

## The Philosophical Inquiry into the Dilemma of Religious Language and Its Challenges for Churches in Nigeria

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### Abstract

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The problem of religious language is worrisome to the practitioners of Abrahamic faiths in Nigeria because it has the potential to undermine the claims made by these religious traditions. These three major faiths proclaim truths about God in written texts, commentaries traditions and oral teachings. In fact, speech about God is essential to both personal praxis and organized celebration in these religious traditions and without adequate solution to the problem of religious language, human speech about God is called to question. In addition, without the ability to speak about God and to understand the meaning of what is spoken, the Abrahamic faiths are vulnerable to the criticism that their sacred texts and teachings are unintelligible and may be seen as invalid. Therefore, this paper employed a philosophical method of a critical analysis in investigating the dilemma of religious language and the challenges it poses to the churches in Nigeria. The paper posits that the churches in Nigeria need to understand the meaning of the esoteric words often used by the clerics in order for those words to be meaningful and impactful among the different church adherents in the country.

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**Keywords:** Abrahamic Faiths, Philosophical Inquiry, Religious Language, Churches in Nigeria

### Introduction

The problem of religious language arises from the talk about God. Human language is derived from human experience. When it is now used to talk or express things about things or objects outside the jurisdiction of human experience, one may ask if it is still meaningful. Ordinarily, things can be best understood when they are visible and within the physical world. According to Immanuel Kant, as cited by Omoregbe, (2011:179), “the categories of human understanding can only be meaningfully employed within the scope of man’s sense-experience, that is, within the physical world, the world of sense experience”.

The problem of religious language is worrisome to the practitioners of Abrahamic religions because it has the potential to undermine those traditions. All the major three faiths proclaim truths about God in written texts, commentary traditions, and oral teaching. In fact, speech about God is essential to both personal praxis and organized celebration in these traditions. Without adequate solution to the problem of religious language, human speech about God is called into question. Without the ability to speak about God and to understand the meaning of what is spoken, the Abrahamic faiths are vulnerable to the criticism that their sacred texts and teachings are unintelligible and may be seen as invalid. The problem of religious language also provides a challenge for philosophers of religion. If there is no adequate solution to the problem of religious language, large discussions in the domain of philosophy of religion will also be rendered unintelligible. For example, philosophers of religion debate the nature of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. These claims about God would be rendered unintelligible if human speech about God is impossible. Thus, the problem of religious language is a philosophical problem that must be solved in order to provide a framework for understanding claims about God in both the house of worship and the academy.

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## I. Religious Language

The problem of religious language considers whether it is possible to talk about God meaningful if the traditional conceptions of God as being incorporeal, infinite, and timeless, are accepted. Because these traditional conceptions of God make it difficult to describe God, religious language has the potential to be meaningless. Theories of religious language either attempt to demonstrate that such language is meaningless, or attempt to show how religious language can still be meaningful. Statements like “God loves me” are discussed largely in Religious Language (Wikipedia, 2016).

In contemporary discussions, it is not the question of God’s existence that generates the problem of religious language. If God does not exist, any attempt to describe God will be an inaccurate description of reality. Discussions about religious language articulates how one could speak of God if, in fact, God exists. The problem of religious language is generated by the traditional doctrine of God in the Abrahamic traditions. Since God is thought to be incorporeal, infinite, and timeless, the predicates we apply to corporeal, finite, temporal creatures would not apply to God, (Weed, n.d.).

Religious discourse involves *talk* about God, immortality, miracles, salvation, prayer, values, ethics, etc. To speak of the existence or attributes of God, for example, is to make religious *utterances*. All religions which are promulgated publicly must in some measure use religious discourse. And Christians in particular engage extensively in utterances concerning God and their faith; after all, Christianity is preeminently a religion of verbal revelation from God and personal profession of faith. Thus Christians are always talking “religiously” – in sermons, prayers, confessions, didactic lessons, catechisms, personal testimonies, songs, exclamations, counsel and encouragement, etc.

