

THE EFFICACY OF LANGUAGE IN THE PROPAGATION OF RELIGION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language is the chief tool for effective communication. Be it science, politics or religion, it is language that plays the crucial role in the propagation of axioms and ideas. There are different kinds of languages that are peculiar to the physical, natural and social sciences. But whether there is any specific language in the disclosure of religion is a question that needs to be discussed and analyzed. If comparative study of religion is carried out world over, it will be clear that there is no specific or universal language of religion. This is because unlike other sciences which are empirical in nature, religion is fundamentally an experience or awareness involving trans-empirical elements within its ambit. For this reason, its language is quite distinct and deserves serious attention.

Conceptual Explication

Religion

Religion as a system of lived experiences includes the first-order language through which we communicate our feelings, thoughts and actions in relation to an object of devotion. Galloway defines religion as "man's faith in

power beyond himself whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gains stability of life". Faith in a power beyond man is regarded as the essential feature of religion. This power has the ability to satisfy the emotional nature of man; that is it responds to man and his prayers seeking help in troubled moments or expressing gratitude in the hours of victory. This means that religion is a matter of commitment to an object or devotion or an attitude to life.

Austin Cline defined religion to capture much of what religion is across diverse cultures. It is therefore;

- Belief in something sacred (for example gods, or other supernatural being).
- Ritual acts focused on sacred objects.
- A moral code believed to have a sacred or supernatural; basis.
- Characteristically religious feelings (awe, sense of mystery, sense of guilt, adoration), which tend to be aroused in the presence of sacred objects and during the practice of ritual.
- Prayer and other forms of communication with the supernatural.
- A world view or a general picture of the world as a whole and the place of the individual therein. This picture contains some specification of an overall purpose or point of the world and an indication of how the individual fits into it.
- A more or less total organization of one's life based on the world view.
- A social group bond together by the above.

The definition of religion used here describes religious system. It encompasses the features common in belief systems generally acknowledged as religion without focusing on specific characteristics unique to just a few.

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concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a supernatural agency or agencies usually involving devotional and ritual observances and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.

Sociologist and anthropologists tend to see religion as an abstract set of ideas, values or experiences developed as part of a cultural matrix. Lindback defines religion as "a kind of cultural and linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought.. It is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulation of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings and sentiments". This definition explains that religion refers to one's primary world view and how this dictates one's thoughts and actions. Thus religion is considered by some source to extend to causes, principles or activities believed in with zeal or conscientious devotion concerning points or matters of ethics or conscience, and not necessarily including belief in the supernatural.

Religious statement or utterances can not be counted as cognitive; they cannot be regarded as either true or false like scientific ones. But though empirically unverifiable, religious statements are not meaningless. The significance of religious language in human life cannot be simply brushed aside. Religion as a distinct kind of commitment has its own field and its own distinctive language.

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The term religion could also refer to both personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals and

communication stemming from shared convictions. It is sometimes used interchangeably with 'faith' or 'belief system' but it is more socially defined than personal convictions and it entails specific behaviours.

Language

Researchers have through time, made good attempts at explaining the concept of language from different perspectives. Most definitions of the term or concept are provided by either linguists or anthropologists who specialized in linguistics.

Hall (1968:158) defines language as "the institution where by humans communicates and interacts with each other by means of habitually used oral-audition arbitrary symbols". This definition explains the importance of biology in man's ability to use language. It also points to the fact that language is made up of symbols.

Womack (2001:154) defines language as "the human ability to encode culturally defines meanings in sound and to combine unit of sound to generate infinite new meanings through the application of rules". This definition lays emphasis not only on man's unique ability of language but also on the essence of rules in language use. This points to the facts that every language has a structure.

Language analysis is one of the fundamental tasks of a linguist and even a philosopher. Ludwig Wittgenstein in his philosophical investigations came up with the view that religious language is used not to convey any information about a fact but to tell people to live with a picture, though not a picture which can be sensed one very old view is that theistic statements are quasi-cognitive, they are said to be analogical in nature. Beside these, there are a number of other theories holding the view that theistic assertions are non-cognitive.

A recent development in the philosophy of religion is

much occupied with the problems concerning the descriptive terms applied to God and another is that dealing with the basis function of religious language.

John Hick has pointed out that many of the terms that are applied to God are used in a special sense and differ from the way they are used in ordinary contexts. When it is said that God is great, God is love, or God is good, it does not mean that God occupies a large volume of space or that God has a physical body which expresses itself in a range of actions. In cases where a word occur both in secular as well as theological contexts, its secular meaning is primary in the sense that it has developed first and has acquired an established meaning of its own. The meaning that such a term bears when it is applied to God is an adaptation of its secular use. Consequently, terms like 'great', 'love', or 'good' when applied to God in religious discourses, raise a number of questions. There are different opinions among linguists and philosophers regarding the status and meanings of such terms and the functions of the religious language.

Analogical Expression

St. Thomas Aquinas developed the doctrine of analogy to explain the nature of religious language. Aquinas says that when a word such as 'good' is applied to God, it is in a different sense from that used in relation to human beings. According to him, 'good' is applied to God and man neither univocally nor equivocally but analogical. Qualities like goodness, love and wisdom are the perfect qualities of the Godhead that are known to us only by analogy.

When we say that God is good, we are saying that there is a quality of the infinitely perfect being that corresponds to what at our own human level we call goodness. It is the divine goodness that is the true, normative and unbroken reality, whereas human life shows at best a faint,

fragmentary and distorted reflection of this quality. Only in God can the perfections of being occur in their true and unstructured nature. Only God knows, loves and is righteous and wise in the full and proper sense.

The doctrine of analogy intends to indicate the relation between the different meanings of a term it is applied both to humanity and to God.

