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RELIGION AND HUMAN RELATIONS: THE PLACE OF LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Religion and Human Relations are very indispensable in understanding the nature of humans' interaction with the Supernatural Being and with other human beings. This study examines the link between religion, human relations and language in engendering cordiality in humans' relation with the Supernatural Beings, on the one hand, and with other human beings, on the other hand. The study first discusses the areas of interest in religion and human relations. It goes further to look at the indispensability of language in enhancing humans' effective interaction with the Supernatural Being and human beings. The person of Rev. Fr. Professor B. A. C. Obiefuna and his contributions to the progress of the Department of Religion and Human Relations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, in particular, and to Human Relations, in general, for a better society, are also considered. It is discovered that religion, human relations, and language are features of society, and that language is very indispensable in a bid to ensure humans' cordiality with the Supernatural Being and fellow human beings. It is, therefore, incumbent on humans to properly understand and make the best use of language for these cordial relations with Supernatural beings and with other human beings to be sustained as a way of maintaining a healthy and tolerable society.

Keywords: Religious education, Religion and Society, B.A.C. Obiefuna, Religious harmony, human relations.

Introduction

Through religion, humans are occupied with the unveiling the uncertainty surrounding existence. Humans have belief in a higher Being that controls the affairs of man in the entire universe. This Being is viewed as one who should be revered and respected in every ramification as supreme, omnipotent, omniscience and all powerful. As a result of man's acknowledgement of this fact, man makes all efforts to have a cordial relationship with God, though however, in diverse manners and means. Christians serve God and believe that through Jesus Christ, one makes heaven to be with God on the last day; while Islamic religion believes that the only means of making heaven is through the teachings of Allah as revealed to Mohammed. To the traditional religion, there is the belief the Supreme Being and ancestorship.

On the perspective of religion and human relations, religion is of two-folds relationship: with God, and with fellow human beings. The Bible in certain places in the old and new testaments reports of the relationship of God and man, like in Genesis which discloses that ab-initio God made man in his own image (Gen. 1:26-27), placed man in the Garden of Eden and gave man definite instruction on how to relate with his environment (Gen. 2:15-17). Moses' direct relationship with God in the course of rescuing the Israelites out of the land of Egypt and from the hands of Pharaoh, and taking them to God's Promised Land is also reported in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy in the Old Testament of the Bible. The New Testament accounts for Jesus Christ as the Saviour of mankind, who was born of the virgin Mary and sent by God to suffer for mankind,



eventually died and was buried, and finally was given the keys to Heaven; that at His name, every knee shall bow, and whoever acknowledges His Name's supremacy does so to the glory of God the Father.

Human relations is built on the premise that life is relational (Obiefuna 2018, p. 17), and its importance in personal and interpersonal relation lies on the ability to effectively work through and with other people, including the desire to understand other people and their needs and weaknesses, and their talents and abilities (Lamberton and Minor-Evans 2002, p. 4). Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna has contributed immensely to the grounds gained in contemporary time by Religion and Human Relations as a discipline. Also, religion has a link with the society just as language; language plays a vital role in establishing cordial relations with both the supernatural Being and other human beings.

This paper espouses religion and human relations and their link with language. Through this study, insight is given on the importance of language to religion and human relations for a better society. The contributions of the Eagle, Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna, in reshaping the study of religion and human relations is also discussed.

Understanding Religion and Human Relations

Religion is ubiquitous and perverse concept that is devoid of a generally accepted definition (Obiefuna 2018 p. 7; Woodhead 2011). The major concern of religion as a discipline is the unravelling of the myth surrounding the existentiality of human being and the provision of a philosophical cum theoretical explanation for the propelling force behind this existence. Through religion, man as a dependent being freely and internally acknowledges his dependence on God and expresses this in acts of individual communal worship (Umeanolue 2011, p. 155). In the opinion of Obiefuna (2018) the idea of religion emanates from the uncertainties associated with existence and the explanation of the ultimate realities of the existence of humans and other creation, which purely hinges on the assumption and understanding that beyond humans, a Being exists that is responsible for all that exists (p. 6). Obiefuna's view of religion agrees with Madu (2003), who had earlier posited that religion refers to man's recognition of the existence of power or powers beyond himself, who as it were, created the universe, sustains, preserves and provides for the universe (p. 46). Religion contains a unified inherent system of belief and practices that unite into one single community that may be called the church as regards Christian religion and all those who adhere to them (Durkheim 1964, p. 229) as well as enables a group of people to struggle with the ultimate life challenges (Haralenbos 2006, p. 274). This may be the reason Njoku (2010 p. 300) describes religion as double-relational bond that binds people to what concerns them ultimately and to the community of faith. Njoku further buttresses that the vital roles played by religion are capable of helping people to cope with or adjust to the uncertainties of life, life contingencies and also enable the religious overcome despair, hopelessness and futility for which religion is indispensable in human society.