The challenge made by many modern philosophers has been that talk of this kind is not really meaningful (in any cognitive sense), even if it has the deceptive appearance of being so. For years and years and years it may have seemed that when Christians used language about God and salvation, it was possible to make pretty good sense out of what they were saying. Not everybody believed that what Christians would utter was *true*, of course, but the God-talk of believers was at least thought to make (or entail) assertions which carried rationally intelligible, if not also spiritually intoxicating, meaning. But not so, according to many philosophers of recent vintage (Bahnsen, 1992).

The empiricist, David Hume’s claims that every reality must be verified by evidence and this was influenced by the logical positivist movement, led by the philosopher Ayer, (1946). The movement proposed that, for a statement to hold meaning, it must be possible to verify its truthfulness empirically – with evidence from the senses. Consequently, the logical positivists argued that religious language must be meaningless because the propositions it makes are impossible to verify. A British philosopher, Antony Flew proposed a similar challenge based on the principle that, in so far as assertions of religious belief cannot be empirically falsified, religious statements are rendered meaningless (Flew, 1971).

The analogy of games – most commonly associated with Ludwig Wittgenstein – has been proposed as a way of establishing meaning in religious language. The theory asserts that language must be understood in terms of a game: just as each game has its own rules determining what can and cannot be done, so each context of language has its own rules determining what is and is not meaningful. Religion is classified as a possible and legitimate language game which is meaningful within its own context. Various parables have also been proposed to solve the problem of meaning in religious language. Hare (2013) used his parable of a lunatic to introduce the concept of unfalsifiable beliefs according to which a worldview is established – which are not necessarily meaningless. Basil Mitchell (1971, 1986) used a parable to show that faith can be logical, even if it seems unverifiable. Hick (1960) used his parable of the Celestial City to propose his theory of eschatological verification, the view that if there is an afterlife, then religious statements will be verifiable after death.

## II. The Problems of Religious Language

Religious language is a philosophical problem which arises from the difficulties to accurately describe God. The fact that God is generally conceived as incorporeal, infinite, and timeless, ordinary language cannot always apply to that entity (Allen, 1992). This makes speaking about or attributing properties to God difficult, Attfield (2006) added that a religious believer might simultaneously wish to describe God as good, yet also hold that God’s goodness is unique and cannot be articulated by human language of goodness.

This arises the problem of how (and whether) God can be meaningful spoken about at all, and this of course causes some problems for religious belief since the ability to describe and talk about God is important in religious life. Simone Weil a French philosopher as quoted by Brenner (1999) expressed this problem in her work titled *Waiting for God*, in which she outlined her dilemma: she was simultaneously certain of God's love and conscious that she could not adequately describe him.

The medieval doctrine of divine simplicity also poses problems for religious language. This suggests that God has no accidental properties – these are properties that a being can have which do not contribute to its essence. If God has no accidental properties, he cannot be as he is traditionally conceived, because properties such as goodness are accidental. If divine simplicity is accepted, then to describe God as good would entail that goodness and God have the same definition (Allen, 1992). Such limits can also be of problem to religious believers, take for example, the Bible on a regular basis ascribes different emotions to God, such which would be implausible according to the doctrine of divine simplicity.

McFague (1982) who is a theologian believes that the more recent problem of religious language is based on individual experience, owing to the increased secularization of society. She notes that human experience is of this world rather than regular encounters with the divine, which makes the experience of God uncommon and potentially unnecessary. Because of this, she argues, religious language is both idolatrous because it fails to express sufficient awe of God, and irrelevant because without adequate words it becomes meaningless. There are different opinions held by some philosophers about religious language. The following are the several views and conclusions about religious language:

#### **a. Religious Propositions are Meaningless**

Under the influence of Wittgenstein the logical positivists ruled out religious and metaphysical propositions as nonsensical and meaningless because what they assert cannot be asserted to be true or false meaning these propositions are not verifiable. To the logical positivists verifiability is the criterion for meaningfulness. Until a proposition is verifiable it is meaningless. The clearest logical positivism is found in Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. He writes:

The mention of God brings us to the question of the possibility of religious knowledge. We shall see that this possibility has already been ruled out by our treatment of metaphysics... For to say that God exists is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion no sense which purports to describe the nature of the transcendent God can possess any literal significance... All utterances about the nature of God are nonsensical (Ayer, 1946: 114).

