RELIGION AND   SOCIETY

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to the Holy Trinity.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER   ONE

CHAPTER   FOUR

RELIGION AND CULTURE
By

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the study of religion in society. When studying religion, a study of culture is necessary. This statement is argued from three positions: (1) cultural migrations occurring worldwide, (2) religion as a cultural identity marker causing the borders between culture and religion to blur and (3) the location of religion within culture causing religion to act as custodian of culture. This results in a situation where any signs of animosity towards culture are interpreted as opposition towards religion. Hundreds of studies have examined how religious beliefs mould an individual's sociology and psychology through religious beliefs, religious denomination, and strength of religious devotion as they are linked to their cultural beliefs and background. The influence of communication in how individuals and communities understand, conceptualize, and pass on religious and cultural beliefs and practices are integral to understanding the relationship between religion and culture. We are to explore the influence of culture on religion and how our globalized world affects the communication of religions and cultures, and how Christianity communication is misunderstood when strictly communicated from the worldview of Jewish

cultures.

What is Religion?

It is difficult to define religion from one perspective and with one encompassing definition. "Religion" is often defined as the belief in or the worship of a god or gods. (Geertz, 1973, 90) defined religion as "a system which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men 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.

It is essential to recognize that religion cannot be understood apart from the world in which it takes place (Marx & Engels, 1975). To better understand how religion affects culture and communication, we should first explore key definitions, philosophies, and perspectives that have informed how we currently look at religion. In particular, the influences of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel are discussed below to further understand the complexity of religion.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) saw religion as descriptive and evaluative. First, from a descriptive point of view, Marx believed that social and economic situations shape how we form and regard religions and what is religious. For Marx, the fact that people tend to turn to religion more when they are facing economic hardships or that the same religious denomination is practised differently in different communities would seem perfectly logical.

Second, Marx saw religion as a form of alienation (Marx & Engels, 1975). For Marx, the notion that the Catholic Church, for example, had the ability or right to excommunicate an individual, and thus essentially exclude them from the spiritual community, was a classic example of exploitation and domination. Such alienation and exploitation were later echoed in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who viewed organized religion as society and culture controlling man (Nietzsche, 1996).

1) Building on Marxist thinking, Weber (1864–1920) stressed the multi-causality of religion. Weber (1963) emphasized three arguments regarding religion and society thus: How religion relates to a society is contingent;

2) The relationship between religion and society can only be examined in its cultural and historical context; and

3) The relationship between society and religion is slowly eroding. Weber's arguments can be applied to Catholicism in Europe. Until the Protestant Reformation of the 15th and 16th centuries, Catholicism was the dominant religious ideology on the European continent. However, since the Reformation, Europe has increasingly become more Protestant and less Catholic.

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) focused more on how religion performs a necessary function; it brings people and society together. Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things (Durkheim (1976, 47). From this perspective, religion and culture are inseparable, as beliefs and practices are uniquely cultural. For example, religious rituals (one type of

practice) unite believers in religion and separate nonbelievers. The act of communion, or the sharing of the Eucharist by partaking in consecrated bread and wine, is practised by most Christian denominations. However, the frequency of communion differs extensively, and the ritual is practised differently based on historical and theological differences among denominations.

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) focused more on the fluidity and permanence of religion and religious life. Simmel (1950) believed that religious and cultural beliefs develop from one another. Moreover, he asserted that religiosity is an essential element to understand when examining religious institutions and religion. While individuals may claim to be part of a religious group, Simmel asserted that it was important to consider just how religious the individuals were. In much of Europe, religiosity is low: Germany 34%, Sweden 19%, Denmark 42%, the United Kingdom 30%, the Czech Republic 23%, and The Netherlands 26%, unlike in the United States (56%), which is now considered the most religious industrialized nation in the world (*Telegraph Online*, 2015).

Combining Simmel's (1950) notion of religion with Geertz's (1973) concept of religion and a more basic definition (belief in or the worship of a god or gods through rituals), it is clear that the relationship between religion and culture is integral and symbiotic. Clark and Hoover (1997, 17) noted that "culture and religion are inseparable" and "religion is an important consideration in theories of culture and society". Religion is the

relationship of every individual to the spiritual things they have regarded as holy and worthy of their highest reverence. It is also considered as the means that brings comfort to the people whenever they deal with the truth of life and death and anything in between. Many of the religions in the world highly observe their sacred texts as the authority and guide for spiritual and moral conduct.