Uche (2010 p. 293) sees religion as an affixed set of relationship that links man to God as well as to his neighbour. Religion involves beliefs, practices, and rituals related to the transcendent, where the transcendent is God, Allah, Hashem, or a higher power in western religious traditions, or to Brahman, manifestations of Brahman, Buddha, Dao, or ultimate truth/ reality in Eastern traditions (Koenig 2012). Religion also deals with norms and values; and it is through the beliefs, practices, rituals, norms and values that humans relate to God and to his neighbour (Uche 2010, p. 293). It is an organised system that (a)



facilitates closeness to the transcendent, and (b) fosters an understanding of one's relationship and responsibility to others in living together in a community (Koenig, King, and Carson 2012 p. 15-34). These scholars present religion as what induces some influence in humans, such as, providing resources for coping with stress, operating through rules and regulations (doctrines) on acceptable way of living life and relating with members of the group, emphasising love of others, compassion and altruistic acts and encouraging meeting together during religious events. Merriam (1980) summarises what religion stands for as:

the outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of God or of gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service and honour are due; the feeling or expression of human love, fear and awe of some superhuman and over-ruling power, whether by profession or belief, by observance of rites and ceremonies or by the conduct of life (p. 250)

Obiefuna (2018) does not differ from Merriam (1980). In his succinct submission, he says: Humans call this Being with various names: Chukwu/Chineke/Olisa/Ezechiteoke Abiama (Igbo), Allah (Hausa/Islam), Olodumare (Yoruba), Abasi (Efik), Yahweh (Jew), God (general Christianity) and so on. Humans' acceptance of the reality of this Being, humans' acceptance of dependence of this Being, humans' acceptance of respect and worship of this Being, and humans' acceptance that their dependence on and worship of this Being (for many reasons), and humans' acceptance that this Being has influence on their relationship with him, fellow humans and the rest of creation, is the basis of religion (p.7).

Woodhead (2011) identifies three dominant uses of religion as inducing belief/meaning, providing identity, and providing a structured social relation. The scholar further discloses five concepts of religion, which are: *religion as culture*, *religion as identity*, *religion as relationship*, *religion as practice*, and *religion as power*. As *culture*, religion induces a belief with certain things and subscribing to certain proposition and accepting certain principle. Woodhead notes that from the sociological and anthropological points of view, religion is interpreted as an embracing system of meaning that covers the whole essence of life. Religion plays vital role in shaping shared values; it is a mystification that obscures the contradictions of social and economic life thereby resulting in some forms of alienation (Marx and Engels 1969). On the point of view of being an *identity*, religion, according to Woodhead, creates and maintains social bonds. Drawing inference from Durkheim's definition of religion as a place where a society holds up an image of itself, reaffirms its bonds, renews its emotional ties, marks its boundaries, sets itself apart, and therefore, brings its members into being, Woodhead contend that religion names the "beliefs and practices" that are relative to what is sacred and 'set apart', which unite those who adhere to them into a 'single community'. For religion as *relationship*, Woodhead notes that religion serves to bind people together in a particular way, and belonging to the same religious group induces a kind of social relation with other members of the group. Woodhead also notes that sociology, which includes sociology of religion, has in practice drawn a sharp line between social relations between living human beings and social relations with ancestors, gods, God and other 'supernatural' beings. Woodhead presents the *practice* concept of religion as signifying religion to be something that is lived out (or 'danced out' as put by Marrett [1994 p. 31]), which is evident in the ritual aspect of religion. Religion as *power*, according to Woodhead, accounts for power which lies at the heart of religion that typically offers relationship with some form of higher power or power which

can be drawn down into the mundane world. On this point, the scholar says that religion is associated with power which people can enter into relation with by understanding it, revering it, worshipping it, appeasing it, drawing upon it, manipulating it, railing against it, meditating upon it, making offerings to it, and falling in love with it. People who indulge in religious practices look forward to being rewarded.

