

# PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION AND HUMANITY

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## Abstract

The etymology of philosophy; love of wisdom connotes the love of wise decisions in the affairs of life. This reflects the decisions one makes in the society in order to live a good and peaceful life and to co-exist with other members of the society. Religion expresses belief in a supernatural being, and human beings are the subjects of these beliefs; human beings express their beliefs in the supernatural being. The wars, violence, conflicts and hatred which religion begets, over the years, raises the fundamental question: why is man's belief the doom of man's existence?. Ethics, a sub-branch of philosophy, attempts to examine the rationale for human actions and how men ought to act in general. Since ethics is concerned with everyday problems arising as a result of human acts, it poses such questions as: what is the life for man?, is violence and conflict right or wrong?, how are we to determine which actions are performed rightly or wrongly?, can religious violence be justified?, how can the culture of peace and non-violence be realized?. These philosophical questions place man at the center of all beliefs, and use reason to reveal the influences religion has on those who believe in it and its influence on humanity as a whole. It is within this framework that this paper, using an historical, expository, and evaluative methodology, examines the role of philosophy in the face of religious challenges and towards humanity.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, Religion, Humanity

## Introduction

Philosophy, as a field of study, tries to explain reality in a rational, systematic and ideal manner. Whenever the word philosophy is mentioned, rationality and human knowledge are challenged to define itself and give account of reality.<sup>1</sup> In ordinary sense, philosophy incorporates a person's view, ideology or belief system but as a discipline, philosophy goes beyond the ordinary sense to question and critically examine the belief system, ideology or any view held by a person or a group of people. This further connotes that philosophers are those who ponders on weightier problems of life situations when ordinary men lead their lives with the 'givens' in the society.

The word religion is derived from the latin 'religare' which simply means to bind, and from the old French 'religio' which depict bond, reverence, obligation, etc.<sup>2</sup> Religion encompasses designated behaviours, practices, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, organizations that relates humanity to supernatural, transcendental or spiritual elements. Man, in this light, devotes oneself to a divine being who one owes some sense of reverence and obligations to.

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<sup>1</sup> F.O.C Njoku, *Philosophy, Communication, Conflict Resolution and Peace*. (Owerri: Claretian Publications, 2014).5.

<sup>2</sup> The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, Deluxe Encyclopedic Edition. USA: Standard International media Holding, 2013 Edition.

Scholars gave diverse definitions of religion; religion is a belief in a god. It is the cult of the invisible. It is defined as a psychological illusion and so on. Religion as a practice and sacred reverence to the Supreme Being concerns the purpose of this research.

The reverence of a supreme being is a common factor in the philosophers' view of religion, although their particular beliefs vary, in respect of having a theistic or theistic views concerning religion. Socrates held that there is a supernatural realm and there are gods. Reason may be the best guide to moral decision making and one must also take into rational account what the gods have commanded one to do whether it was revealed through a personal divinations, dreams or other supernatural channels. True religion, for Socrates, does not reside in superstitious sacrifices or self-serving because the gods have no use of these things if one cannot render services to one's fellow humans through the cultivation of wisdom and virtue.<sup>3</sup> Plato holds similar virtue when he opines that the goal of human life is to be like God by pursuing wisdom and practicing virtue. The practice of religion, Aristotle contributes to political harmony, and it is the proper function of the state to look after its maintenance. The existence of gods, Cicero maintains, does not automatically validate attempts to divine the future. This notion should be clearly distinguished from true religion and annihilated. Religion should be preserved and not overthrown. Religion must go hand in hand with morality. Epictetus argues that the most important factor in religion is to have the right opinion about the deity one worships.<sup>4</sup> Augustine has a Christian interpretation of religion. He maintains that the nature of God can only be revealed through the eyes of Christian faith.

