

Communication in Religion and Its Integrative Implications for Society

Peter. O. O. Ottuh¹, Mary O. Jemegbe²

¹Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy, Delta State University, Abraka, Delta State, Nigeria

²Department of Christian Religious Studies, Delta State College of Education Mosogar, Delta State, Nigeria

E-mail: pottuh@delsu.edu.ng; ottuhpeter@gmail.com¹

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ABSTRACT

Looking at religion from the lens of social theory system, one cannot but, postulate that religion is an expression of the relationship that exists between human beings and the divine. This religious expression by individuals accumulates into plethora of communication within a given society. This paper is solely concerned with communication in religion and religious communication and how they play integrative role in the social cohesion of human society. Methods adopted to achieve the above task are the phenomenological and evaluative methods with support of secondary sources. The research reveals that communication in religion and religious communication are strong and essential agents of social change in any human society; and that, they have also enhanced the lives of individuals in terms of social, moral, mental, spiritual, economic and cultural well-being. The paper concludes that the communicative power of religion should not be underrated by individuals, society and government. And that religion should be used to communicate effectively and positively for the integration and development of modern society.

Keywords: Communication; social change; Religion; Integration; Society

INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of the basic needs of human beings in society. As a social being, in the absence of communication in society, human beings would be lost in their understanding of one another and about their environment (Yta 2015). In other words, there will be no social cohesion if there is no communication between members of society. Communication therefore, makes and keeps society actively alive.

Communication in human society happens at different levels and forms. In every field of

study there are elements of communication so that when one is addressing the subject of communication it is proper to be certain of the aspect of communication one is writing on (Iyorza 2013; Iyorza 2015). That is the reason why communication is widely defined to include the fact that even non-humans (animals and plants) communicate among themselves just as human beings do within themselves.

Even though communication functions significantly in human society including building of relationships, it can also cause a break-down of law and order in society, especially when the contents of such communication are negative and are not well understood. When communication is dispensed messages and meanings are created for the consumption of society (Saludadez and Garcia, 2017). In this sense, many people in the society take for granted the communicated and created messages, while others analyze such communicated and created messages to arrive at a meaning which impact may be detrimental society. In this way, Eilers (2009) and Laka (2015) postulated that communication among human beings is the essence of exchanging ideas and knowledge including the essence of creating meaning for further everyday communication.

As an academic field of study, communication accommodates several bodies of knowledge which includes religion. There is communication in religion and; at the same time, there is religious communication. It is truism to say that communication in religion and religious communication can be positive or negative. One thing that binds people together in Nigeria today is religion (Asuquo 2019; Yta 2020). And one of the ways through which religion has done this is through the inherent communicative acts and arts discoverable in it. Hence, this research becomes very significant because of the high patronage of religion in Nigeria and the suggestive fact that, the communicative power of religion to promote cohesion has been underestimated and remained untapped.

Concept of Communication

By description, communication is a human activity. It occurs among social groups, clubs, families, religious groups, political groups, etc (Ushie 2018; Udoudom 2018). Communication may be conceived differently by different people. In other words, it has no single simple universally acceptable definition. It could be described as the science or practice of transmitting information. Communication can simply mean the sharing of thoughts, ideas, feelings, desires or messages among several persons with the aid of sound or symbols. It can be described as a process by which meaning is assigned and conveyed in order to establish and share understanding (Craig, 2004). Repertoire skills involved in this process include such skills as listening, speaking, analyzing, questioning, evaluating, observing, interpersonal and intrapersonal processing. Communication as a process permits significant insight into the nature of human beings. The ability to understand and interpret this insight arising from this process which is discoverable in symbols and symbolic actions aids the total understanding of the human person.

Collaboration and cohesion occur through communication. As a process, communication transfers information from one destination to the other. Communication processes are sign-mediated interactions between different agents which share a repertoire symbols and semiotic rules (Berko, *et al*, 2010). In this sense, communication is the impartation or exchange of ideas or message with the aid of speaking, symbolizing and writing (Wrench, McCroskey & Richmond, 2008). Although, one-way communication exists, it is better appreciated if one sees it from its dual dimensional process which implies a process of transportation of ideas or feelings through the channels of exchange and progression for the purpose of approved communal good. In this sense, communication means a process whereby information is

enclosed in a package and is channeled and imparted by a sender to a receiver through a particular medium (Berko, 2010).