Religious people perform religious activities such as meditations and rituals mostly done in institutions. Because of this, religion has become the backbone of most people in every society even at the onset of those times when animism was prevalent.

Religion helps people understand the natural calamities happening around them as it provides them with explanations of some phenomena such as floods, earthquakes and the like. The system of moral and ethical values of people is also based on the religion they've been practicing in a society. Religion, in other words, makes sense of the events in every person or believer's life. It has always been fundamental in the religious view to worship and serve God or in the case of other religions, in many gods. Things that pass the moral standards of religion are accepted while those that are not are considered immoral which religious people don't want to associate with. Religions have backstories that are sacred and are mostly preserved in scriptures, representations and sanctuaries. People who believe in religion are usually called religionists. Some people follow not just one but more than one religion at a certain time. Three of the world religions that have the most number of followers are Christianity, Islam and Hinduism.

Religion is an organized collection of belief systems, cultural systems, and world views that relate humanity to spirituality and, sometimes, to moral values. Many religions have narratives, symbols, traditions and sacred histories that are intended to give meaning to life or to explain the origin of life or the Universe. From their ideas about the cosmos and human nature, they tend to derive morality, ethics, religious laws or a preferred lifestyle. According to some estimates, there are roughly 4,200 religions in the world.

What is Culture?

Culture doesn't have a universal definition but most people have agreed that it refers to the collective knowledge existing in the people particularly as it concerns society. According to Cristina De Rossi, an anthropologist at Barnet and Southgate College in London, culture shares its word history with the French word also termed *culture* derived from the Latin term *colere* which means "to nurture the earth", and other words with meanings related to the cultivation of growth. Culture is the social heritage of every person which includes the knowledge they have acquired from years of being together in one particular society. When one fully comprehends the concept of culture, he or she can easily determine why people in one area behave in a certain way that they always do. People usually ask why a certain society dresses up this way, speaks that way, and believes and practices this or that. Culture answers all these in a perfect sense. The reason why people exhibit particular traditions and customs in their community is because of culture. The word culture (Latin: cultura, lit. "cultivation") is a modern concept based on a term first

used in classical antiquity by the Roman orator, Cicero: "cultura animi". The term "culture" appeared first in its current sense in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, to connote a process of cultivation or improvement, as in agriculture or horticulture.

When it comes to the material aspect of culture, the people's mechanisms and relics are also included as these things reflect what their culture really is in a given society. To add to the list of things that mirror culture are the people's language, architecture, clothing, greetings or interactions with others, eating habits and other traditions. In other words, culture hints to us how these people refine themselves to perfection through the passing years. The things mentioned above are just the physical part of a certain culture. What is closer to the cultural view of humanity is how people become aware of themselves. This knowledge is acquired and not just a genetic result that develops at birth. This means that every person in a society establishes familiarity with the happenings around him and eventually develops it into tradition. That is what constitutes culture which includes religion as one of its many subsets.

Furthermore, Hall (1989, 13) defined culture as "a series of situational models for behaviour and thought". Geertz (1973), building on the work of Kluckhohn (1949), defined culture in terms of 11 different aspects:

(1) the total way of life of a people; (2) the social legacy individual acquires from his group; (3) a way of thinking, feeling, and believing; (4) an abstraction from behaviour; (5) a theory on the part of the anthropologist about how a group of people behave; (6) a storehouse of pooled

learning; (7) a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems; (8) learned behaviour; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour; (10) a set of techniques for adjusting to the external environment and other men; (11) a precipitate of history. (Geertz, 1973, 5)

The essentialist view regards culture as a concrete and fixed system of symbols and meanings (Holiday, 1999). An essentialist approach is most prevalent in linguistic studies, in which national culture is closely linked to the national language. Regarding culture as a fluid concept, constructionist views of culture focus on how it is performed and negotiated by individuals (Piller, 2011). In this sense, "culture" is a verb rather than a noun. In principle, a non-essentialist approach rejects predefined national cultures and uses culture as a tool to interpret social behaviour in certain contexts.