Philosophy can be viewed vis-à-vis religion. He stipulates that if philosophy is love of wisdom, then philosophy is the love of God, wisdom is not just an intellectual virtue but a divine reality. Religious truths, for Avicenna, are revealed by God through the elites (prophets) to the masses under the guise of metaphorical languages. The Islamic religion, for Averroes, is divine and true. It consists of two parts: external and interpreted. While the external is found in the text of Quran, the interpreted part is borne by the elites who unveil the ambiguous passages of the Quran. The Quran texts are literally excellent and its theoretical and practical prescriptions are beyond the human ingenuity of an illiterate prophet. The meaning of the texts of Quran should be accepted at face value. The allegorical hidden meaning the text discerns should not be divulged to the masses, since it can destroy the belief of the masses and corrupt both faith and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Bacon, on the other hand holds that certainty of belief is the very soul of genuine religion. Reason can be used to prove what is accepted in order to understand better the revealed mysteries of God and their doctrinal implications. He sees the belief that the truth of all natural philosophy can be found in the scriptures as a big mistake and wrong.

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<sup>3</sup> Verkamp J. Bernard, *Encyclopedia of Philosophers on Religion* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018).190.

<sup>4</sup> Verkanp J. Bernard. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Verkamp J. Bernard. 14.

Mixing theology and philosophy will result in either a heretic religion or an “imaginary” and “fabulous philosophy”. Pierre argues that although the human knowledge may be obscure sometimes, which makes the truth of abstract dogmas of religious truth difficult to comprehend, God requires individuals to seek the truth as meticulous as they can.<sup>6</sup> This truth will guide them in leading a virtuous behaviour. Kant opines that given the universal propensity of mankind to evil, religious reinforcement of human duties as divine commands is necessary, but morality must remain autonomous. The object of religious veneration, for Comte, should be humanity itself. With love, as the universal principle, religion will provide a new, dynamic intellectual orientation to family, language, and other static elements of society, regulating and unifying individuals. Sartre posits that the existence of a God conceived as all mighty reduces human freedom to discover their true selves and to relate more directly to each other in order to build up a human race that will have its own principles, aims and unity.<sup>7</sup>

Unquestioned trust in God, for Arendth, is different from a dogmatic faith. The transmission of religious passion into political life would pervert both religion and politics into denounced exercises in ideological fanaticism.<sup>8</sup> Alston maintains that although there is only one true religion, no practice of any religion can be proved to be superior to another religion. A person should remain in ones religion if it fulfils one’s spiritual needs and one should respect the rights of individuals who practice other religion.<sup>9</sup> Religious authorities were broken up by the linguistification of the sacred. Derrida suggests the need for deconstruction, without embracing the determinate content of any specific religion, in that light, one remains quasi-atheistic. Deconstruction, applied to religion, constantly reread its ancient texts in ever new ways in order not to conceive terms like justice, faith, worship, etc, as a fixed or determinate set of beliefs. Rorty detests institutionalized religion because it can make its elites to compel citizens into embracing its view. Institutionalized religion is an enemy of democracy. It makes religion unobjectionable and the elites, under the guise of religion, use citizens to achieve their selfish interests.<sup>10</sup>

Having exposed the views of some philosophers on religion this paper is divided into three parts. Part one discusses religion and the challenge of intolerance; part two reveals the metaphysical root of intolerance; part three unveils religion and the human future; part four exposes the role of philosophy in the society, and part five suggests toleration and appreciation as the nexus to diverse religious sects

### **Religion and the Challenge of Intolerance**

Conflicting beliefs which religion begets, and diverse interpretations that portray God and faith in God as pluralistic in nature, make religious intolerance inevitable. One, most times, is compelled to raise the question; is it in the nature of religious

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<sup>6</sup> Verkamp J. Bernard. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Verkamp J. Bernard. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Verkamp J. Bernard. 161.

