

A Contagious Malady: The Human Quest for Truth through Religion

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ABSTRACT

A unique characteristic of mankind is rationality, an element which distinguishes man from animals, and which enables man to think intelligently and reach conclusions. It manifests itself in human cognitive potency and gives room for diverse views among men on the objects of knowledge and beliefs – both of which are efforts to pin down truth. This paper, therefore, seeks to discuss the problems associated with man's efforts to pin down truth through religion and to hold a thesis that religion is a "contagious madness" which has created chaos instead of happiness, confusion instead of truth, and disunity and polarity instead of peaceful co-existence and harmony among all persons in the world. This is what I choose to call the general psychosis of mankind. The phrase "contagious malady" is used here not in the sense of medical science, but figuratively to show the effect of religion on man and the society in which he lives. Perhaps, my views concerning religion, as expressed in this paper, represent my own share of the global madness. It is expected that contrary or even complementary views will be expressed by individual critics or admirers of my views respectively, to exhibit their own portions of the general psychosis among human race.

However, our task here is not to destroy religious truth a la Marx or Feuerbach, but to create an awareness needed to foster tolerance among different religious beliefs in the society. The need for religious tolerance in the world becomes imperative in the face of religious insurgences and problems all over the world. These problems are so enormous that they, at times, assume political, social and economic dimensions. Therefore, medication for the epidemic must not exclude consideration of the purpose of man and his religion.

INTRODUCTION

A unique characteristic of mankind is rationality, an element which distinguishes man from animals, and which enables man to think intelligently and reach conclusions. It manifests itself in human cognitive potency and gives room for diverse views among men on the objects of knowledge and beliefs – both of which are efforts to pin down truth. This paper, therefore, seeks to discuss the problems associated with man's efforts to pin down truth through religion and to hold a thesis that religion is a "contagious madness" which has created chaos instead of happiness, confusion instead of truth, and disunity and polarity instead of peaceful

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II

Man was born free.¹ This freedom confers on man the liberty to make decisions on, among other things, matters bordering on acceptance or rejection of certain ideas, beliefs, ways of life and knowledge of truth. Such decisions which may be by products of certain pleasant or unpleasant circumstances experienced by mankind may be inspired in three basic ways. Firstly, it may be inspired internally through divine means in form of divine messages through divinely chosen individuals, or simply through meditation or reflections on human experience. Secondly, it may be inspired externally by the literary works of certain individuals or sacred books, or simply through teachings (directly or indirectly), or through empirical study of things. Finally, such decisions may evolve through the combination of the internal and external devices.

Every man clings tenaciously to his beliefs or ideas or ways of life or even particular knowledge of truth, until he or influenced to change by circumstances into a new line of thought. Sometimes, he regards even his or her immediate neighbours who do not share the same views with him as either outcasts or infidels or simply ignorant of the truth. "Men live by the sum total of their beliefs from practical beliefs (such as that the world is round) to deep spiritual ones"². In fact, some men are so mad with their beliefs that "they are prepared to live not only by these beliefs but also die for them"³. Indeed such men "are willing to die rather than deny their beliefs"⁴. No doubt, the rest of the world who hold opposing views to these religious beliefs would be labelled deviants, sinners, non-conformists, fanatics or madmen.

It seems therefore, that there is joy in madness which is only experienced and best understood by those who are mad. People say that a madman lives in his own unique world. One does not need medical devices or psychiatrists to ascertain the validity of this claim because it could be inferred from the madman's behaviour when compared with those of other people around him. But at best the psychiatrists may conclude, as far as his knowledge can carry him, that the madman is mentally

unbalanced or has an unsound mind. Even though modern science has made it less difficult for us to distinguish between sound and unsound minds, it is regretful that our hope in science as custodian of objective truth is thrown into a great disarray when we realize the shortcomings of this height of human knowledge. It is no news that in spite of its preference for precisions, scientific certitude or truth is less absolute. Indeed, the distinction between normal and abnormal is a problematic issue in all areas of human endeavour. The confusion becomes more heightened when one hears a madman calling a normal person a madman. Then the question is; who is mad and who is not mad between the two people? It is puzzling to note that even in his sub-conscious, the madman seems to be aware of the disparity between a sound mind and unsound mind, and so holds his own truth. It would be naïve and unhealthy to allow sentiments in our judgments and dismiss the underlying truth in his remarks.