In teaching religion and human relations, emphasis is not only on the Transcendental Being or Reality, but also on its social relevance (Obiefuna 2018 p. 11). Obiefuna further presents two fundamental dimensions of religion or religious system as (1) *Vertical* dimension, which indicates relationship with the Ultimate Being and other supernatural forces; and (2) *Horizontal* dimension, indicating humans' relationships with one another, a relationship that is influenced by the traditions of their specific religious system.

Looking at the human relations aspect, humans interact with one another; and that is the whole essence of life – to interact. By interaction, humans consciously try to understand themselves on one hand, and other human beings on another hand. Human relations refers to the ability to work effectively through and with other people; and it includes a desire to understand others, their needs and weaknesses, and their talents and abilities (Lamberton and Minor-Evans 2002, p. 4). The study of human relation, according to Obiefuna (2018 p. 19), exposes one to the major vital skills required for effective and positive relationships. He enumerates areas of major interest in studying human relations that require emphasis for human relations practitioners to interact without looking very selfish and greedy, thereby avoiding causing wounds in human society to the promotion of common good. These major vital skills are: (1) *self-esteem* aimed at eliciting an individual's feeling of confidence in handling issues of life, whether personal or in relation to others; (2) *self-awareness and self-disclosure* whereby one makes effort to discover people's view of one; (3) *mutual respect*, which refers to the need to consider others, and avoid inhuman treatment to other people; (4) *motivation*, which requires working hard for success in order to be rewarded or avoid being punished; (5) *group dynamics*, which talks about consideration of the modus operandi of a group or groups individuals belong for the purpose of achieving a desired goal; (6) *communication skills*, referring to the need to be conscious of the content, channel and mode of communication in order to avoid what could affect the group negatively, since communication is important in all personal and interpersonal relations, and for the failure or stability of any organisation/society; (7) *attitude*, which deals with an evaluation of ideas of other people in handling seemingly sensitive issues and in certain circumstances (p. 19-25). The foregoing underscores the importance of human relations. In the next section is a discussion of the link between language and religion and human relations.

Language and Religion and Human Relations

It is established that religion and human relations is concerned with humans' relation with supernatural or Supreme Being as well as their fellow humans. For there to be effective relation, language becomes a very important tool. Language enables humans to commune with the Supreme Being, and also relate with their neighbours. This underscores the fact that without language, there will be no communication. Communication is a vital process that is associated with human society, but without language, there will be no communication. This is because the whole essence of language is for communication (whether verbal or non-verbal). Verbal communication reflects verbal interaction (orally or in writing) among human beings through which ideas, feelings, emotions, desires,



opinions/views, thoughts, reactions, information, etcetera, are exchanged by means of voluntary produced symbols.

Language is an integral and vital part of any society. This is because the members of a society must interact with one another in order to exchange information/messages. When information/messages are exchanged, communication takes place. Communication is a continuous process and could be true or false. For example, when man sometimes deliberately conceals his ideas or thoughts by giving someone wrong information, the function of language in this context is the communication of ideas that are false and meant to conceal ideas; but when the reverse is the case, ideas that are true are communicated. Therefore, it is true that we communicate while speaking, but it is also true that ideas can be concealed in the process of communication. However, the communicative function of language is basic whether ideas are concealed or expressed.¹ Also, it is possible for one to speak in one language without communicating. This is the case when one is using a wrong linguistic code. That is why it is equally a *sine-qua-non* to be mindful of language use during interaction with God and relationship with fellow humans. What this suggests is the need to always use the right linguistic code.

Relating with the supernatural force and other humans requires politeness. Politeness allows the participants to engage in a social relationship in an atmosphere of relative harmony.² Politeness, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), refers to action taken, by way of redress, to counter-balance the disruptive effect of face-threatening acts. Politeness takes care of one's relationship with others in a conversational situation. Put in another way, politeness deals with the speaker's relationship with the hearer.