<sup>9</sup> Verkamp J. Bernard. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Verkamp J. Bernard. 170.

truth to be intolerant? The current issues persistent in the world today are pointers to the fact that we live in an age of renewed religious warfare. In Europe, there exist conflicts among Christians, between Christians and Muslims in Bosnia. In Germany, conflict is witnessed between right-wing Christian Germans and the Muslims and Orthodox from Bulgaria. In the Middle East, tensions between the Sunnis and the Shiyites often become violent. The fight between the Israelis, the Arab Muslims and the Christian faiths has taken a drastic undertone. These conflicts and violence is most times regarded as ethnic conflicts but religion plays wonderful role in defining ethnic identity. Of course, religion in itself, is neither tolerant, nor intolerant. The outcomes of tolerance or intolerance depends on the manner we encounter religion. Religion, from this point of view, has a mixed legacy; religion appealed to, in order to motivate or carry out gracious deeds and religion appealed to, in order to justify destructive deeds. Toleration was revealed in ethics in the early modern era, in the works of Locke in his "Letter Concerning Toleration".

The word toleration is derived from the latin root "tolero" which depicts to bear, endure, sustain, to lift up or carry. This connotes that the actions or deeds tolerated may not be pleasant. It is a means to an end, in the sense that it is like a vaccination which is painful but aims at a good future,<sup>11</sup> because the consequences of intolerance surpass the evil of tolerating them. Locke postulates that those who practice different faith should be tolerated, though atheists are not part of his list and should not be tolerated. Intolerance, in recent times, has been a global vice. Religion, asides racism, is one of the major factors. In many parts of the world where there is no drawn line, as regards what is sacred and secular, as was drawn in the West, the repression of religious tolerance still prevails. Violence and outburst of religiously motivated warfare sometimes are remotely observed, though tensions and conflicts short of war are often witnessed. The question; how many people have been killed, or have killed others in the guise of religion will attract the answer, countless. To solve the problem of killing because of religion, one must, first of all, articulate how an individual could reconcile faith in the absolute truth of one's religion with ones acceptance of the consideration that one ought to be tolerant. This will answer the cumbersome question; how can one remain religious and still be tolerant? The reply to this puzzling question pulls one to the metaphysical root of intolerance.

### **Metaphysical Root of Intolerance**

From the metaphysical point of view, only the supreme principle, the Ultimate Real, referred to as the Godhead has no opposites and transcends all duality. The very act of creation implies necessity, duality and opposition and here, the domain of relativity commences and the root of opposition evolved. The manifestation of

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<sup>11</sup> Razavi A. Mehdi and Ambuel David, *Philosophy, Religion and the Question of Intolerance* (NewYork: State University of NewYork Press, 1997).vii.

the supreme, Ultimate Real or Divine Nature is revealed through their opposites.<sup>12</sup> Tolerance and intolerance, from this perspective, goes beyond moral issues, but have a cosmic dimension. To live in the world is to live in the world of opposition. This duality and opposition is witnessed in realities like truth and falsehood, beauty and ugliness, good and evil, etc. Traditional metaphysics upholds that opposition, and intolerance of opposites is present in all realms of existence below the divine and they can never live in harmony with each other without violating the very principles of their existence.

### **Religion and the Human Future**

At the base of existence, is the supreme, the Divine Nature, but at the base of religion is man who expresses believe in God, who worships, who sacrifices, etc. The power of religion to shape, invigorate and even destroy human life is regularly witnessed in the world today. Hence the heart throbbing question; “will the resurgence of religious practice contribute to a humane future or will it condemn societies to unending violence, ignorance, and wants?”<sup>13</sup> Adorno argues that religion should rearrange its thinking and action so that nothing similar to Auschwitz will ever happen again. Questions about the need of religion, for him, should not be substituted with its truths. Religion needs more reasoning but not to rationalize irrational dogmas or to defend a turn towards transcendence as a screen for societal hopelessness.<sup>14</sup> From the metaphysical root of intolerance, as discussed earlier, the conflicts and violence witnessed today, results from the interpretation of truth revealed to man by the ultimate Real (God). Amidst these interpretations, there is need to ensure the future of humans who uphold these religious views.