In the above process, the sender receives a message of feedback from the receiver as per the message decoded. The meaning of this is that, in communication, there are always messages, senders and receivers. It is expedient that in every act of communication there must be communicative commonality that all parties concerned must possess. Notable activities here include auditory (verbal) means which include tone, voice, song and speech; and non-auditory (non-verbal) means which include body language, symbols, touch, media and writing. Communication as a human activity is not static; it is dynamic and ever active (Worugji, et al., 2008; Iyorza 2017).

Historically, communication as a human activity dates back to the origin of human beings on earth. It should be noted however, that in ancient time, the techniques of communication are different from what is obtainable in modern society. In the ancient times, communication was very significant to human social life. It was an avenue through which members of group share information, ideas, and attitudes for their own sake and for the sake of their society. For example, it was basic that face and body were used to indicate one's mood. Furthermore, certain materials found in society like clothes, smoke, drums, flutes, rivers, and village criers served as channels of dispensing information about something that needed to be brought into the notice or knowledge of people. However, with the emergence of modern technology and science, more advanced forms of communication were developed including writing, Newspaper, radio, television, telegraph, telephone, etc.

With the emergence of the modern means of communication, all the processes involved have been revolutionized. Researchers have classified the emergence and transformation of communication into three revolutionary stages namely: written communication with pictographs; written communication on papers, clay, wax, and papyrus; and communication through electronic and wave signals. In the first stage, which associated written communication with pictographs writings were made on stones, which were too heavy to transfer. During this era, written information was not moveable or transferable, but it existed. In the second information transmission stage, writing ideas and information started appearing on solid surfaces like papers, wax, clay, papyrus, etc (Enor et al., 2019). During this time, familiar alphabets were introduced to allow for language uniformity across cultures. This was accompanied later with the invention of the Gutenberg printing machine. In the third information communication revolution, information became transferable through organized waves and electronic signals (Warwick, 2004).

In terms of its components and contents, communication can be categorized along a few major dimensions namely:

- i. Message – the idea, feelings, wishes or information being transmitted.
- ii. Source (emisor/sender or encoder) – source of transmission.
- iii. Form – method of transmission.
- iv. Channel – the means, through which the message is being transmitted.
- v. Destination (receiver/target or decoder) – the end receiver of the message being transmitted.
- vi. Receiver – the person the message is shared with (Schramm, 1954).

Overview Definition of Religion

Although religion has no one universal definition, it is either defined or described from the perception of the one that is defining or describing it. Others define or describe religion based on its functions and contributions to society. Hornby (2007) defines religion as “belief in the existence of a supernatural ruling power, the creator and controller of the universe, who has given man a spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body” (p.712).

On the other hand, Echekwube (1984) describes religion as “that vital encounter with the supernatural or divine being to which one responds with one’s whole being, it is a special experience by man in depending on a superpower for the purpose of a greater realization of himself” (p.36) On his part, Bouquet (cited in Omoregbe, 1999) sees religion as “a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute who is simply called God in religion” (p.22). Several issues such as sacred, relationship, self-realization, ruling power, creator/ship, and controller raised in the above definitions or descriptions of religion reveal the beauty and importance of religion in traditional society. Religion is one of the vital forces in every human society (Duke & Osim 2020). It contributes through its functions to individuals and societal growth either positively or negatively.

Religious Communication and Communication in Religion

In religious communication, attempts are made to transmit religious values from generation to generation. For those who grew up in homes with no obvious or institutional religious character, think of family rituals, trips, etc. which were “religion like,” and through which parents try to transmit the values and ideas which were important to them. Family life, especially parent-child relationships serve as a vehicle for transmitting religious ideas and values. Important mode of oral religious communication is ritual (Bassey & Bubu 2019; Duke & Osim 2020). Another important oral dimension of religious communication is the attempt to converse between and among religious orientations which differ fundamentally in their notions of what is true.