Following Thomas (1995:149), House (1998) presents three different conceptualisations of politeness as: (1) a real-world goal, (2) reflecting social norms and (3) a pragmatic phenomenon. Politeness as a real-world goal, psychologically means a real desire to be nice to others and it relates to the speaker's personal motivation and psychological state; while as a social-norm, it emphasises certain social and behavioural norms and rules in a given society, which one is expected to abide with in order to be polite while exhibiting good manners; and politeness as the pragmatic phenomenon is viewed in terms of principles and maxims, and as the management of face.³

Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983) are the two proponents of politeness in terms of principles and maxims.⁴ Politeness principle proposes ways of producing and understanding language based on politeness, and seeks to establish the feeling of community and social relationship with particular focus on interpretation process based on the understanding of the hearer. Lakoff (1973) proposes *clarity* and *rappor*t as the two politeness strategies in human communication. On the basis of these two strategies, Lakoff provides two rules for ensuring politeness in communication. The first rule is 'be clear'; and the second rule is 'be polite' (within which are three rules of politeness or *rappor*t or politeness strategies; which are (1) Don't impose (Distance), (2) Give options (Difference), and (3) Be friendly (Camaraderie)). House describes these two strategies as reminiscent of the two basic

¹Anagbogu, Philip, N, B. M. Mbah and Cecilia A. Eme (2010), Introduction to linguistics, Second edition. P. 15

²Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

³House, Julianne. Politeness and translation, 1998.

⁴House, Julianne. Politeness and translation, 1998, presents Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983) as the proponents of politeness in terms principles and maxims.

functions of language: the cognitive-referential function and the interpersonal function; which she points out many linguists and philosophers have suggested as characterising the two fundamental uses of language. Leech (1983) on the other hand proposes six different maxims of politeness principles. These are *Tact maxim* (minimise the hearer's cost and maximise his/her benefits), *Agreement maxim* (minimise disagreement between yourself and others and maximise agreement between yourself), generosity, approbation, modesty, and sympathy. Leech further suggests different scales for the operation of each maxim. They are the Cost-Benefit Scale/Indirectness Scale – which deals with maximisation of benefit at minimum cost for both the speaker and the hearer. Leech's politeness maxims are culture-dependent as what may be polite in one culture may not be in another culture.

The management of face, which is a proposal by Brown and Levinson (1987), considers communication to be potentially dangerous and antagonistic. This aspect is based on biology and also linked to psychosocial behaviour of human beings. It regards language user as an individual as well as belonging to a group. Brown and Levinson adopts Goffman's (1967) concept of face, which is likened to a person's public self-esteem or self-image that could be damaged, maintained or enhanced while interacting with others.⁵ They present two kinds of face: (1) the positive face (the positive social value represented in one's desire to be liked or appreciated by others), and (2) the negative face (the communicants' wants – represents the desire by the communicants for freedom of action and freedom from imposition. The consideration of the usefulness of the concept of politeness in man's relation with God and fellow humans is very important.

The understanding of contextual use of linguistic forms in social interaction is also very necessary on the part of the listener/receiver/hearer. The tenets of pragmatics make it a *sine-qua-non* that in every communicative situation, the choice of language as well as consideration of the contextual issue involved are very paramount as the first step to effective communication. This is also relevant in religion and human relations in order to ensure that the right code is chosen for better interaction. Successful communication requires consistency with the principle of relevance and, as part of that, the use of the right contextual information when processing the utterance.⁶ This is because meaning is determined by a variety of contextual factors, including the hearer's cognitive processing abilities to infer meaning from context.⁷ Words and phrases or sentences sometimes enter into a variety of semantic relations with each other. Understanding these various semantic relations, which involve word semantic relations and the structural-semantic relations in religion and human relations, is, therefore, very essential for good relations with God and with fellow humans for the free flow of communication.

The principle of turn-taking is also another very important aspect of religion and human relations. In the use of language for communication, no two individuals speak at the same time; rather, those involved in communicative events take their turn to speak one after another. It is said that when everybody talks at the same time, no one is talking and it becomes noise-making. In human relations, it is expected that the principle of turn-taking is adhered to.