In search of solutions to the challenges religion begets, current debate about religion and the human future was raised. The debate adopts three outlooks: secular humanists, true believers and open humanists. Religion, for the secular humanists, is nothing but tyranny, ignorance, violence, and the hatred of the life one is living. Scientists or naturalistic values should rather be embraced. Humanistic values like freedom, tolerance, human dignity, reasonableness, for the true believers, are meaningless. They are just the veiled rhetoric of secular cultural imperialism. The open humanists are dismayed with the collapse of ultimate religious values. They fall within the secular humanists and true believers. They wish to commit themselves to a future that is worth living,<sup>15</sup> and they are disappointed with both secular humanism and traditional religion. The open humanists, no doubt, must have witnessed, overtime, the repercussions of the two extreme outlooks. They may, previously, have been members of either of the two extremists, but that is not

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<sup>12</sup> Hossein Nasr Seyyed, “Metaphysical Roots of Tolerance and Intolerance: An Islamic Interpretation,” in *Philosophy, Religion and the Question of Intolerance* (NewYork: State University of NewYork Press, 1997), 43.

<sup>13</sup> Klemm E. David and Schweiker William, *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay on Theological Humanism*. (United Kingdom: BlackWell Publishing, 2008). 1.

<sup>14</sup> Verkamp J. Bernard, *Encyclopedia of Philosophers on Religion*. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Klemm E. David and Schweiker William, *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay on Theological Humanism*. 2.

our major concern. How they reflected and chose a future that is worth living is our major concern. In discussing why the open humanists thought of a worth-living future, there is the pertinent need to point out that they believe in some virtue which the two extremists possess, but frowns at some of their beliefs. Rejecting freedom, which the true believers uphold, can automatically shut out freedom of religion; freedom to choose which religion to worship or freedom not to worship at all. This is why intolerance persists, because they believe that toleration breeds relativism. They maintain that religion has been sacrificed on the altar of secular and forced to accept relativization in order to be modern. They further argue that tolerant on the basis of the relativization of the truth implies also being tolerant towards those who hold the reality of absolute truth.<sup>16</sup> The Muslims, for instance, are intolerant of the westernized elements within their own society. They feel that their identity is threatened. Seyyed Nasr stipulates:

The threat to the existence of any entity which is still alive brings with it resistance and intolerance towards whatever is threatening its existence....Much of what is happening in the Islamic world is due to this fact and increases with the impending threat....They are reacting in the manner of a living organism which become immediately intolerant toward the threatening element....If it were to show tolerance, the body would become ill and possibly die. How tragic for a body which has lost its immune system and becomes over tolerant towards every foreign invasion.<sup>17</sup>

This postulation implies a support for intolerance. This explains why the Islamic states discourage the building of churches and punishes actions which they feel threatens their religion irrespective of whether the human rights are tampered with. Islamic religion has been recorded, in centuries, for intolerance. This has resulted to series of violence and killings which, for them, is a just war. Some quotations from the holy Quran breed discrimination, hatred and violence language. Instances are; “God’s curse be upon the infidels” (2: 89), “Slay them wherever you find them... idolatry is worse than carnage... fight them until idolatry is no more and God’s religion reigns supreme” (2: 190-193), “Fighting is obligatory for you, much as you dislike it” (2:216), and “the only true faith in God’s sight is Islam” (3:19).<sup>18</sup> In Nigeria, recently, a sect known as Boko Haram emerged. They bomb Christian places of worship as a campaign to Islamize the whole country, because they identify Western education and civilization with Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Muhammad, the great prophet of Islam, assassinated human beings in the name of Allah. The Koran encourages ruthless behaviour and killing of unbelievers of Islam.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hossein Nasr Seyyed, “Metaphysical Roots of Tolerance and Intolerance: An Islamic Interpretation.” 49.

<sup>17</sup> Hossein Nasr Seyyed. 53-54.