It must be noted that truth here is self-experienced and holds for the individuals who find themselves entangled within the fold, and remains so until, perhaps, they are changed by circumstances. Here human differences, including different experiences of individuals, play an important role in determining man's attitude to his beliefs or ideas or what he considers as truth. This position stands in accord with Francis Bacon's analysis of the Idols. According to him, there are four kinds of Idols that influence and distort man's interpretation of experience, namely: The Idols of tribe, the Idols of the cave, the Idols of the market place, and the Idols of the theatre. The Idols of the cave are the errors peculiar to each individual arising from his temperament, education or other factors that influence judgments and views of things. The Idols of the market place are errors due to the influence of language. The language in common use generally gives fixed meanings of things as they are commonly conceived. But further investigations can show that the common notions expressed in language are inadequate or deficient. Therefore, as a result of the influence of these idols there is the tendency in mankind to erroneously cling to what they already believe and reject whatever seems to be contrary to these beliefs. This situation leaves humanity with the problem of how to determine which belief system conveys truth.

Perhaps we should invoke the tone of a common quiz in epistemology that: is objective or absolute truth a mirage?" In which area of human endeavour can we pin down absolute truth? Bertrand Russell in his book entitled *The Problems of Philosophy* begins an inquiry into the human knowledge of reality with an epistemological puzzle which is expressed in a question that: "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?"⁵. Russell acknowledges, any attempt to answer this question in affirmative and without proper scrutiny will result into more confusion contradictions. It is this attempt in philosophy to pin down objective or absolute truth that has given birth to many theories of truth and culminating in an endless search for truth. As Ayo Fadahunsi puts it;

The epistemic problem of truth is philosophically speculative in the sense that no one is sure or rather can claim that one criterion or the other best describes the

*state of affairs. We can only in our own right, judge whether a claim is more appropriate or best describes a considered situation. Every other theorist thus speculates about what he feels suits the situation at hand and the purpose of his adventure in the discipline.*⁶

Truth is a product of knowledge which exhibits, implicitly or explicitly, certainty as its major characteristic. True knowledge, therefore, enjoys absolute certainty, while belief which has faith as its basis enjoys moral certainty. To say that you know something is to say that your knowledge of that thing, which you claim to possess, is demonstrable. However, various epistemological schools have not successfully defended their divergent views on what truth is. Hence, neither the correspondence theory nor the coherence theory nor even the pragmatic theory of truth could be regarded as a true model theory of truth. This lends credence to the fact that man is not an artificial being or machine, and as such, the universality of a particular perspective for all men, is virtually impossible. But there are times when consensus is reached for specific purposes. This is essentially the case in science. The scientists find it more expedient to agree on their discoveries. Polanyi regards this as a remarkable achievement for science. Thus, he writes:

*The consensus prevailing in modern science is certainly remarkable. Consider the fact that each scientist follows his own personal judgment for believing any particular claim of science and each is responsible for finding a problem and pursuing it in his own way; and that each again verifies and propounds his own results according to his personal judgment. Consider moreover that discovery is constantly at work, profoundly remoulding science in each generation. And yet in spite of such extreme individualism acting in so many widely disparate branches, and in spite of the general flux in which they are all involved, we see scientists continuing to agree on most points of science. Even though controversy never ceases among them, there is hardly a question on which they do not agree after a few years' discussion.*⁷

As matter of fact, where there is dispute among scientists over a particular issue or discovery, it is usually resolved by means of tests and experiments. Scientific endeavour requires tolerance. Scientists recognize the fact that there is bound to be "controversies over issues but such controversies between leaders of thought are usually conducted in order to canvass support rather than to convert each other"⁸. Indeed, it becomes clearer why fairness, tolerance and truth can hardly be maintained in a public context unless its audience appreciates candor and moderation and can resist false oratory⁹.