Different approaches to culture influence significantly how it is incorporated into communication studies. Cultural communication views communication as a resource for individuals to produce and regulate culture (Philipsen, 2002). Constructivists tend to perceive culture as a part of the communication process (Applegate & Sypher, 1988). Cross-cultural communication typically uses culture as a national boundary. It is thus treated as a theoretical construct to explain communication variations across cultures. This is also evident in intercultural communication studies, which focus on misunderstandings between individuals from different cultures.

In the 20th century, "culture" emerged as a central concept in anthropology, encompassing the range of human phenomena that cannot be attributed to genetic inheritance. Specifically, the term "culture" in American anthropology had two meanings namely:

(a) The evolved human capacity to classify and represent experiences with symbols, and to act imaginatively and creatively;

(b) The distinct ways that people living in different parts of the world classified and represented their experiences, and acted creatively.

The following is the summary of the relationship between religion and culture;

1. Religion and culture are as old as mankind itself, Taylor (1871, 52).

2. They are the roots of ancient and modern norms and values of societies.

3. Culture begets religion as the religion of a place begets societal settings.

4. Societal values, norms, rites of passage and rituals associated with one's culture can be traced to the kind of religious practices, Hofstede (1991).

5. Religion and culture remould an individual for better consciousness.

The role of religion in organizations is well studied. Overall, researchers have shown how religious identification and religiosity influence an individual's organizational behaviour. For example, research has shown that an individual's religious identification affects levels of organizational dissent (Croucher et al., 2012a). Garner and Wargo (2009) further showed that organizational dissent functions differently in churches than in nonreligious organizations. Kennedy and Lawton (1998) explored the relationships between religious beliefs and perceptions about business/corporate ethics and found that individuals with stronger religious beliefs have stricter ethical beliefs. Can one study religion without studying ethnicity and culture? One can only understand the nature of religion when one understands its connectivity to ethnicity and culture. The interrelatedness and interaction of people from different cultures and races belonging to different religions are our focus here. This endeavour becomes even more urgent

when considering current world events. Globalisation, post-colonialism and growing multi-cultural societies necessitate an understanding of the relatedness of culture, ethnicity and religion. The goal is to suggest the importance of studying culture and ethnicity to understand religious diversity especially in Africa. Understanding ethnicity can contribute to enhanced inter-religious dialogue and provide possible guidelines for intercultural reconciliation.

The following three reasons can be attributed to why studying ethnicity and culture has become important in understanding religion, namely;

• Cultural migrations necessitate the studying of cultures; Hackett (2005:144).

• Religion as a cultural identity marker must be considered; Scott and Hirschkind (2006).

• The relocating of religion to culture needs to be taken into account according to flux (Vroom 1996:118).

Differences between Religion and Culture

Based on religious grounds, cultural differences are viewed from a value perspective. Differences are now viewed either as good or bad. The differences concerning the own identity are perceived to be based on being different, being 'bad' (Kilp 2011, 203). The ethical evaluation of the other increases in content and is perceived as a growing threat requiring protection of the self, which is now polarised as being good as opposed to the other which is now perceived as bad. Cultural identity is, however, not fixed but dynamic (Vroom 1996, 118). Cultural identity can change over time. Cultural identity is an ideological interpretation of how people view

themselves and want to be viewed by others. A problem arises when multiple cultures co-exist in close proximity and even more so in the same country. What and who determines cultural identity then? It is possible to belong to several cultures simultaneously just as Vroom (1996, 121) sees cultural exchange as more normal than maintaining cultural identity.

