Religion, Culture and Communication

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Abstract
The correlation between religion, culture and communication has occupied scholarly attention for many years. Religion is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also an historic platform for cultural expression and reinvigoration. In academic classification, religion is subsumed under culture. The purpose of this paper is to establish the nexus between religion and culture and the concomitant impact on communication.

Key words: Religion; Culture; Communication; Religion and Cultural ecology; religion and tourism;

Introduction
Some scholars have raised the question: Which social institution has the most recurring and pervasive influence in human society? Sociologists of religion, especially adherents of functionalism are in agreement that religion is the most powerful, pervasive and indispensable social institution. Talcott Parsons has stated that there is no known human society without something the sociologists would classify as religion and religion is as much a human universal language. Yinger (1970) has analogically compared the functions of religion in society, to that of a carburetor to an automobile engine: “It is widely held by students of society that there are certain functional prerequisites without which society would not continue to exist…. scarcely more than to say that an automobile engine could not exist, as a going system, without a carburetor. Most writers list religion among the functional prerequisites. He has also raised a question: what is the function of religion, which is essential to mankind? The answer is simple since religion interprets the meaning of life in ultimate terms. After the establishment, or creation of the meaning structure, the next most important function of religion in society is communal solidarity. Religion is social cement that keeps the society as a unit.

The above leads us to another question: Can there be an individual religion? Scholars are divided on whether religion is only a societal or communal phenomenon, without any personal or private dimension. Yinger (1970) stated that there can be religious aspects of private systems of belief and action. A complete religion, however, is a social phenomenon and it shares significant aspects only in the interaction of the group. In this paper I argue that religion can be either personal or communal and there is no need to subscribe the view that religion does not have private or personal dimension. The communal dimension of religiosity is only an aggregation of individual consciousness. Kelly (1972) has rightly pointed out that no religion can be said to be visible until it is shared by a group of committed votaries and has at least survived a couple of generations: “If it is going to make the grade as a religion, it will have to become part of a stream of shared experience in which it meets the tests of various crises, doldrums, transitions, tensions, and attritions” (44-45).

Peoples’ lives and personality are moulded by the society so their behaviour follows regular, recurrent patterns. Humans can be called as “social animal” since the term “social animal” means that people normally live in the company of others, and that social interaction has profound influence on behavior. By "regular, recurrent patterns" meaning that human behavior takes distinctive forms that are often repeated under given sets of circumstances (Pellegrin, 1964). It is therefore necessary that individuals should understand the dynamics of social interaction, functions and structure that occur in society. Man has a duty to study his environment and the forces that are at work in society. To avoid any ambiguity, we shall
now attempt an answer to the question: What is society? Berger and Berger (1976) have described society, simply as man’s experience and interaction with other people. Pellegrin (1964), in his definition of society has stated, “The term "society" refers to the fact that humans live in association with one another and that the conditions of human existence are moulded by the relationship of people in a given group setting. A society consists of persons who are organized into a complex system of relationship with one another”.

A common feature in all the definitions of society so far given is that society has to do with man and his interactions with others. It is this characteristic of human gregariousness and religiosity that this study is out to analyze using the theoretical framework of sociology of religion. Lenski’s (1970) definition of society is more comprehensive and directly relevant to our study. Lenski (1970) has described the human society in four ways that is, society is a territorially distinct organisation that consists of animals of single specie, it is also a form of organization with sustained ties of interaction and a relatively high degree of interdependence, characterized by a high degree of autonomy among its members. As a summation of these four descriptions, Lenski (1970) posited that: "society exists to the degree that a territorially bounded population of animals of a single species maintains ties of association and interdependence and enjoys autonomy". It may be necessary to answer another question: Why does man interact? The purpose of social interaction is for man to satisfy his needs. Human societies are the adaptive mechanisms through which men use to satisfy their needs. There are categories of elemental individual needs which have to do with the necessities of life and there are derivative social needs. The irony of human life is that in trying to solve one problem, we so often create new ones. That is why man has to rely on the societal mode of organization for most problems to be solved.

Durkheim (1965) has reported that society is the interaction of human beings. Social interaction is necessary for the survival of man and his society. Human beings live in a socio-cultural setting and carry out various activities within a value framework. It is within this socio-cultural setting that the framework for meaning and significance is realized. The meaning structure of the society is manifested in religious beliefs. From time immemorial, religion has served humanity as social cement and a unifying factor. O’Brien et al (1964) said, “Religion ...is concerned with establishing an esprit de corps among the members of a community. Its prescriptions help to maintain peace of mind by regulating relations between man and the unknown”.