We admit that open-mindedness and commitment are the phenomenological attitudes of the scientist who wants to make an excellent research into the phenomenal world. The attitudes of scientist such as Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Pasteur and Einstein are characterized far more by hot commitment than by cool detachment¹⁰. What then is very important in scientific discoveries (as it is in all religions) is for the researcher or scientist to have faith in his work. According to Planck:

Anybody who has been seriously engaged in scientific work of any kind realizes that over the entrance to the gates of the temple of science are written the words: Ye must have faith. It is a quality which the scientist cannot dispense with¹¹.

Even then, such faith must be founded on the principle of the Golden Rule which emphasizes a mean between two extremes. The doctrine of mid-way between two extremes has long been prescribed by great religious leaders such as Buddha and Confucius as well as an ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Consequently, Claude Bernard warns that "men who have excessive faith in their theories or ideas are not only ill prepared for making discoveries; they also make very poor observations"¹². Moderate or tolerable faith therefore becomes imperative in human choice of and reliance on any belief or a way of life or a particular attitude to life. Needless to say, that all religions and other aspects of human life require tolerance for peace and harmony of all human species on the earth. But it is doubtful if any religion has a pass mark for championing this course for the purpose of humanity. It seems to me that the whole of human race is to be blamed for this blind guide.

III

Religion as an activity is bi-dimensional. Religion can be viewed in the broad sense (reductionist-view of religion), and in the restricted sense. When viewed in its broad sense religion is reduced "to any kind of strong belief in anything"¹³. Thus, in this sense, everybody has a religion. This does not rule out the atheists, scientists, Marxists and all other groups of people whose beliefs exclude any relationship with an object of worship. It is therefore appropriate to say that everybody holds onto the truth in whatever he or she believes and thereby exhibits the madness of mankind.

However, in the restricted sense, religious enterprise is viewed to mean the activities of some special group of people. Etymologically speaking, the word religion seems to derive from three Latin words namely "Ligare" (meaning to bind), "Relegere" (meaning to unite, or to link), and "Religio" (meaning relationship)¹⁴. Consequently, in all religions there must be specific features some of which are link, unity, and relationship between man and the object of worship. Religion is thus viewed as "a particular system of faith and worship"¹⁵. According to A.C. Bouquet, religion is "a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existence, the absolute or simply, God"¹⁶. Religion is therefore seen by J.I. Omoregbe as a bi-polar phenomenon – man who is the religious man on one side and on the other a transcendent being or deity believed to exist and which is worshiped by the religious man¹⁷. This view of religion suggests a dependence of man on the deity which he worships. By his definition of religion as "a feeling of absolute dependence on God"¹⁸ Schleiermacher, successfully identifies the cause of religious. We must note that absolutism transcends the human nature and knowledge, more so when it has remained as unattainable ideal in all aspects of human affairs. Absolute truth is a mirage, and at best it serves as a standard which every human being strives to attain. If it is attainable, it cannot be regarded as

absolute. So, any standard which is set and attained is not an absolute standard but a step towards the absolute or ultimate standard. Thus, what is probable is that what men hold as truth is nothing but an epochal truth which can be modified, rejected or continuously found valid at the subsequent epochs. The dynamism of nature and permanence of change therefore becomes a big crack in the wall of knowledge in which many philosophers take refuge.

Against the backdrop of this absence of permanence in nature, absolutism or extremity as it applies to dependence, relationship, belief, faith as well as to all other features of religion should be viewed as misnomer. This is what prevents religious tolerance. Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucians, Taoists and all other religions disagree among themselves to the extent that one may be tempted to conclude that all human beings are not from the same source. Understandably, the objects of worship in these different religions are conceived differently but at times it is done in such a way as to provoke disagreements which may affect the totality of man's life, more so if the claims are based on absolute faith. For example while God has a place in Christianity and Islam, as the creator of heavens and earth and the absolute controller of man, Hinduism reduces God (Paramatman) to the level of second in command to Brahman (the ultimate reality). Whereas, in Buddhism God has no place at all. Even where two beliefs are somehow similar with little differences, the followers are not ready to appreciate the virtue in tolerance. Christian and Islamic faiths, for example, have similar doctrines with little differences. But these little differences are often viewed by the believers as more fundamental in their religions and hence intolerance of other religious beliefs becomes a virtue. Yet, they claim to be creatures of the same God.