Symbolic Statements

Religious language is symbolic in nature. Paul Tillich viewed that all theological statements concerning God—that he is the creator, a good and personal being, and so on—are symbolic. Moreover, religious faith which is the state of being ultimately concerned about the ultimate can express itself only in symbolic language. A symbol participates in the reality to which it points. It opens up our vision to dimensions of reality that otherwise remain unrecognized.

Tillich further expresses that a symbol has truth; it is adequate to the revelation it expresses. No symbol should be treated as an existential thing. Every symbol points to the infinite, which it symbolizes. A symbol is a statement which a believer makes with all his heart, soul and strength. The true awarenesses of the transcendental or ultimate reality which the symbol represents is an existential grasping of it. Hence no symbolic statement can be impersonally, literally or factually true, that is to say, they cannot be classified true or false like cognitive judgments. They are authentic when they evoke an ultimate concern for man's destiny or when they represent the transcendent with an immediate awareness. But symbols are not merely expressions, they have their root in reality. They are not merely different subjective ways of looking at the same thing. They have a foundation in reality, however, much the subjective side of man's experience may contribute.

Language/Religion

Acquiring a religion involves to some extent learning a new vocabulary and syntax. For example, old Quaker using "thee" and in some Christian circles, phraseology such as "believing in" and because what is said may partially condition what can be thought. The use of such speech patterns will have subtle psychological effects on the speakers, tending to limit what can be named and hence what can be thought. This is because religion and language are closely connected at the structural level.

Many religions have a sacred language. For example, Hebrew for Judaism, Classical Arabic for Islam, Sanskrit for Hindicism, Latin for Catholicism. Owing to the fact that religions are generally ancient, the languages they used are often partially or wholly unintelligible to the laity and sometimes even the clergy, but contrary to the view of others, this linguistic remoteness is a strength, not a weakness. Misguided attempts to bring the language up to date often coincide with a loss of religious faith, and it is difficult to say the cause and effect. Many Roman Catholics still lament the abandonment of latin language in favour of vernacular.

Language generally is not static but evolve over time. This is applicable to religion for it is not static as well. Deacon (1997) writes

As a language passes from generation to generation, the vocabulary and syntactical rules tend to get modified by transmission errors, by the active creativity of its users, and by influences from other languages.. Eventually words, phraseology and syntax will diverge so radically that people will find it impossible to mix elements of both without confusion. By analogy to biological evolution, different lineages of a common ancestral language will diverse so far from each other as to become reproductively

incompatible. This explains that as language changes, so it is with religion. For instance, Christianity evolved from Judaism. Within religions, there are often subspecies the different denominations within Christianity.

Campbell (2006) considers religion as narrative but not belief. Going by this view, narrative is largely a matter of language, for they are primarily expressed in words they can also be in pictures, but the pictures generally require verbal elaboration for effective comprehension.

There is therefore, a trivial sense in which religion and language are related to each other. It would be impossible to acquire a religion without the medium of language.

Two aspects of religion are pointed out here. First, it is seemingly universal in all human societies. Second, although, religions may vary greatly from one society to another, they possess certain features in common that make us able to identify them as religions.

Many people have interpreted this universality and similarity as indicating the presence of a religion instinct, an inbuilt tendency to religious belief and practice in all human beings. Some have been speculated that there are brain structures that give rise to this. These very similar arguments have been applied to language.

Every human society has language, and Noam Chomsky (1972) has famously claimed that there are similarities in the structure of all languages that point to the existence of a "Universal Grammar". The grammar or "deep structure" of human languages is very complex, yet children seem to have an innate ability to master this complexity with a short time as if by instinct. This has suggested to many people that the rules of Grammar are in some sense built into the human brain during evolution. If this idea is correct, it is applicable to religion. Religion after all, is apparently a near-universal in human societies, like language. There is

therefore, a "deep structure" for religion just as there seems to be for language.

Religious Language as Non-Cognitive

Religious language is now considered as non-cognitive. Randall (1993) holds that religious language works with a body of symbols and myths which are both non-representative and non-cognitive. According to him religious language performs a number of functions which include the following:

- The language arouses the emotions and stir people to actions, thereby strengthening people's practical commitment to what they believe to be right.
- Secondly, the language also stimulates cooperative action and thus binds a community or group together.
- The language communicates qualities of experience of members of the group.
- Finally, it evokes and serves to foster and clarify our human experience of an aspect of the world

Another view of religious language as non-cognitive comes from R.M. Hare. He conceived language as a kind of game with many possible rules of play. This agrees with the traditional grammarians who share the same view on language. It shows that scientific or factual use is not the only context for the use of language. Hare holds that religious statements are both prescriptive and descriptive. According to him, religious statements do not describe facts but express out attitude to facts.

Religious language, whether we describe it as analogical, symbolic or non-cognitive is unique, and its uniqueness is something which springs from the uniqueness of what that language is about.

The language of religion is one that tries to

comprehend the incomprehensible. Sri Ramakrishna says, 'No one can say with finality that God is only "this" and nothing else'. It is obvious that religious language can act as ladders for people grouping in worldly darkness to reach trans-empirical heights.

Conclusion

Though religion involves the use of symbols, language is the major one that really enhances worship. Human being distinguish God through his names which are given in language. They express the qualities and characteristics of God also in language.

From the language used in praising God, one would know the people's perception of God they worship. The language will also help to expose the faith and belief of the people to their God or deity.

The priests of God communicate with worshippers of God with the use of language. In churches, Christian priest give their sermons with the use of language. They speak about God and his love for mankind by using language. They also use language to counsel believers.

At this point, it may be said that the functionality or otherwise of religion is dependent on the existence of language.

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