To Ayer, the existence or the nature of God is to utter meaningless sounds. This does not mean He supports the view of the atheists because the atheists are also speaking nonsense to have said God does not exist because their assertion cannot be verified as well. In the same vein, the statement about the soul is nonsensical because such a statement cannot be verified since there is no way of showing that there is a soul in man.

Hick (1960) on the other hand, argues that religious propositions are verifiable in principle and are therefore meaningful. They are not practically verifiable but verified in principle, they will be verified when their predictions are fulfilled. Take for example, the proposition that there is life after death or that God exists will be verified by the individual when he dies. This is also called eschatological verification. The weakness with eschatological verification is that it cannot show that verification is false. It cannot tell if there is no life after death or that God does not exist should that is the case if one dies. So, there eschatological verification is conditional (Omogbe, 2011).

#### **b. Religious Propositions are Pseudo-Proposition which says nothing**

Flew (1968) opined that theological propositions are pseudo-propositions which in fact make no assertions at all. The assertions which they claim to be making are so qualified that in the final analysis they are actually saying nothing. For a better understanding of his assertion, he made the illustration below:

Two explorers at a particular time went to a jungle. There were many flowers and weeds in a clearing that looks like a garden. One of the explorers concluded that there must be a gardener who tends to plot while the other denies with him that there is nothing of such. Therefore, they decided to pitch their tents there to know if any gardener will come in, they set a barbed wire fence around, electrify it and patrol it with bloodhounds.

They waited a while but no gardener was coming. The other gardener still insists and therefore concluded that, but there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves. His companion responded, what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you all an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener different from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener to all?

According to Flew (1968), any assertion must be capable of being negated by another assertion which the assertion itself denies. To make an assertion amounts to denying certain things which negate the assertion. The statement that God loves us as a father loves his children is negated when an innocent child is suffering from hepatitis and the heavenly father shows to sing of doing anything to have the life saved while the earthly father is running up and down to have the child's life saved. When confronted with such a situation the believer insists that God loves us and goes on to qualify God's love, saying it is different from human love, it is an inscrutable love (Omogbe, 2011). The classical Christian answer to this assertion of Flew is that God allows evils because he will in the end turn evil into good, an answer which is irreconcilable with God's omnipotence and infinite goodness. If he cannot bring out the good he has in mind unless he first of all permits evil to afflict human beings, then he is not omnipotent.

In the medieval period, it was concluded that the qualities like God loves, cares and is merciful is not to be applied the same way those qualities are applied to man. The love of God cannot be equated to the love of man. The love of God is a "super love", and according to Pseudo-Dionysius "a super-essential love", a type that transcend human love. But since we do not know this love of God only that it is different from the love of man it means no one can tell in particular what God's love really is. It therefore means that the statement that God loves mankind is a pseudo-statement which means or tells nothing in as much as one does not know what God's loves is (Omogbe, 2011).

Thomas Aquinas responded to this by saying that when it is said that God loves, it does not necessarily mean God loves mankind exactly as human beings do, that is, the word is not predicated of God exactly the way it is predicated of human beings, this is known as univocal predication. At the same time, Aquinas insists that God's love is not totally different from human love. The word love is not predicated of God in any way totally different from the way it is predicated of human beings, this is called the equivocal predication. God's love has some similarities with, and differences from human love. It is thus analogous to human love. Meaning, it neither exactly the same as human love nor is it totally different from it. And this applies to all divine positive attributes and such expression as God loves, God cares, God speaks, God hears etc. There are some similarities and differences between the way human beings do these things and the way God does them.

The question is how one would know the similarities and the differences between the two. To know this it is necessary that one is so much aware of the two, but in this case the love of man is not known, how then will one be compare and contrast the two? Using the Bible passage that says man is creating in the image of God will amount to nothing because those who do not believe in the scriptures will not be convinced enough. Since God is not seen how will one know or measure the similarity between man and God as well as the qualities they both share in common.