H. Watson and J. Boag identify fundamentalism as a boost to religious insurgences in the world. Thus, they remark that:

In the world religions there are groups of believers whose fervid identification with their own religion is expressed most strongly as condemnation of all other faiths. We can call them fundamentalists ... they tend to neglect the fundamental spiritual and moral basis of their own faith, substituting for its moral teaching a rigid observance of its outward symbols and credulous acceptance of its myths. Fundamentalism has been the source of the most of the intractable religious quarrels that have led to or sustained, wars – Catholic vs Protestant. Christianity vs Islam. Hindu vs Muslim etc... Fundamentalism usually draws its emotional appeal from struggles long past and the myths that have gathered around them. Serb nationalists still seek revenge for the defeat of the Serbian army by Muslim invaders at the battle of Kosovo in 1389 that led to several centuries of Ottoman rule and this attitude exacerbates their relations with their Muslim neighbours to this day.....The commitment of the energy and idealism of young men and young women today to fundamentalist causes is the saddest and most intractable aspect of the problem. Many are willing to die (as well as to kill) for the cause they espouse, sometimes encouraged by their religious belief that voluntary martyrdom will ensure certain immediate entry into heaven¹⁹.

Indeed, fundamentalists are extremists who emphasize certain aspects of their religion to the condemnation other religions. As C.S. Momoh puts it, "The religious fanatic or fundamentalist holds fervently to the dogma that anyone is doomed who does not belong to his religious sect or denomination"²⁰.

Ideally, religion, by its very nature, ought to promote peace among mankind. When remarking on the chaos caused by religion to the existence of peace in the society J.I. Omoregbe writes.

*Does religion promote peaceful coexistence among people? It can hardly be denied that religion has been the source of a lot of intolerance, feud, discrimination and devastating wars in different parts of the world, both in the past and at present. We need only to think of the caste system in India, the religious wars in Europe, the 'holy war' of Islam, the Christian-Moslem crusade, and religious sect the cases of Northern Ireland, Lebanon and the destruction of lives and property in Nigeria by the Maitesine sect in the last few years come readily to mind*²¹.

These are aftermaths of the diverse interpretations of the irreconcilable injunctions in the sacred books of each of the religions concerned. Each claims to be superior to the others and exercises the faith as the only approved revealed religion by God (or the ultimate reality so conceived) to mankind. Thus, persecution and condemnation await whosoever does not share the same faith. The Holy Bible, for instance, condemns those who do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Truth and the Way (John 14:6) while the Holy Quoran asserts that the fire of hell will consume those who refuse to accept the Islamic religion . (Quoran ch.57:19 and ch.4:56). Yet the Bible says "Thou shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" (John 8:32). But where lies the truth? Is it to be found in the Bible or the Quoran, or the Upanishads, or Bhagavadgita or Adhamatyayoga, or Brahman Sutra? Is it in Islamic religion, or Christianity, or Confucianism, Taoism, or Zoroasterianism, or Buddhism, or Hinduism, or the African Traditional religion?

The realization of the contagious nature of religion makes it difficult for different religious sects to allow interaction among their members. It is a contagious epidemic reinforced by intolerance which makes people of different religious beliefs to stay off one another. Otherwise, how do you explain the following statements what I choose to call "The Dilemma of a Religious Man" that:

- (i) Have you ever heard that a man (Christain) was once found on the street of Mecca with a Bible in his one hand and a bell on the other; jingling the bell and calling on the Saudi Arabians to denounce Prophet Mohammed and turn to Jesus Christ as their saviour? I tell you, it would have been better for our dear Christian to first give his valedictory speech and bid his family farewell before embarking on such a suicide mission. Certainly, he would see hell on earth before seeing the paradise because his faith would elude him.

- (ii) Or have you ever heard that a pastor of a Pentecostal church confirms the truth in Islamic religion and is ready to live by it? Behold! Our friend, the pastor, would be condemned by the Christians as a "Religious Prostitute", "a Blasphemer" and "an Antichrist". Yet, he will never be regarded as Godly among the Moslem.