Religion helps people to communicate in two directions. For example, members of society always come together because of the similar purpose they share. What binds members of society together may include common myths, legends, values, ethics and traditions among other things (Ogar & Ogar 2019). They may also come together for other reasons different from those mentioned above. For instance, they come together to offer prayers, sacrifices or to perform any other form of ceremonies. Religion as a binding factor enables humans to understand themselves and transmit information of any kind within the society which they live. Importantly, religion gathers people together for the purpose of religion commitment. This kind of religious communication is horizontal because it is a communication between human beings themselves. When the communication is between human beings and God or gods, it becomes a vertical communication. The African people are very conscious about the existence of two worlds - the visible world and the invisible world. The Africans believe that both worlds are close to each other.

Therefore, they feel that they have to communicate with the invisible world as well as to tap from the mystical world in order to keep life going. It is religion which makes it possible for man to communicate with the invisible world, with God, with other spirits and practically, with the living dead who form part of their family. Through religion also, the people are able to penetrate into power and forces of nature which they imagine to be personal forces. Such personal forces include witchcraft, *ogbanje* (born-to-die), sorcery, etc.

Other forms of religious communication may include tele-evangelism, radio evangelism, tract and literature evangelism, open-air evangelism, educational evangelism, hospital evangelism, email evangelism, postal evangelism, festivals, ceremonies, sacrifices, etc. The above are the channels through which religious ideas and ideals are propagated in modern human society. It should also be noted that globalization has aided religious communication greatly.

Although, communication itself is not essentially a religious subject but its definition can be coined from human knowledge like in the case of religion. However, when such definitions

are discussed from a religious sphere, they become exposed to some alterations. A considerable basic and critical point in religious thoughts is that religion is a communicative subject; this means, it is a message descended from the Supernatural Being to human beings and anyone who accepts this message will also in turn transmit it to others. Of course, every religion that exists in human society communicates. In this sense, religion can be grouped into two categories: propagandistic (missionary religion) and non-propagandistic (non-missionary religion) religions. For example, Christianity and Islam are propagandistic religions while African Traditional Religion (ATR) is not.

In Judaism the notion of expansionism and propaganda is not as prominent as it is in Christianity or Islam. Islam for example holds the view that religion is a message and a messenger itself. If Judaism has been exposed to distortion and has lost its communicative efficiency or if Christianity has become a context for colonization, these are other issues that are irrelevant to our discussion in this paper.

If one looks precisely into the religious commandments or precepts and worships in most religions, it could be seen that there is a social and communicative aspects that are evidently clear and common to all religions. For instance, most religious prayers which are a concise sequence of religious beliefs and precepts have been suggested and emphasized to be said collectively and in an entirely communicative manner (Alviry, 2007). Saying such prayers collectively suggests a communicative function in worship rites and it is also a plural form of worship which causes sympathy and intimacy among religious adherents and at the same time, provides a situation that leads them to the awareness of each other's conditions and lifestyles. Propaganda in religion serves as a major function of communication. People misconceive communication in religion as mere propaganda. Propaganda in religious thought means transferring a specific value-based message aimed at drawing the attention of the audience towards the true source and nature which is God; for any communication in religion – whether with God, other people, or with ourselves.

Take the Islamic religion for example; what was the Prophet Muhammad's procedure for propagation in order to communicate with his audience? The Prophet adopted three propagandistic methods: First, according to the fact that in the first three years, the Prophet invited people to Islam individually, invitation was through individual communication and through face to face interaction (Carey, 1985). Afterward, in Mecca before the Prophet's entrance into Medina his methods of communication between groups and individuals changed. In his communicative method in Mecca a specific group of people were analyzed and the Prophet used different communicative methods to speak with them, for instance the way he communicated with the tribal heads (*Ghoraysh*) was different from his relationship with the people (Alviry, 2007). But in Medina when the government had attained its structure and organization, the Prophet communicated to the masses through the governmental structures that were already in place. It is worthy of note, that attending each stage does not mean to deny or ignore the previous ones.

Regarding the instruments of communication, the Prophet usually uses oral communication at the time he was in Mecca, but when the Islamic government was formed, he resorted to written communication. For example, he wrote some letters to the heads of different states and empires and invited them to join Islam, in other words, he used written communication for his religious propaganda (Alviry, 2007). The main aim of the Prophet for using communication was to convince people and bring them to Islam.

Human beings have this strange compulsion and intention to try putting all most everything about their lives into words, either verbal or non-verbal. It may not seem quite very real until they can verbalize it, and once they do, it is done to their satisfaction, not only does the phenomenon becomes real, but it is well understood. Equally strange is the tendency of human

language to resist our attempts to put things into words. Language seems to make some things more difficult to verbalize than others. Feelings, for example, are notoriously difficult to express.