### **c. Religious Propositions Do Not Mean What They Say**

Feuerbach (1972) and Braithwaite (1955) do not agree that religious propositions are meaningless. The propositions are meaningful just that they mean something different from what they say. According to Feuerbach, the concept of God is the concept of man's perfect nature projected outside man, which means that any statement made of God is actually referring to man's perfect nature. To have said God is infinitely good simply means man in its perfect form is infinitely good.

When the Psalmist in Psalm 63:1 says "My soul is thirsting for God" means My soul is looking forward to be free from the limitations imposed on it at present and come to the perfect state of its nature, and this is the perfect man of its nature. Feuerbach reduces theology to anthropology and the same he does to religious language reducing it to anthropological language. To him, all prayers addressed to God are to the human nature in its perfect form.

Braithwaite (1955) in his essay titled *An Empiricist View of the Nature of Religious Belief* asserted that all religious propositions are moral assertions, that is, assertion of an intention to commit oneself to certain ways of life. He says that the meaning of any statement is given by the way in which it is used. Moral assertions are much more than expression of one's feelings.

To him, what is fundamental in a moral assertion is the fact that it is an expression of an intention to commit oneself to a certain way of life which is a moral way of life. So, religious principles are essentially moral principles and religious assertions are also moral assertions. The essential feature of both is the intention of those who make to commit themselves to certain ways of life (McPherson, 1974).

The difference between the two principles is that religions are not clear enough of moral principles in an abstract manner. They rather teach their moral principles through stories that are fictitious though very effective and convincing. These stories are not meant to be believed as true but they evoke intentions and resolutions from believers, as they strengthen moral convictions. But this assertion of Braithwaite might not be true because believers never seen the stories in their holy book to be fictitious but real and they will first believe the story before that it is true before the commitment to a moral way of life.

#### **d. Religious Propositions are Meaningful Within their Perspective Contexts**

Criticizing and rejecting his earlier theory of *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein (1922) writes that there can be no ideal structure of all languages as he earlier presumed in the *Tractatus*. He asserts that each language is like a game with its own rules governing its use. The meaning of any word is to sought within the context in which it is used in the language in which it is used. It is not polite to look for the meaning of a statement outside the contexts in which they are used. Wittgenstein sees language as a game and different languages as different games. There is no ideal structure for all games because each game is different from others, and it has to be played according to its own rules. It is a waste of time trying to look for the essence of language as a metaphysical concept. Religious propositions are meaningful when situated within the context in which they are used. The meaning of any religious statement therefore, is to be found in the way it is used within the religious language-game, and not outside it (Evans, 1985).

This means that the standard of intelligibility of any religious language is to be found in the theology of the religious in question. It also follows that a religion and its language usage cannot be criticized by outsiders who are not members of it. To criticize a religion from outside would mean using criteria taken from outside the religion in question to criticize it, criteria which are different from its own. It equally means that philosophers cannot legitimately criticize religious doctrines since there is no transcendental logic with which they could judge or criticize the language, statements or doctrines of any religion. Each religion has its own logic within its own language-game, and if you want to criticize it you have to do so within such language-game, using its own logic criteria of intelligibility (Wilkinson and Campbel, 2010).

### **III. Implications of Religious Language for Nigerian Churches**

The centrality of language in human existence defines the human society. The use of language is so important in the history of man. Communication is made possible and easy via language. The use of language cannot be pushed aside by anyone. Language is so important to people everywhere even in Nigeria. Nigeria as a nation values language so much. At present, Nigeria has three major languages and over 521 languages in all. With this Nigerians have been able to tolerate one another despite the differences in language. If Nigerians could do this absorbing religious language will not be difficult for them.

Religion can be viewed from two major perspectives-as a people's belief and opinion about the existence and nature of a supreme being who is divinely involved in the meaningfulness of the affairs of man; and as an institution or system with specified beliefs. Seen as a type of belief or as institution, religion relies on language as having the criterion of meaning in all about religion no matter which. It is therefore necessary to note that language is an important phenomenon in any religious affair which has necessitated a number of unprecedented, intellectual interests in language in relation to religion in the recent past (Obuasi, 2014).