**Culture and Worldviews**

Human beings in cultural groupings share fundamental commonalities in the definition of reality. James Downs posits that people who live in coherent groups define the world around them “deciding what is real and how to react to this reality” (Downs 1971:36-37). World-view is the comprehensive description of how people see or view the world around them. Redfield (1992:27) states, “The “world view” of people... is the way a people characteristically look outward upon the universe” (85-86). Worldview answers the following questions: “where am I? Among what do I move? What are my relations to these things?” Religion as a cultural universal is a platform for meaning creation. Religion provides meaning for human experience. Meguire (1992) has defined meaning as “interpretation of situations and events in terms of some broader frame of reference”. Berger (1976) has characterised every human society as “an enterprise of world-building. Although man is instinctual, he is not programmed as the lower animals. Man has a duty to make a world for himself.

An essential requirement of culture is to provide its members with a socially constructed mental universe which involves a meaningful ordering of communal experience and culture history. Berger (1967) terms this as nomos. The socialization process therefore involves appropriate internalization of this culturally transmitted world of meaning. Failure to do this will eventually lead to meaninglessness or anomy which is a dreaded separation from the social world. Functionally, the socially established nomos is a shield against terror, frustration, hopelessness and confusion. Berger posits that: “The ultimate danger...is the danger of meaninglessness... Anomy is unbearable to the point where the individual may seek death in preference to it... Every nomos is an area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness...”.

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Berger (1967) observed that man finds himself in an utter darkness of meaninglessness and chaos. The greatest marginal situation is death, which threatens the basic assumptions of order on which society rests. Berger stated that nomos and cosmos are equidistant. Cosmos is the system of fundamental meanings believed to underlie and organise the universe, while religion is the human platform through which a sacred cosmos is established. Berger (1967) defines sacred as “a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him”. Berger contended that a cosmos, as the ultimate ground and validation of human nomoi need not necessarily be sacred. The principle instrument in the creation of the sacred cosmos is religion and religion has played strategic part in the human enterprise of world-building. Similar to Durkheim, Berger (1967) is of the view that religion is a social phenomenon, while society itself is a religious phenomenon. Society is a human product and also an objective reality.

Cultural Studies

Culture is a reflection of the spiritual dimension of social life. It is the key to understanding the people's cognitive world and primordial values. Culture enriches man's intellect through spiritual values. It expresses man's creativity, aspirations and hopes. It helps comprehend man's vital problems more deeply, and helps deal with them more effectively. Such problems include individual and social self-determination in the modern world, and man's effective action to control society and develop his own powers. Ukeje has defined culture: “... as the fabric of ideas, beliefs, skill, tools, esthetic objects, methods of thinking, of eating and of talking as well as customs and institutions into which each member of the society is born”. The level of development and realization of man's essential powers, and the fruitfulness of his creative effort in the sphere of material and intellectual production, are reflected in culture. Culture exposes man's inherent qualities. It reveals man as a genius. Arnoldov (1988) has said that often man does not realize his spiritual and moral resources as the creator of both society and culture: “Yet he is a whole world in himself which contains the wisdom of the ages, the experience of his personal life, a wealth of emotions, and an impulse toward the future”.

The purpose and preoccupation of culture is man. Culture expresses man's nature, essence and social meanings. It enhances the interest of man and the value of human existence. Culture is only meaningful through man. Culture is inconceivable without man, and man's life is inconceivable without it. Culture, by affecting man and social development, displays its transforming function in relation to nature, society, and man himself” (Arnoldov 1988). Cultural progress connotes the development of society's moral, spiritual and intellectual perfection of people to achieve the aim of harmonizing the natural and social environment. The predetermined objective for cultural development is the rediscovery of man as a social being. Another vital purpose of culture is the cognition and transformation of the world. Arnoldov (1988) stated that culture transforms the world; it contains mankind's immortal treasures, the fountains of human thought, creation, and action. It has a most direct relation with man's fate and the eternal problems of being; the meaning and purpose of man's life. Culture comes to man through personal effort. One must learn to ponder over his life, expand his spirituality, and develop his intellect and power for cultural self-development and self-creation. Man must constantly tap from the reservoir of spiritual life, and the drive to fashion his inner world of feelings and ideas. The vehicle for man's cultural development is courage, redirection of self-consciousness, reorientation of the psychic-vent, overcoming of inferiority complex, conservatism of thought, and optimism.