Perhaps no area of human experience presents a more formidable challenge to this verbal compulsion of human beings than religion. Its subject matter which is God, transcendent or spiritual experience seems, by its very nature, to be beyond human capacity to express, or to put it into words. However, from the very beginnings of recorded human communication on the walls of caves, through today in churches, synagogues and everyday conversations, in writing and in oral speech, humans doggedly continue to try to bring communication and religion together (Duke & Okafor 2020). The reason behind this, is to put religious experience into words so that others might share it, and perhaps also to make it real and understandable to ourselves.

Some of these attempts, such as those in the Bible for instance, have achieved the level of great communication arts. Other more mundane attempts, perhaps even some in our own lives, deal with many of the same problems and possibilities of religious language as the Bible does. Ideas which make up much of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, might be based in the Bible, they are communicated from generation to generation through family life, rituals, and preaching.

Communicative Power of Religious Rituals

Religious rituals are multi-party and multi-media in nature. This means that more than two parties are involved in the process. Rituals are usually long-term performance of couple of stages and last for several hours to accomplish. Hence, it is believed that rituals are delimited into several components or sections and sub-units including gesture, actions and episodes (Turner, 1984). Religious ritual typically is composed of several genres of action ranging from language to food and other elements. However, in religion there are varieties of rituals which I may not discuss in this paper.

The paper exposed the fact that religious rituals communicate and thereby promoting social action in society. In this wise, every human life is ritualized to make fit into the social system. This is the reason why most human beings including other social species are capable of ritually communicating and interacting with one another (Eller, 2007). Although, interaction emanating from religious ritual may not be termed as communication (sending and receiving of information or message) *per se* but its performance is set to achieve the goal of establishing, maintaining, influencing and solidifying human relationship with the Supernatural Being and some non-human entities. During rituals the believers interacts with one another and with the Divine. This why ritual is a core aspect of every religion. Notably therefore, religious rituals have practical impacts on individuals and society at-large. These practical effects include social, spiritual, mental and healing.

Religious rituals are not only communicative but they are as well transformative in term of social change in society. Religion like culture establishes various standards that control and guide human attitudes. In most human societies religion is the prime source of the ordination of standard of behaviour. Hence, religion's profound function lies on its ability to educate, instruct, inform and build people individually and collectively including the society at-large. In this wise, religion is a means of communication. It communicates by establishing the fact that: "the relationships and orders of the social and natural world are "given" - they have been established, and this establishment comes from outside, from the super-social and supernatural realm" (Eller, 2007 p.35).

Religious communicative rituals are sometimes targeted at society in term of maintenance and at the same time serve as the symbol or representation of accepted beliefs. Hence, rituals are sacred rites that bring people together in communal fellowship (Carey, 1985). In this sense, the

communicative character of religious rituals can be seen in the meaningfulness of the action to the person performing the ritual. In any human society, religious rituals help people to reach acceptable compromise in any societal commitments and transactions.

In African Traditional Religion, diviners who are also specialists in religious rituals also serve as professionals in the technique of interpreting signs and symbols. These signs and symbols communicate to the people the messages or will of the gods. These diviners who share in the power of the gods also serve as a sender and receiver of messages from the gods. Ritual of divination is component of African Traditional Religion. Such ritual is the gate-way to all communication channels between the divinities and the people (worshippers). Other notable rituals in African Traditional Religion include puberty – a translation of one stage of life to another which is considered to be higher, and death – marking the end of the natural life and a translation to the afterlife probably to become an ancestor.²² Rites of passage are themselves communication, they convey new initiatives, socialize and educate in order for members of society to assume new social roles in society. This is an indication, that human beings are partakers in the dynamic transformation of their environment.

Communicative Power of Religious Myths

Myths in African religions communicate morality, values, ideas and knowledge. Myths in African Traditional Religion are philosophical reflections on the supernatural and the universe. Traditionally among Africans, culture and knowledge about the past have been communicated in an unwritten manner from generation to generation. For example, myths about the origin of the universe offer useful explanations to the nature and origin of existence. Hence, one can conclude that African myths perform communicative function.

