles.[29]If this is the case, then how does such a religious assertion pose serious moral problems?

First, there is the problem of over-assumption associated with the statement under discussion. It can be said that in almost ninety percent cases where such prayers have been offered, the usual assumption have always been that it is the prayer and not the deceased's living records that would determine his or her final destiny. This creates the problem of undermining the fact that the individual's living records count. It explains why such a religious prayer is often said even at the funeral of a most notorious kidnaper, terrorist, murderer, cultist, etc. But this ought not to be because the works of an individual prior to his or her death should be a

major determining factor of where his or her final destiny resides. The Christian Bible is replete with insights on how human earthly activities would determine to a large extent where a person's final destiny resides (See Matt. 25:31-46; Dan. 12:2-3; and Rev. 22:12).

The second moral problem with such a religious prayer is the possible distortion of the moral equilibrium of the society. Koko has noted that in a traditional African society, funeral rites accorded to the dead were considered crucial because it was believed that such funeral rites had a way of regulating the moral equilibrium of the society.[30]For example, in traditional African societies, only people who were known to have lived good lives and died good deaths were accorded elaborate funeral rites as a mark of honour for lives well-lived. On the contrary, those who were known to have lived wicked lives as criminals, including arm bandits, terrorists, cultists, rapists, etc. were usually not given elaborate burials so that others would not follow their bad examples. These were necessary to maintain the moral equilibrium of the society. Regrettably, today, Christians and Muslims often offer such a religious prayer without considering the circumstances of death of the deceased and the life he or she lived while alive in this world. Indubitably, this is a serious violation of what obtains in a typical traditional African society. It could also be argued for example that such a religious prayer when offered for a deceased known to have been a criminal while alive, could encourage others to become criminals as well and this can potentially distort the moral equilibrium of the society. Certainly, this is not healthy for the Nigerian society that is already suffocating from moral decadence and serious security challenges. Therefore, Christians and Muslims in the quest to fulfill their religious obligations for a deceased in a traditional African context should always take into cognizance the African worldview about life, death and the hereafter before offering such a religious prayer.

Conclusion

In this paper, efforts have been made to examine the problems associated with the traditional Christian and Islamic prayer, "May his soul rest in perfect peace". It is argued that such a statement creates serious philosophical and moral problems that question the propriety of its usage. Although such a religious prayer is usually offered with the intention of consoling the family of the deceased, its moral disadvantage outweighs its benefits, particularly if the deceased was morally bankrupt. Such a prayer could distort the moral equilibrium of society by encouraging immoral

behaviours. Thus, there is need for a reconsideration of the use of this religious prayer during the burial of a deceased person, especially if the deceased is known to have lived a questionable life while on earth. This leaves religious leaders especially Christians and Muslims with the huge burden of investigating the lifestyle of the deceased before carrying out the responsibility of burying him or her, to be able to pray appropriately and more realistically.

Notes and References

1.   R.L. Sturch, "Religious Language", in: Ferguson, S.B., Wright, D.F. and Packer, J.I. (eds.) *New Dictionary of Theology*, (Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 579-580.
2.   C. Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith: A Historical Sketch from the Middle Ages to the Present Day,* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1968), 173.
3.   A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Dover Publications 1946), 144.
4.   A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic,* 199
5.   J. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, (New Delhi: Prince Hall, 1993).
6.   R. Swinburne, "God-Talk is not evidently Nonsense". In: Brian Davis (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion,* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, Ltd., 2000):151
7.   A. Church, "Review of A. J. Ayer's Language, Truth and Logic". 2nd Ed. *Journal of Symbolic Logic,* 14 (1949), 53
8.   J. Omoregbe, *A Philosophical look at Religion: Philosophy of Religion,* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, Ltd., 1993), 183
9.   C. Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 174.
10.   J. Omoregbe, *A Philosophical look at Religion,* 183
11.   J. Omoregbe, *A Philosophical look at Religion.*
12.   N. I. Geisler, and P.D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1980), 305
13.   R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Beliefs". *Eddington Memorial Lecture for 1995, reprinted in Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy,* (ed.) (I. T. Ramsey, SMC Press, 1996), 60-63.
14.   I. T. Ramsey, *Religious Language*, (SMC Press, 1957), 61&62.
15.   J. H. Weed, *Categories: Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Religion,* (Canada: University of New Brunswick, 2007).
16.   M.B. Maimon, *The Guide of the Perplexed,* Vol. 2, Trans. by Sholomo, P. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

17. W.P. Alston, "Functionalism and Theological Language", In: *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989a), 65.
18. S.T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae.* Trans. by Fathers of the Dominican province, (New York: Benziger Bros, 1948).
19. R. McInerny, *Aquinas and Analogy,* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press 1996).
20. Weed, *Categories: Philosophy of Language,* & Sturch, "Religious Language", 579
21. Geisler and Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy,* 305.
22. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 144, 199
23. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*
24. Omoregbe, *A Philosophical look at Religion*, 183
25. Swinburne, "God-Talk is not evidently Nonsense", 151
26. Church, "Review of A. J. Ayer's Language…", 53.
27. Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, 174
28. Omoregbe, *A Philosophical look at Religion*, 183
29. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature…", 60-63
30. J.C. Koko, "The Religious Significance of Funeral Rites in Abua, Rivers State: A Christian Perspective" (A Degree Essay Submitted to the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso), (2007): 15-22.