The highest impetus and motivation for cultural development is activity. Cultural activity as an intricate social phenomenon includes the consumption of cultural values, that is, perception, assimilation, evaluation and the creation of new values, capabilities and skills. There is an historical dimension of culture. Culture is a product of man's social interaction and history and the modern society must possess the ability to evaluate the past of people and the country and the world at large (Arnoldov 1988). Culture is a veritable instrument for communal unity and solidarity. Culture has the task of uniting people. Cultural values are assimilated and disseminated through human intercourse. Human isolation does not only destroy man's spiritual and moral powers but also dooms man to social loneliness: “Progressive culture is directed' to uniting people and to their spiritual and emotional communion. Only such culture can unite the diversity
of human individualities in an organic whole, join the spiritual wealth of separate personalities together and so promote social and spiritual harmony in society (Arnoldov 1988). There is a symbiotic relationship between religion, culture, and communication. Religion is the most primordial expression of cultural achievement of mankind. No religion can be understood unless it is studied from a cultural context. Historically, religion is dressed in cultural garment as a product of culture. The academic vision and conception of culture in the social science and liberal arts is different from what is implied in the common usage. Culture is a holistic term for the symbolic and learned aspects of human society and it means everything in human society that is socially, rather than biologically transmitted (Scott and Marshall 2005:133).

The first comprehensive definition of culture was conceptualized by Edward Taylor in 1877 when he defined culture as a learned complex of knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law and custom. In German language, there is a distinction between kultur and zivilisation. While kultur means symbols and values, zivilisation refers to technical, economic, political ideas and organization. Heinrich Rickert (1863-1939), the neo-kantian professor of philosophy at Frieberg and Heidelberg, and a contemporary, and friend of Max Weber introduced the term Kulturwissenschaften and rejected Geisteswissenschaften, and insisted that the core of cultural studies is not the mind – which can be studied in experimental psychology. The object of cultural studies is cultural products and institutions. Rickert (1962) defined culture materially as real objects constituted by values and fostered with regard to these values. He argued persuasively that culture consist of every item that is either produced or fostered by human creativity for the sake of valued ends, and that since cultural objects owe their intrinsic constitution and origin to human values, their interest is very different from the interest derived from natural phenomena (Benton 1978:108). Culture as a conscious creation of human rationality is now a distinctive are of focus in academic curriculum. But then, there is a seeming confusion on the scope and subject matter of cultural studies. Presently, almost all the departments in the humanities lay claims to cultural studies as a unique area of focus and specialization. For some people, cultural studies are concerned with the nature of mass culture and the activities of cultural industries. Cultural studies a approached from the perspective of popular culture, communication, consumer society, the mass media, leisure and postmodernism.

In 1871, the pioneer anthropologist Edward B. Tylor defined culture that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (qtd. in Lenski 1970:18). For White (1959) culture is “an organisation of phenomena- acts (patterns of behavior), objects (tools; things made with tools), ideas (belief, knowledge) and sentiments (attitudes, ‘values’) - that is dependent upon the use of symbols” (139-140). As a synthesis of Tylor (1877:18) and White’s definitions, Lenski (1970:18) defines culture simply as “mankind’s symbol of systems and all the aspects of human life dependent on it”.

It is a global phenomenon that departments of Religious Studies have recently highlighted the cultural dimensions of religion. In view of the external pressure mounted on African culture, academic discourses in matters related to culture have been brought to the fore. Religion as a pervasive social institution is culture-bound. Religion is a complex cultural phenomenon that is best understood within a cultural context. In academic classification, religion is subsumed under culture. Culture is a reflection of spiritual dimension of social life. It is the key to understanding the people’s cognitive world and primordial wisdom. Culture enriches man’s intellect through spiritual values. It expresses man’s creativity, aspirations and hopes. It is the summation of all the positive and transforming experiences of mankind.

Yinger (1970:20) is of the view that to understand any religion, it is necessary to study the cultures that embodies it. Mbon argues that to divorce religion from it culture in which it is imbedded is methodically counterproductive since a good understanding of such cultural constituent as arts, architecture, language and music can aid the scientific scholar to understand religion within the cultural milieu in which it is encapsulated (13). Integration of cultural studies into the curriculum of Religious Studies, though belated, is a positive development that deserved acclamation from the academic community.

**Universal Characteristics of Culture**
1. **Culture is a social creation.** It is socially created, or as Iwe (1992:55) has put it, culture is a social heritage (55). Murdock has said that culture is not instinctive, or innate, or transmitted biologically, but is composed of habits that are learned, tendencies to react, acquired by each individual through his own life experience after birth (369).

2. **Culture is inculcated.** While all animals are capable of learning, it appears it is only man that is capable of transmitting cultural knowledge to his descendants. Man does this through language.