It seems harmony between religious groups living nearby can only be reached when conformity from both sides is employed. Meeting one another at the borders of cultural identity and negotiating boundary markers can lead to positive conformity. Conformity does not include taking on the characteristics of another culture, but merely recognising differences at the borders and respecting them. The following differences are noticed to exist between religion and culture as summarised below:
1. Religion is just one of the many subsets of culture and not the other way around. Culture is the bigger picture.
2. Culture is a body of knowledge that is acquired by people through years of being together in one society, while religion is the belief system directed towards the supreme deity and yet this is something that may or may not be accepted by each person in a culture. Two individuals may have the same culture and yet practice different religious practices.
3. Culture focuses on human beings which is its social heritage, while religion is associated with the God or the Creator of the whole universe.
4. Culture is concerned with the evolution of humans and their beliefs and practices, whilst religion is wholly concerned with a revelation that comes from the Supreme Being to the people.
5. The existence of religion is formally written in Holy

Scriptures that came from God; while culture is more practical as the way people behave in a community shows what kind of culture they have.

6. Culture tends to change as time passes by while the fundamentals of religion are fixed from the start.

Making Religious Peace with Cultural Diversity and Adversity

The dynamic nature of our world is gradually making religion redefined and relocated to culture; Matt Waggoner (2011, 219) posited that religion is located in culture or a social system. The implication is that studying religion requires a change in focus, away from the individual and group consciousness and finding the location of religion from the exterior to the subjective. Bruce Lincoln's (1989) on the other hand managed to combine Durkheim and Marx's orientation to the study of religion. The first step is to acknowledge that societies construct religion. Secondly, religion, as culture, is always associated with a power struggle. Culture, especially religion, becomes a site where power and privileges in society are negotiated. Lincoln (1989, 6 & 174) refers to this as the 'hegemonic struggle'. Culture has an ideological role in this hegemonic struggle. Culture ignores its historical origin and makes transcendental claims to authorise its position of power and discredit other claims. Further, the origin of religion is from the point of religion always an authoritative transcendent or supra-historical source, thereby concealing the cultural and historical origins.

Lincoln (2000, 416), however, refrains from naming religion as a 'core component' of culture. Aesthetics and

ethics are core components of culture as they are concerns for all human cultures. Kierkegaard (in Pattison 2004, 4) seems to have added the element of religion to the two components constituting culture: aesthetics and ethics. The role of religion in culture, however, changes from one context to the other as it plays a 'role of prime importance in culture (Lincoln 2000, 416) although this role is inconsistent. The implication Waggoner (2011:219) draws from Lincoln's analysis is to point out that religion is a subset of culture and not something sui generis. Religion participates in the hegemonic struggle in culture. Religion can then act as a cultural identity marker. There are, however, many potential cultural markers (i.e. language, shared history, race and geography). People can view others not in terms of ethnicity but primarily in terms of religion. Ethnicity and religion overlap causing cultural or religious animosity to spill over into religious or cultural animosity.

This can be checked by making peace with the society in diversity and adversity mostly in this new era of globalisation. We can also apply the anthropological approach where cultural and ethnic studies are considered as part of studying religion to identify those elements that constitute cultural identity, whether they are ethics, religion or aesthetics or a combination of some sort (Frederik Barth, 1969).

It is clear that when religion functions as an identity marker, several traditions and myths are feeding various claims of racial superiority. Studying religion requires an understanding of the ideological determination of cultural identity. It is necessary to study the myths behind the claims of racial superiority. Traditions from the past

determine social behaviour. A study of the myths and traditions that contribute to racial and religious bias is necessary to understand the other.

The end goal of this paper is to contribute to the process of reconciliation between cultural and religious differences. One option is to separate culture and religion, ethnicity and religion, and the other is to embrace diversity and complexity. A third possibility is to acknowledge that unity lies in diversity. This entails to maintain religious principles which attach a religious community to the broader community of believers worldwide. The solutions seem to be threefold: separate culture and religion, join culturally but not religiously or join religiously but not culturally. Kilp (2011) indicates how cultural conflict spills over into religious conflict based on the sequence of events.

Conclusions

This paper discussed that there is a close relationship between religion and culture in the society and that a noticeable shift in studying religion is necessary. From the discussion, the following elements are clear:

❖ Studying religion cannot go without studying culture.
❖ Studying culture cannot go without studying religion.
❖ Studying inter-religious dialogue cannot go without studying underlying traditions and myths contributing to worldviews.
❖ The relation between religion and culture seems to be inseparable.

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