<sup>18</sup> Anele Douglas, “The Fundamental Source of Religious Intolerance,” *Vanguard Newspaper*, August 26, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Njoku, *Philosophy, Communication, Conflict Resolution and Peace*. 168.

<sup>20</sup> Njoku. 169.

The Christian religion, on the other hand, is not without such discriminations. Some assertions in the bible promote intolerance and projects the Christian doctrine as the only sound and possessor of truth. Quotations like; “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved”<sup>21</sup> and “Jesus said unto him, I am the way, the truth, and life: no man cometh unto the father, but by me”<sup>22</sup> make the acquisition of religious truth a closed system and every other medium of truth acquisition, false. Some biblical assertions promote violence by encouraging the killing of, even, blood relative, if one tries to convince another to worship another god.<sup>23</sup>

Religious tension in Nigeria, for instance, threatens security and raises doubt and fear amongst the army and police force. Members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), also known as the Shiites, clashed with the army and police force, while the Shiites were observing the Arbreen mourning procession. The security agencies warned them not to enter city for the procession, but they insisted. The security agencies may have felt that their entry may result to violence, due to previous cases of Islamic violence usually witnessed, hence the casualty of many members of the Shiites.<sup>24</sup> The ruling elites and the clergy always attribute religious intolerance and violence to unemployment, poverty, illiteracy and mental derangement, but ignored the root cause; the disastrous effects of some scriptures contained in “holy books”.<sup>25</sup> One is forced to conclude that toleration of other religion simply amounts to toleration of possessors of false doctrine for the sake of peaceful co-existence. Whether this is a fact or not, it is pertinent to know that faithful appreciation of otherness belongs to the freedom of faith. A faith which imposes itself forcefully is no faith at all. This is because force disables freedom and freedom remains a necessary condition of faith. Freedom of faith, in this light, connotes freedom from faith, because the human’s faith also needs freedom. Faith imposed, is faith destroyed which explains why no one should be hunted for saying no. God is the absolute existence and human beings are his creatures. God will not derive pleasure watching his creatures kill themselves as a result of diverse interpretations of his revealed nature. While God remains absolute, no knowledge of him is absolute. This explains why we need a re-interpretation of the revealed truth especially when the human race is at stake because of religion.

### **The Role of Philosophy in the Society**

Philosophy, to some religious devotees and some scholars, should not interfere with religious matters, because reason alone cannot understand or interpret most religious experiences. If philosophy is discredited today, in the midst of religious

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<sup>21</sup> “Acts 4 Vs 12, King James Version,,” in *The Holy Bible*, Red Letter (Transword Book Services, n.d.).

<sup>22</sup> “John 14 Vs 6, King James Version,,” in *The Holy Bible*, Red Letter (Transword Book Services, n.d.).

<sup>23</sup> “Exodus 13 Vs 10, King James Version,,” in *The Holy Bible*, Red Letter (Transword Book Services, n.d.).

<sup>24</sup> Kinsley and Joseph Erunke Omonobi, “Death, Blood as Shiites Soldeirs Clash in Abuja,” *Vanguard Newspaper*, October 30, 2018. Anele Douglas, “The Fundamental Source of Religious Intolerance.”

<sup>25</sup> Anele Douglas, “The Fundamental Source of Religious Intolerance.”

violence experienced today, one wonders what future the human race will have. Reason is philosophy's tool. A society's problem of hyper-theism, has to do with the abuse of, lack or absence of rationality. Rationality, mentioned here refers to a critical reflection on the state of the society, with the aim of improving the human society. Irrational belief remains a dangerous phenomenon,<sup>26</sup> especially when this belief is a threat to mankind as a whole. Religious beliefs should provide personal sustenance; build bonds of association and solidarity. These positive roles should be adopted as part of religious functions.