3. **Culture is social or shared experience of society.** Culture can assume a particular form within a particular society, such that there will be uniformities in social behavior.

4. **Culture is ideational.** Culture is always conceptualized as the acceptable behavioral pattern of society. Murdock has observed that "most people show in marked degree an awareness of their own cultural norms and ability to differentiate them from purely individual habits and a facility in conceptualizing and reporting them in detail, including the circumstances where each is considered appropriate and the sanctions to be expected for nonconformity" (363, 364).

5. **Culture is gratifying.** Culture satisfies basic needs of man. It is gratifying because it leads to the achievement of desired goals, and society may not accept cultural change without scrutiny.

6. **Culture is conservative.** Cultural values and norms do not respond easily to social change. Traditional farming method using hoes and cutlasses is cultural in Africa. That is the acceptable way of life. Africans are finding it difficult to change to ploughs and tractors. To that extent, culture is conservative.

7. **Culture is adaptive.** Although some cultures may resist change, it is a universal human experience that every cultural contact produces some change and adaptiveness.

8. **Culture is integrative.** Culture is made up of integrated patterns, network of institutions, and interrelated systems, which reflect social consensus and uniformity.

9. **Culture enjoys continuity.** Man, the creator of culture may die, but culture will survive several generations. It is not possible for people within a specific cultural influence to escape the influence of culture. Iwe has said that culture is marked by continuity in time and comprehensiveness in the scope of its sway over its members, its members may die or perish but it continues its march in time from generation to generation; its impact on all its members is comprehensive or without exception, and is inescapable as death. Its impact or sway on men is similar to that of water on fish (55).

10. **Culture is value-oriented.** It is an embodiment of the people’s world-view and cosmology. It is a reflection of the people’s normative values. Culture is the mirror of society

**Functions of Culture**

Iwe (1979) has identified six functions of culture within the social system.

1. Culture guides behavior, provides roles, defines relations and exerts social control.
2. Culture distinguishes one society of people from another.
3. It is through cultural process that the normative values of the society are interpreted and charged with meaning and purpose.
4. Culture is an instrument of cohesion. It provides the basis for unity and cooperation within the society. Iwe writes: “Cultural unity normally inspires loyalty, patriotism and devotion as it stimulates and reinforces cooperative efforts for the attainment of objectives the people consider culturally worthwhile and desirable” (56).
5. Culture is the guiding spirit of the social structure. Culture preserves the social heritage and values for posterity.
6. Culture is a molder of social personality. People all over the world represent their cultural portraits. Iwe concludes that: “... Culture is essentially inseparable from society. Society is what culture makes it, and culture is defined by society. People and their culture are in perpetual state of interaction, mutual influence, of interdependence and progressive reciprocal adaptation” (Iwe 1979:57)

**Religion and Cultural Ecology**

Hiebert has defined ecology “as the study of the interactions among organism and their physical and biotic habitats” (1978:89). Human beings are linked to nature in various ways. There is also the reality of
dependence on nature as the source of basic necessities of life. But there are other products of nature which are dangerous to human existence, such as disease, natural disaster, predators and fires which have capacity for mass destruction. Since human beings are not passive receptors of the forces and fortunes of nature, forests are cleared, soil cultivated, road networks are opened, medicines are manufactured to counter disease. The natural impact of winter and summer are minimised through the use of air conditioners and heaters.

Man has created an artificial environment to surmount the restrictions of biological make-up and physical habitat through technological exploration of the products of nature and also to safeguard itself against dangerous consequences of the interaction with nature. Man’s effort to check the tyranny of nature has led to the equally dangerous tyranny of technology (Heibert 1978: 90). Mankind is now dependent on science and technology for survival. Man is caged by technological principle which encourages dependency on metals, plastics, fuels, and nuclear energy. Man has conquered nature. Technological breakthrough has produced a boomerang effect. Hiebert (1978) writes: “Cutting down forests can change patterns of rainfall and cause serious erosion; the use of chemicals and firearms can kill off species of animals and birds that survived for millions of years” (90).

The concern of academic Religious Studies on the human environment has to do with the religious dimension of nature, and types of adaptation that will produce a balance between nature and human culture. Religion is concerned about resource depletion, planless and wasteful squandering of natural resources, and pollution of the air and depletion of the ozone layer.

**Religion and Cultural Tourism**

Traditional definition of tourism has been limited to the desire of people to visit a particular place for sightseeing, visit to friends and relatives, vacation and leisure. This definition excluded the religious dimension of tourism. Valene Smith has identified six categories of tourism: ethnic tourism, cultural tourism, historical tourism, environmental tourism, recreational and business tourism. Academic Religious Studies is concerned with cultural and historical tourism.