We can distill from the above dilemma that religious intolerance and desire for religious domination have brought mankind into crises of varied magnitude. According to Hans Kung (1991: 73-74), religious intolerance accounts for many massacres and wars in the Middle and Far East, between Marinite Christians, Sunni and Shiite Muslims, between Syrians, Palestinians, Druse and Israelis, between Iran and Iraq, between India and Palestine, Hindus and Sikhs, Singhalese Buddhists and Tamil Hindus, and between Buddhist monks and Catholic regime in Vietnam, and also between Catholic and Protestants in Northern Ireland.²² J.S. Mill (1947:92) says, "the notion that it is one man's duty that another should be religious was the foundation of all the religious persecutions ever perpetrated..."²³ Like Kung, Momoh (2003) argues that most of the causes of religious crisis in the world have their roots in intolerance.²⁴

Both the Qur'an and the Bible emphasize the omniscience of God. Each of these religions also claims to have been inspired by God Himself through revelation to certain religions also claims to have been inspired by God himself through revelation to certain individuals but at different times and in different ways and places. Besides, many religions had been in existence before Christianity and Islam. Judaism which later developed into Christianity was one of them. These religions had many followers. It is unthinkable, therefore, to believe that all the followers of the previous religions before Christ and Mohammed went to hell and would be denied resurrection. It is equally unthinkable to hold onto the belief that God, with His unique omniscient attribute did not foresee that conflicting revelations or contradictory accounts of revelation or irreconcilable doctrines about Him would generate chaos, conflicts, hatred, war and disunity among making. Indeed, it is believed among religious men that nothing happens without a purpose. What is then the purpose for which God revealed Himself severally and differently to different races and still expects unity of purpose, common goal and peaceful co-existence among men? Then what is the purpose of man and his religion?

According to J.I. Omoregbe, religion has enabled many people to see some meaning and purpose of their lives²⁵. Religion is a way of looking at reality. It complements the functions of metaphysics (philosophy) and science. This is not to say that a religious mind is a primitive mind. Obviously, many a scientist are religious men, while philosophers who are great theologians flock through the history of Western philosophy. Therefore, it is inappropriate to dismiss religious truth as irrelevant to human development. But while great emphasis is often laid by every religion on moral life (though in divergent versions and ways), none has considered it morally right to allow for tolerance of other religious sect. To the believers of these religions it is just or morally right to segregate or even annihilate, where necessary, other religious people who do not share the same belief with them. But did God create us to fight, hate and kill ourselves? Did God

choose specific nations for specific religions? What about those nations who are not chosen by God, are they not entitled to their own religions? Why do we have to call non-chosen nations sinners?

It is probable therefore that religion is a cultural phenomenon. J.I. Omoregbe expresses this as he writes:

Religion is inseparably part of culture. Every religion is the product of a particular culture within which it grew. Its doctrines reflect the world view of that culture, at that particular time. Hence it is impossible to understand any religion without understanding the culture within which it grew. It is impossible for example to understand Christianity without understanding the Jewish-Greco-Roman culture. Similarly, it is impossible to understand Islam without understanding the Arabic culture nor can the Hindu, Buddhist or Jainist religion be understood without understanding Chinese culture any more than the Chintoist religion can be understood without understanding the Japanese culture²⁶.

With this arrangement, one should expect world peace whereby each race appreciates the values of other races but not necessarily forced to live by them. Perhaps, forceful evangelism or spread of faith at all costs is responsible for the dreaded contamination among each religious group. For example, if a Moslem is allowed to mingle with Christians, it is probable that either the Moslem is converted to Christianity or the Christians are converted to Islam. If indeed, it is true that we are all created by God and each will account for his deeds, it poses no problem for any believer to change his faith. But unfortunately this fact does not engage the minds of the believers of the two religions. In fact, in most mono-religious states of the world, concerted effort are often made to ensure the prevention of infiltration of alien religions which might turn people against the government.