Each religion in Nigeria has its own language and it is respected by the other religions. Though they may sound contradicting in some areas with other views yet they are well understood by the adherents of such religion. Common among these languages is the Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the rejection of this assertion by the Muslims that God is not given birth to and He did not give birth to anyone. It is such an argumentative discussion but each view is well understood by the follower of each religion. However, the *Ifa* worshippers of the African Religion in Nigeria have a similar story of Jesus in their *Ifa*, the story of *Okanbi* which is so similar to the story of Jesus Christ of the Christians.

Sometimes one is tempted to ask questions about the Christians types of evangelism whereby they preach to people admonishing them to accept Jesus Christ into their lives and that if they should, they will be prosperous, Jesus will solve all their problems, make them rich, succeed and have breakthrough, all in the name that Jesus loves them. Looking at the lives of those preaching, one will notice that their lives do not reflect what they profess. But haven't joined them, one will discover that all that they promised Jesus will do are not forth coming, and suddenly they start talking about the kingdom of God. They say our riches and wealth are in heaven and that is where our treasure is. Though the statements are subjected to questions, but it is well understood by the followers. An outsider may find it difficult to comprehend. But once they join the church, they come to have a better understanding of the language.

The Nigerians understand God's love when there seems to be evil in the so called love. To the Yoruba people in Nigeria, they believe that both good and evil are created together and walk together they believe that the world is created with both good and evil when they say *Ti 'bi ti're la da 'le aye*. The Yoruba culture also believes that God and his divinities are responsible for the good and evil in the world. Since God is *eleda* (the creator of all things), he sees to the activities of the world. God with other divinities ensure the smooth running of the universe by creating both good and evil. However, the existence of evil should not be seen as a proof for God's incompetence or his limited goodness (Sogolo, 1983). When evil happens, they take it as their fate saying it was God that let it happen *amuma Olorun ni*.

This understanding gives no or lesser problems to the churches in Nigeria having held to the understanding of what God is capable of doing and what his love seems like. Though they expect a more comfort and better life while they are in the church other than the life style they were living before joining the church. However, they are not ignorant of the religion as it also suits their cultural belief of God. Based on this they are not too move when the odd things happen and religious propositions are not meaningless or seen as pseudo-propositions to them.

There are some religious words that are particular to some denominations and they are identified with such a statement. Take for example, the Mountain of Fire Ministries is known for *Die by Fire* each time they pray. Though one may not see the devil or his invisible/spiritual agents dead but it is understood that is their weapon to fight a battle for victory. Every denomination is identified with her own type of ministry and focus, some for holiness, some for prosperity and so on. Statements made during prayers are so enormous that they are to be questioned sometimes, but they are seen to be religious language and they are best understood by the members of that denomination or one uses the lens of the denomination to examine it. As Wittgenstein postulated, such denominations cannot be criticized by outsiders who are not members of the church. What they say and do during the time of worship is particular, more meaningful and understood to the followers.

## Conclusion

No theory of religious language has emerged that has won general acceptance, and perhaps, none may. However, it should be clear that religious language is an extremely complicated phenomenon, serving many purposes and functioning in many different contexts. The Wittgensteinians are probably on the right track in urging us to consider first the use of religious language. The statement if religion has to be first interpreted within the context of that religion. It will not be proper to criticize religious doctrine or language using the knowledge or evidences outside the religion. Each religion has its own logic within its own language-game and any one that wants to criticize it must do so within the language game, using its own logic criteria of intelligibility.

In this sense, every religion should be language of one another and must not criticize the language of the other religion by using its own lens. Churches in Nigeria should also queue behind this by respecting one another's denominations. Each denomination also has its own language-game. A style of prayer and statements are particular and obvious in the denomination and the other. To judge them means you must first be one of them or seen with their lens. Religious language should not by any means bring religious conflict among the religions in Nigeria. Let us learn to respect our religious views and language as a nation.

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