We want to place on record that religious motivations contributed predominantly to the evolution of tourism both in prehistory and in the classical world. Herodotus, Greece father of ancient history reported that Egyptians hosted their neighbours to celebrate religious festival: “...when they arrive at Bubastis, they celebrate the occasion with great sacrifices and more wine is consumed at this one festival than during the whole rest of the year” (qtd. in Casson 1999: 31).

As far back as 776 B.C.E, Greeks instituted a religious and athletic competition every four years to honour Zeus (the supreme god of ancient Greeks). With time, the competition gave birth to four national festivals; the Olympic Games, Pythian Games, Isthmian Games, and Nemean Games. Each of this festival included sacrifice and prayer to a god. Deities were honoured through superlative and creative athletic and artistic performance. Casson (1999) captures the mood of the tourist during the festival: “...the feeling of being part of a great event and of enjoying a special experience; a gay festive mood punctuated by exalted religious moments; elaborated pageantry, the excitement of contest between performers of the highest calibre...” (76-77).

The Greeks also had sanctuaries of the healing gods for public bath that were located at Aesdepius and Epidamus which included facilities for rest and diversion. The Greeks recognised rest and recreational activities as having therapeutic value. Greeks also travelled to Dodona and Delphi to consult with oracles. The disciples of Socrates visited the temple of Delphi, to inquire about the master’s wisdom. In modern times more people travel for religious purposes across the world. Some religious people may pay a visit to sacred sites of their religion; others go to the headquarters of their organisations for spiritual rejuvenation. The numbers of people who visit Vatican City, Lourdes, Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, Mecca in Saudi Arabia and Biakpan in Southern Nigeria far exceed those who travel for non-religious purposes.

**Religion and Communication**

Udall and Udall (1979) in their *People and Communication* define communication as: “The process by which one person (or a group) shares and imparts information to another person (or groups) so that both
person (or groups) clearly understand one another” (15). Bergin (1981) in his *Practical Communication* affirms that Latin derivative *communicare* which means to share and the French root *communis* which means common (1). It is also necessary to mention in passing that painting, music, dance, sculpture and related art forms are part of communication.

Let us now attempt the etymology of the word “religion” to guide us to determine the correlation between religion and communication. Brown (1973) in his *Religion and Violence* traces the derivative of the word “religion” to three Latin roots – religare, religio and religere: Religare refers to something that is binding, religio is a constraint that cannot be evaded and religere refers to a repeating and unavoidable verdict that confronts us outside our control. “The cumulative ingredients of these Latin terms, then, are the notion of a building constraint from which we cannot escape, and to which we feel deeply committed” (Brown 1973: 3).

A cursory glance on the etymologies of religion and communication will reveal a symbiotic relationship in the social functions of the two institutions. The Latin roots of communication, whether *communicare or communitas or communis*, are all interpreted to mean the quest for fellowship, understanding, mutual trust, justice and cooperation in interpersonal relationship. Religion according to Emile Durkheim is veritable source of social solidarity and cohesion. Durkheim viewed religion eminently as a collective thing that functions to “re-create” the sentiments that strengthen society through rituals and festivals. Thus, it is through the medium of communication that religious messages are transmitted to the society.

The most outstanding area of interaction between religion and communication is in interpersonal communication- where religion and communication dovetails in social functions. Stewart (1977) in his *Bridges Not Walls* defines interpersonal communication as: “… the transaction that happens when communicators are willing and able to share some of their own personness and to be aware of the personness of the other(s)” (24). Miller (1968:7) in his *The Psychology of Communication* treated a variety of topics, ranging from cybernetics and automation to psychical research and the supernatural. Miller’s work showed persistent concern with problems of scientific psychology, communication theory, and the attempt to formulate a psychological conception of man as an information-gathering, information-processing system (7).

Dillistone (1956), before the expiration of his energetic, vibrant and resourceful academic career wrote his *magnum opus, Christianity and Communication* in 1956. Dillistone (1956) did not only portray communication as an indispensable channel for the dissemination of Christianity, but was creatively courageous to propound a theology of communication. Christianity as a universalistic religion has depended on cross-cultural communication for the dissemination of the gospel to foreign lands. Communication and media studies are therefore indispensable to missiology in the university curriculum. Homiletics- the science of preaching is a study in public communication. Nobody can teach homiletic successfully without a good understanding of communication. Besides, Christian journalism has become an international phenomenon. Christian broadcasting networks are already in global satellite

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