Doctrinal imposition ought not to be a religion's major concern; rather the content of these religious beliefs as it affects the humans who are the subjects of these beliefs should be given more importance. It is the role of philosophy, as the Socratic gadfly, to instill rationality in people and remind them of the need to see the other as an end. Philosophy helps one to develop the power of "culture criticism,"<sup>27</sup> which enables one to face the truth and devise better rule of action in the future. When every religious doctrine is accepted as given, without sieving the wits from the corn, then man's doom is near, because the consequences behind the execution of such doctrines will not be evaluated. Robert Neville maintains that religions should realize that the ultimate source of obligation transcends each religion, hence the need to recognize particular fallibility which makes their insights and traditions of argument, although historically valuable, vulnerable to correction in the public debates about religion.<sup>28</sup>

### **Toleration and Appreciation: the Nexus to Diverse Religious Sects.**

Toleration, for religious fanatics, may be regarded as a fall, from absolutism to relativism, or doubt. They further believe that truth remains intolerant of falsehood and good of evil. The truth has been converted in the name of relativity and sacrificed at the altar of tolerance. Whether this belief is true or false will only be determined by the "Absolute Real" who all worship and belief goes to. One question remains conspicuous; how will all religion that exists in the global world co-exist peacefully without threatening its worshipers' existence? Mustafa Erdil posits that tolerance and mutual respect amongst other virtues, will aid humankind to achieve a peaceful co-existence. The intolerant mind is certain that it knows the truth and this truth is so obvious and self-evident. Those who do not accept this self-evident truth are wrong for not accepting it, and the intolerant mind is angered by the unbelievers of his truth. Religious truth, for the intolerant mind, is absolute hence his attempt to convert others, and possibly, by force. For the tolerant mind, religious truth, even if it is held in an absolute sense, is only binding for one whereas others need not follow it. Toleration is a necessary truth and a condition to maintaining a civil state. The tolerant mind engages not in value judgements.

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<sup>26</sup> David Barsamian and Chomsky, Noam, "Chronicles of Dissent" (New Star Books, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> F.O.C Njoku, *Philosophy in Politics Law & Democracy* (Owerri: Claretian Institute of Philosophy, 2002). 218.

<sup>28</sup> Neville C. Robert, "Political Tolerance in an Age of Renewed Religious Warfare," in *Philosophy, Religion and the Question of Intolerance* (NewYork: State University of NewYork Press, 1997), 28–40.



Appreciation is a step further to tolerance. The appreciative mind engages in a constructive discourse with the alien world view, and values this world view upholds. This examination of the alien world view stimulates a hermeneutical process resulting in a deeper understanding of other religious traditions. This type of relativism does not negate truth of the individual traditions rather they are manifestations of a process of rationalization, intellection, reflection and contemplation.<sup>29</sup> This creates avenue to compare and contrast value system; a process that requires adoption of a rational framework within which there is room for truths, not only one truth, because the comparing and contrasting of value system is not aimed at searching for which religion possesses the absolute truth.

### **Conclusion**

Having treated the meaning of philosophy, religion, challenges of intolerance, religion and human future, the role of philosophy in a devoted religious society, toleration as a means of accommodating diverse religious sects. I stipulate further that reconstruction of some religious texts and utterances will go a long way in maintaining peace and harmony in the society. These texts, most times, confuses the worshippers and propel the fanatics to execute the actions supported by the texts and utterances. Although there is freedom of religion, individuals in the society should not exercise this freedom at the expense of other individuals. Any religion that opposes humanity should not be obeyed by humans. There is a pertinent need for the society to subject those religious doctrines and practices that are harmful to the human race to scrutiny. These practices should be evaluated, placing the protection of human life as the first criteria for acceptance, and any religious practice that threatens this fundamental human right should be ruled out. A redress is vital for a peaceful co-existence in a society with diverse religious beliefs. When the root is tackled, the believers will fall in place.

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<sup>29</sup> Razavi A. Mehdi and Ambuel David, *Philos. Relig. Quest. Intolerance*. Xiii.