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# Philosophy and theology: a twin brotherhood

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examine the important part philosophy play in theology. Theology depends to a large extent on the philosophy of the people. It looks at the concept of philosophy, the concept of theology and the implication of philosophy in the development of theology. It therefore proposes that philosophy and theology are twin brotherhood – one cannot exist in isolation; each enables the other, taken together it makes a whole word of sense.

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## Introduction

Philosophy is one of the veritable tools employed by theologians to get those viable experiences that are handed down from generation to generation. It is important to note that no Nigerian society exists without having its basis rooted in the philosophy of that society. That is what the society conceived to be the foundation for its existence. Philosophy is therefore a very important tool in the development of theology. This we shall explore further.

## Concept of Philosophy

It is hard to define philosophy, the term philosophy comes from two Greek words meaning love and wisdom, but every age has given the word philosophy a different meaning. Most authorities agree that philosophy deals with the nature of man and his place in the universe, William James once defined philosophy as “an unusually stubborn attempt to think clearly”.

The materials of philosophy come from the sciences of man and nature. The philosopher studies the findings in these fields and try to say what they mean, for the life and destiny of mankind. The scientist seeks to discover facts and to develop principles which will allow men to predict and even control events. Philosophy is interested in the finding of science only as long as they have a bearing on the fate of man. Peter and Hirst in Okonkwo and Ozurumbo (1984) opined that philosophy is concerned with analysis of concepts and questions about the grounds of knowledge, beliefs actions and activities. Philosophy deals with the totality of man's life and the nature of society. For Ukhurebor (2006), philosophy is a process of asking questions in particular areas. These include those things that affects mans life.

It can therefore be deduced that philosophy is a process of asking question in order to know or acquire knowledge about the unknown. In other words, it is the study of finding out about the realities of life. Its pre-occupation therefore is to search for knowledge about abstract realities of human life.

In the process of seeking to explain the physical world and the non-physical experiences, therefore arose the problem of the process and method of knowing. In dealing with the problem of knowledge, reason was found to be one of the most reliable sources of human knowledge. There arose the need to study the science of reasoning and work out a method and principles of

good reasoning. This provided a whole range of topic which became known as logic.

## Philosophy as Science

Philosophy is a science but not the regular science, in the sense of the word as it applies to the pure sciences and the physical or applied sciences. This is because philosophy has no fixed method that can be compared with that of the other sciences and does not depend on the empirically observable for its raw materials, it is not a science. The mode of its scienceness is different from other sciences. Whereas, the other science have no room for intuition as a source of knowledge, philosophy is opened to intuition as a possible source of knowledge. By the very nature of philosophical activity, it could be described as a superscience or metascience or the science of sciences, this explains why, Einstein acknowledged that without philosophy he would not have made his scientific discovery. Einstein noted that the reasoning which led to the discovery of Special Theory of Relativity (STR) was decisively furthered by his reading of David Hume's and Ernest Mach's philosophical writings (Udoidem, 1992:9).

## Concept of Theology

Man's consciousness was one of the basic indications of the search for knowledge. In this search for knowledge, the belief in the Supreme Being (God) was one of the first solutions to the philosophical search for the origin of things.

Religion therefore is man's response to understanding the Supreme Being. This response could be positive where it is religious theism but where it is negative it is religious atheism. Both proponent of these views hold to their view tenaciously. This search for philosophy led to knowledge of religious experience. Philosophy subjected religion to philosophical analysis and critique for the purpose of justifying its basic claims. Consequently, it raises the following questions. Does God exist? What is religion? How do we experience God's power? These questions led to the development of a new branch of philosophy known as – the philosophy of religion.

It must however be emphasized that philosophy of religion is not the study of specific religion such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism or atheism but rather a specific and critical analysis of the philosophical implications of religion. It subjects the claims of religion to tests of logic, evidence and reason as any other

area of philosophy. This critical direction by philosophers had led to their being described as atheists or unbelievers. For example Socrates was described as an atheist for his view on Athenian tenets.

The relationship between philosophy and religion has often been examined from three perspectives. The first perspective are those who are of the view that there is no relationship between philosophy and religion, the second perspective are those who maintain that religion is necessarily one way of man's response to the philosophical search for the meaning of man's existence, the final group are those systematic theologians who think that philosophy is a handmaid of theology – that one need a philosophical mind to enable him/her study theology.

Scholars in the first perspective would be seen as having a misconceived idea of what philosophy is and what religion entails. Consequently the failure to understand that philosophy has the task of clarifying unclarified issues in all areas of study is a serious intellectual plan. In essence, it is obvious that philosophy and religion have a relationship like there exists in other areas of study such as philosophy of law, philosophy of History, philosophy of science, philosophy of education etc. The point is that religion itself need philosophy to make itself more evident.