In Yoruba traditional religion, Satan called *Esu* (or *Eshu*) is believed to be the ‘superintendent of police’ (or principal associate) of the Supreme God (*Olodumare*) and is responsible for the enhancement of free communication between God and humans (Grillo, 1979). Contrary to the Abrahamic religions’ concept of *esu* (or Satan) as an embodiment of evil, he is viewed in Yoruba religion as the way opener for flow of communication between the human and nonhuman entities; life transformer and healer of sicknesses.

Communicative Power of Religious Music

Music plays significant function in African society. Music or singing serves as a means of transferring knowledge, values and culture of the people from one generation to another. It is a preservative storage tank of African culture, traditions, norms, ethics and history. Music in African context celebrates life and other important events in human life including adolescent initiation rites, weddings, title-taking ceremonies, funerals, and ceremonies for the ancestors. Music is communicative because it combines such skills as dance, speech visual arts to create a multiple communication or media.

Religions song or music plays important roles. Sound for instance, is thought to be an essential means through which human and nonhuman forces establish and impose order in the universe (Waterman, 2009; Okafor & Stella 2018). In an atmosphere of religious worship, music or songs invoke an extra ordinary spirit-possession of worshippers and thereby control the flow of supernatural power among worshippers. Just as music among the Fulanis of Northern Nigeria can be used to communicate to and order the direction or movement of cattle, in the same vein, it is used to communicate to and control the movement of worshippers.

Integrative Power of Religious Communication

Societal integration is a situation whereby people of a given society or community have grown to understand, appreciate, accommodate each other, and work together to pursue a

perceived common goal and destiny, irrespective of the apparent diversities in their language, culture, religion, race, colour or economic or social status.

Communication is the livewire of any human society or group and for any society to make any meaningful progress; it must develop and have effective communication. In modern society we can now communicate our messages either verbally, non-verbally or in visual forms. Religion according to Durkheim (1954) “is a social thing” (p.46). Religion as a social instrument in society performs communicative functions. Religion itself is communication. It communicates ideas, knowledge, feelings, thoughts, wishes and other information to people. Religious communication is the effective means of interaction for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development and progress of human society (Basse et al., 2020).

The level of development of communication and understanding of religion in any given society could serve as an index of overall level of development of a society or a nation. Religion and communication are two vital areas of human endeavour which dictate the pace of development in every sphere of human life.

Both religion and communication are involved in the task of societal integration through the transmission of knowledge, ideas, ideals, feelings, desires, etc. The extent to which this transmission takes place, invokes new and deep understanding, appreciation, and tolerance among people. All these aforementioned are requisite qualities for harmonious living in modern human society. This means that positive religion and effective communication that exist in a heterogeneous society are capable of promoting harmonious living and attainment of societal integration. In this sense, people in their society with the aid of effective communication and religion can understand themselves, share their challenges, and proffer possible solutions to their political, economic, social, ethnic, educational and spiritual problems.

A society that is devoid of religion and communication is a dead society. This is because such society will definitely lack social and spiritual interactions. Such society will be in a total state of lawlessness, conflicts and chaos that could be avoided with the presence of positive religion and effective communication. Religion on the other hand, is seen as a part and parcel of communication. In this sense, both religion and communication complement each other.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, it has been established that communication has no fixed and universally acceptable definition. Communication is deeply predicated on human attitude and social system of society. It is an ongoing process that defines human identities through symbolical forms and reformation. Included in this social reconstruct are ideas, emotions, social relations and expressions. Having discussed the concepts of religion and communication, it could be seen that they are quite related. Religion as a means of effective communication serves as a unifying factor and instrument of socialization in a society.

The most common social instruments or factors in human society today that bring people together irrespective of their social, educational, economic, traditional and tribal status are communication and religion (Abel & Uket 2016). Both make human society and keep it alive through shared interactions; promoting peace and stability through effective resolution of conflicts. Communication and religion facilitate development in every sphere of human life through shared discoveries, experimentations, and intellectual stimulations. It should be noted that both communication and religion have greatly improved and increased modern human society.

This is why this paper recommends that religious leaders and adherents should use religion to communicate effectively and positively to develop their society. On the other hand, the government should not underrate religion but deeply and sincerely appreciate it and accord it

constitutional recognition in terms of policy making and participation. This will greatly improve societal integration. In this way, people and society will be able to maintain close contacts among themselves more effectively and productively.

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