⁵House, Juliane. *Politeness and translation*, 1998.

⁶Gutt, Ernst-August. *Pragmatic Aspect of Translation: Some Relevance-Theory Observation*, 1998.

⁷Grice, H. Paul. *Logic and Conversation*, 1975.

The Person of Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna

Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna can be described as someone who has lived his life preaching and teaching Religion and Human Relations and is ever ready to support anything or move that would promote human relations as a means towards fostering peace and harmony in the society. He hails from Nkutaku village, Agulu, in Anaocha Local Government Area of Anambra State. He attended All Hallows Onitsha, where the foundation for his eventual love for religion, society and human relations was built in him; Bigard Memorial Seminary, Ikot Ekpene campus (now St. Joseph's Major Seminary), where he associated with so many erudite scholars who thought him philosophy and exposed him to the various aspects of "human person especially the transcendental character of the person, the source of reality and the interrogation for origin and end of all things" (Obiefuna 2018, p. 63). Obiefuna's investigation into the concept of Being revealed the difficulty of the comprehensive comprehension of the concept and the fact that every study revolves around the concept, yet without the concept having a definite definition (Obiefuna 2018, p. 63). He was exposed to the fact of vertical and horizontal dimensions of human interaction with the Unseen Reality and with fellow humans.

Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna also studied *Religion and Society* as well as *Religious Conflicts* at the famous University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). He later got employed into Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, to teach Religious Studies; and became the third lecturer in Department of Religious Studies. He made his marks in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, where he served in various committees as well as Directorates including Directorate of General Studies. He also had served as Dean, Faculty of Arts, and as he was winding off as Dean, sourced for funds with which he built a *Monument of Fulfilment* and donated to the Faculty in particular, and the University in general. He has written many journal articles, monographs and books, and has supervised a lot of Master's and PhD students. He became a Professor with effect from 1st October, 2009, and later had his inaugural lecture in 2018, which made him the 46th inaugural lecturer of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, and the 2nd inaugural lecturer of Department of Religion and Human Relations after Rev. Fr. Prof A. B. C. Chiegboka. It is on record that through this erudite scholar and servant of Most High God, many students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University renounced cultism on the fateful "Golden Wednesday" when he gave "the crown prayer".

Rev. Fr. B. A. C. Obiefuna was instrumental to the changing of the name of Department of Religious Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, to Department of Religion and Human Relations. That was under the headship of The Very Rev. Dr D. C. Okeke (now retired as a Professor). The inspiration to suggest a change in the name of the department was drawn from his little knowledge of International Relations, upbringing, as well as his association with the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), which broadened his horizon in understanding the possibility of people of various religions and denominations, States of origin, tribes, gender, and class coming together from different walks of life to interact as persons pursuing one goal: personal and group/organisational reputation (Obiefuna 2018, p. 71). Today, Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna is a fellow and member of Council of this noble Institute, which is best addressed as The Institute.

This servant of God had remained obedient to constituted authorities of the Catholic Church and the directives of his Diocese, which has led him to proudly and boldly claim to be "a Professor out of obedience". He is a lover of all and does not discriminate at all; this quality he vividly showcased when he was Dean of Faculty of Arts, Nnamdi Azikiwe

University, Awka. Those who know him very well are very familiar with a popular song that pleases him: “Aiya eee, Nwọzọakụ abịa, ayeeeeeee! (DC); Aye, Aye, Ayeeeeeee!”.

Conclusion

This study examined how religion, human relations and language combine to foster cordiality in humans’ relation with supernatural Being and other human beings. It first discussed the areas of interest of religion and human relations, and further looked at the indispensability of language in enhancing humans’ effective interaction with supernatural Being and human beings. It went through memory lane to present the person of Rev. Fr. Professor B. A. C. Obiefuna and his contributions to the progress of Department of Religion and Human Relations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, in particular, and to Human Relations in general for a better society. From the study, it has been revealed that both religion, human relations and language are features of society, and that language is very indispensable in a bid to ensure humans’ cordiality with supernatural Being and fellow human beings. Therefore, humans should make the best use of language for these cordial relations with supernatural Being and with other human beings as a way of fostering a healthy and tolerable society.

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