Admittedly, the mono-religious states are civil states, but it is doubtful if certain fundamental human rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of association are really extended to the corridors of religion. This may be the case probably because the existence of such government may be threatened by the eventual change of orientation and belief of the citizens. To this extent, such government promotes peace, though at the cost of the people's freedom, and so holds no blame. Notwithstanding, allowances can still be provided in the state constitution to allow for greater exercise of such freedom promoting greater peace and religious tolerance.

However, we must note that membership of any religious group is circumstantial. A child that is born in Saudi Arabia and by parents, who are citizens of Saudi Arabia, is definitely going to become a Moslem. Similarly, a child that is born by the Roman citizens is Rome may automatically become a Christian. And each of these two children will hold onto the truth in the religion under which each of them grew. But each cannot appreciate other person's religion properly except he either changes his belief and joins the other fold or tolerates the other religion while

retaining his original religious belief. The former has always been the case, but with a lot of consequences. The latter is a new trend which we recommend to foster world peace. Religion is indeed has being a contagious madness pervading all human societies.

IV

The way out of the problem is not by removing religion from human life because that seems to be an impossible task. It is also not by forcing all religions to have the same faith, or to compress all religions into one faith. Any attempt to do this would amount to the denial of freedom of religion. Indeed world free of religion is not necessarily a world free of crisis. Hans Kung suggests what he calls "religious peace". According to him, there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. In short, there can be no world peace without religious peace²⁷. Perhaps, the way achieving religious peace "lies in the objective of making each man his brother's keeper and of eradicating all evils in society"²⁸. This is a massage for religious tolerance which according to Momoh can be achieved by waging war against intolerance as proposed by CENPRETO (Centre for the Propagation of Religious and Ethnic Tolerance). The claim of the supremacy of one religion over the others is itself a sign of ignorance because there is no one alive today who is knowledgeable enough to say with confidence whether one religion is greater than all others. To that extent, pinning down absolute truth through any religion is not only an impossible task but is a direct invitation to crisis. To remedy the situation members of each of the existing religious groups should view members of other religions as important, and not with bitterness and hatred. Consequently, when the Moslems agitate for their rights and sovereignty, they should not be branded terrorists, and when the Christians rise against their governments they should not be tagged rebels or dissidents. Rather such cases should be investigated with a view to understanding the causes of the crisis and possible means of preventing similar future uprising.

It must be realized that religion is a belief or idea aimed at understanding the world and the purpose of man in the world. We must equally accept the bitter truth that religion is nothing but a way of exhibiting natural madness in us. Since we are all mad, then all must tolerate each other's madness because it is by so-doing that peace and harmony can be achieved in the world. After all, all the existing religions support love among men. It is absurd to find that such love does not extend to membership of other religions. For, sure it is unreasonable to think that we opt for the removal religion from human society. Religion therefore remains our cross which we must carry while appreciating the need for other people to hold their divergent views which affect the totality of their lives. Religion is for man, and not man for religion; it does not preach hatred but love; it should not support killing but life. The world must live in harmony irrespective of religious differences.

The purpose of religion is to generate happiness, unity harmony and peaceful co-existence of all human beings on earth. The divergences found in different religions are derived from different religious experiences which are culture bound, and the divergent interpretations of their practitioners. But a believer of any

religion achieves self-fulfillment by practicing his religion. Religion therefore enables the believer to attain spiritual growth and development. For example, yoga, fasting, asceticism and reverence of God (in some religions) are necessary for the religious man to discipline his mind and make him achieve the highest moral virtue – happiness. Such a posture of the human mind is an appropriate step towards the appreciation of human life and the need for every soul to be happy. It is this state of mind that engenders man to accommodate his neighbours who may probably be from a different background. This is tolerance. Therefore, love and peace should be the watchwords of all religions. Consequently, if you cherish your life, you should realize that other people do too. And so let them be. Religion is not meant to tear people apart, otherwise the phrase – love your neighbours as thyself – is meaningless. It is time for the world to come together as one, and if indeed we seek salvation, our hands should be clean, so that we do not regret at death, the atrocities which we may have perpetrated in the pretence or as a result of wrong interpretations and application of sacred injunctions.

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