### **Theology and Philosophy**

It is not in dispute that theology and philosophy have a unique linkage. A systematic philosophy that fails to give insight into the question of "God's existence" would be judged seriously incomplete. So also a theology that fails to enter into discussion on philosophical claim is faulty.

Moreover other related topics that have philosophical and theological relevance include questions like that of personal identity, is there life beyond the death of the body? Metaphysical questions about time and eternity. God's relation to time and the moral questions about the Christian doctrine of atonement.

Scholars of theology claim that philosophical appraisal has no legitimate relations to what they see as a "revealed" system of belief. This cannot be right in the sense that, firstly, there ought to be legitimate work for the use of language to avoid doctrinal claims like "it is divinely revealed that..." this cannot confer coherence on what is logically incoherent or make a contradiction come out true. Secondly, no matter the extent of religions beliefs, a theologian regards as revealed, that which cannot constitute a complete theistic system. The revealed totality has to be intelligibly related to the deity who allegedly revealed it, imparted it to mankind and its authority need to be more convincingly established than that of rival claimants. What is taken to be the essential nature of that deity through the revealer, cannot itself be derived from revelation. A philosophical component, a more or less epistemology of belief is therefore necessary to a revealed theology.

It is also possible to see the "revealed" package as a set of pictures, stories parables by which human life is regulated and for which no other grounding is possible or appropriate. This religious authority and the efficacy of these pictures when taken in these way become enigmatic and questionable.

### **Is the study of philosophy irrelevant to the study of theology**

In some quarters, it is argued that philosophical inquiry is either peripheral to the study of theology or even plainly irrelevant. For this reason philosophy of religions is allocated a minor status in most courses of study leading to a degree in theology. The reasoning favour of such a view, are:

1) God's nature is inexpressible.

2) God is "wholly" "other" and essentially unknowable, He does not "reveal himself" to human beings.

3) Philosophy is essentially concerned with the operation of language, philosophy by the nature of God is such that it cannot be expressed in any language hence God is in this sense beyond philosophical inquiry.

4) Theologians are concerned with the reality of God and His works, not with the mere expression of that reality whereas, philosophers are concerned with the expression of that reality. Philosophers are not taken seriously since the connection between the expression and the reality is a merely contingent one and thus essential. Hence an investigation of religious language may be an interesting study in its own right but it is nevertheless an unimportant occupation as far as the study of theology is concerned.

I certainly, do not claim that these are the only reasons which might be put forward in support of the contention that philosophical inquiry is peripheral, irrelevant or even a stumbling block to theological understanding, but it is true to say that these reasons are central. I hope to argue that such reasoning are either derived from fallacious or incoherent position. I hope that the misunderstandings and errors which underlie your current view concerning the value or rather necessary lack of it of philosophy in courses leading to a degree in upgraded errors eradicated then once such misunderstanding one cleared the truth is that, once such more positive assessment of the value of the teaching of philosophical discipline and techniques in theological schemes of study can be given.

However, such a positive assessment, is the proper subject matter of another paper, one has to clear weeds before one can plant new seedlings and expect them to flourish. Let us consider the above; it is not to be denied that philosophy is concerned with language and it is not a new thing of contemporary philosophy in the English speaking world.

Its ancestry goes back to at least Plato and Aristotle. However, it must be noted that philosophy is not concerned with language in a sense which might be regarded as trivial by theologians; it is not concerned with linguistic usage. A person might carry out a study of the various words used for various rooms in a house in certain areas with a view of drawing up a correlation between social class, background etc and occurrence of alternative expression in the vocabulary of certain selected groups.

Philosophy however, is not concerned with such inquiries into the words usage of differently located geographical groups without the possible sociological correlations or implications or in the compiling of dictionaries, but with that conceptional scheme or schemes in terms of which experience is possible. Following the above explanation, it follows that it studies the structure of experience and there is nothing unimportant about this. Very often people of different social groups use different bandores to refer to the same object, it is not a fact that an object must be under some description that means if we claim such, we could not make this very point.

In other words, we could not make this point in general, that experience must be done within conceptual structure or framework and philosophers study, the working of such structures or framework. Let me say I shall be returning to this central point later on. It is sufficient to say that those who imply triviality to philosophy think philosophy is merely concerned with conventional usage to no particular end, the linguistic/sociological type of inquiry or inquiries which lead to the compiling of dictionaries. They confuse an inquiry into what

is contingently the case with an inquiry into what is necessary for reference for experiences to be possible.

1) Those who claim that the nature of God is in such away that it is not able to be expressed.

2) Those who claim that the nature of God is not able to be expressed in any language as in above will mean that the nature of God is in fact such, that we must ask such persons how they come into a position to make such a claim.

3) They confuse an inquiry to what is contingently the case with an inquiry into what is necessary for reference for experience to be possible.

Two answers seem possible (a) they are able to make a claim in virtue of their own experience of (b) in virtue of divine revelation. If they claim (a) one must raise the question "Your experience of what? And this question must be answered in order for the kind of experience they have in mine to be identified. Now it seems that the only answer they can give which would establish the conclusion they wish is the experience of God.

But this very position itself is incoherent in that it has to assume what it explicitly denies. In order to be able to identify the experience as an experience of God. In order to be able to identify the experience correctly as opposed to incorrectly, we must be able to apply the appropriate criteria. That is a criteria for deciding that this type of experience is an experience of a being of a certain nature, having the nature of God. Infact, in order to be able to identify the experience as opposed to either correctly or incorrectly, one must be able to invoke criteria of identification, let us say that the invocation criteria of identification must at least, be specifiable even if they are not of a given situation of use.

Actually specified; assuming that some body claims that these are an experiences of God and yet also maintains that it is not necessary for him to specify the basis of which he identifies these as an experiences of God, then he makes not simply or false claim, but on his own thesis on what experience he is alluding. Assuming that someone maintains that he is in a position to make the claim that the nature of God is inexpressible in any language by a divine revelation. (b) then such a person has indeed cut the very floor under his feet, since, in order to decide that this revelation itself is indeed a revelation from God, he must be able to identify it under that description but, to be able to do this, he must be able to specify the nature of God, in order to decide that a certain piece of "knowledge" is of a type such that its source could only have been an entity answering the description "God" in order for the revelation to be true. This will introduce us to what we may call a "modification stage". This means that, the nature of God cannot be univocally expressed in any language; it can nevertheless be analogically expressed. Thus this modification meets with insuperable difficulties in order to make up one's mind to decide that such nature can be so analogically expressed, some specification in non analogical terms must be possible in order for us to be able to decide which nature, can supposedly analogically expressed.

It might very much be claimed by those who believe that we can only speak of God by analogy viz in nature of God being of such and such nature, viz a temporal, eternal imitable, necessary existing hence predicate themselves are not analogically applied to God.

This means that the position it is only been possible to speak of God by analogy does not commit its proponents expressed to the view that God's nature can only be expressed by analogy, I believe that whatever difficulties inherent in the thesis that God can be of "by analogy which are indeed many.

This also means that the claim that philosophy is essentially concerned with proper use of language (in the earlier introduced sense) is not true and the claim that the nature of God is such that His nature cannot in fact be eloquently expressed in any languages. Turns out to be incoherent in the sense of self resulting. To actually consider above the thesis that God is such that His nature is necessarily inexpressible. In the case of above we can at least say that the thesis was a starter with upon investigation turned out to be non-runner, whereas in the present case we have an evident no starter. Here we find at this juncture that those who advocate this thesis open their mouths but cannot succeed in saying anything but that they cannot even open their mouths without at the same time necessarily having to close them, they have no possibility of saving anything, or saying anything for, if the nature of God is necessarily inexpressible then they can never been in a position to make such a claim rationally without rendering themselves speechless.

To ponder over the thesis that the nature of God is necessarily inexpressible must be clearly distinguished from the thesis above – the thesis that God is essentially "unknowable" "other" or "wholly other"? For this later thesis does not commit one to the thesis of inexpressibility, be it as it may that of necessary inexpressibility. When some people say that God is essentially others' or even 'wholly other' is to make what Wilgentein would call a 'grammatical remark on the nature of God.

Assuming that it is maintained that God is wholly other, that we are tempted to ask "Wholly other than what? Frankly speaking, the answer to this question can be given by those who maintain that, wholly other than contingent existence. Again to say that he is wholly other, it is to say that there is a set of questions and obviously a set of predicates which respectively, one can sensibly ask of and predicate of contingent existence, hence which can be true or untrue of contingent existences with such questions and predicates respectively cannot be asked of God or be said to apply truly or falsely of God. Take for an example, the case of Time and Space and the corresponding predicates are cases in point. For example, again one can ask when did God come into existence, or how long, has he been in existence or will be in existence or when He will even cease to exist. God is said to have come into existence or how long?

### Conclusion

In the light of the arguments advanced in this paper, I claim to have established at least the negative thesis that some of the main reasons for denying philosophy a vital place in the scheme of study for a degree in theology are, upon investigation, no reasons that as a result of this a fresh approach to the entire questions of the teaching of philosophy within faculties of theology may be made with a view to allocating to philosophy a more prominent role which will at least reflect her former and in my view rightful Glory.

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