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Article

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RORTY'S THESIS OF RELIGION AS A CONVERSATION STOPPER: A METAPHYSICAL PARADIGM

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Abstract

Religion as a concept has generated divergent perspectives, interpretations and approaches among scholars. While some speak in favour of it, others see it as problematic. Richard Rorty, for instance, heavily criticized religion as a practice that lays its foundation on a supernatural being that lacks rational and empirical evidence. He describes religion as a "conversation-stopper," contending that it creates unnecessary formidable hurdles for human peaceful existence. Religion, he strongly believes, closes down rather than expands debates that is not subsumed within its doctrines. It halts democratic deliberations and creates barriers to an all-inclusive dialogue he argues. As a result, Rorty sanctions the privatization of religion in support of his pragmatic philosophy which gives primacy to practicality and inter-subjectivity. It is on the strength of this that the work engages in critical method and argues that, Rorty's approach towards religion was aimed at fostering inclusivity while neutralizing conflicts. It nevertheless, suffocates the contrasting views and lays a controversial foundation that impedes harmonious synthesis of faith and reason.

Keywords: Rorty, Religion, Conversation-Stopper, Democratic Deliberation, Metaphysical Paradigm.

Introduction

Religion has been a crucial aspect of human civilization, shaping human life, promoting cultural norms, encouraging social interactions and facilitating socialization and most time championing good governance. It has always played a very vital role in public relations, shaping the moral stance of individuals and communities, this however, has not been a smooth ride especially among philosophers. Interestingly, though, religion is such a striking phenomenon in human life that it cannot be ignored by the skeptics, agnostics or even the atheists. So the nature of religion has always been an issue of intense concern for every rational person since it attempts to address or perhaps offer answers to the fundamental

questions of human existence. In fact, no society that wants any meaningful development that can downplay the role of religion since it always guides, forms and directs the behavior of people and their personal relationship with God. In recent times, however, as remarked by Alo Franklin Chibuzor , “secularist often thinks that humanity has finally come of age that they no longer have any use for religion; yet most humans still engrossed themselves with the questions and issues raised by the various religions of the world” (Frank, 2020). Richard Rorty, one of the modern American Philosophers and a secularist, thinks that religion suppresses the power of reason by intentionally not allowing human reason to be the arbiter of life affairs. Rorty is of the view that the excessive reliance on religion in public and political discourse in solving human problems hinders rational discourses in a pluralistic society, due to its inherent absolutist bent. Rorty is not alone as other intellectuals have also shared similar views. While some, hold skeptical stand on the grounds that religion should not dominate and dictate the decision-making processes of any heterogenous society, Others like Jean Jacques Rousseau, attempt to highlight the seemingly endless tension and tussle between public reason and religion.

According to Rousseau, “it is impossible to live at peace with people whom we believe to be damned; to love them would be to hate God who punishes them” (Rousseau, 2002). His statement portrays clearly a basic divisive nature between the absolutism of religion and an all-inclusive dialogue in a heterogenous society. His thought agrees with Rorty’s claim that religion undermines social cohesion in a democratic society, while rigidly fostering exclusivity and discrimination. Rousseau however added that “whatever that destroys social unity is good for nothing; all institutions which put a man in contradiction with himself are worthless” (Rousseau, 2002) and religion possesses this inherent trait. The attack launched on religion by Rousseau was more profound when he remarked that “Christianity preaches servitude and independence. Its spirit is too favourable for tyranny....true Christians are made to be slaves; they know it and are hardly aroused by it. This short life has too little value in their eyes” (Rousseau, 2002) But his submission is that there should be no any exclusive national religion and we should always strive to tolerate others so far as their dogmas have nothing contrary to the duties of a citizen. He warns that “whosoever dares to say that outside the church no salvation ought to be driven from the state, unless the state be the church and the prince be the pontiff” (Rousseau, 2002). Such dogma according to Rousseau is only suitable and appropriate in a theocratic government but in any other government, it is pernicious. More so, Karl Marx expresses similar feelings and frowns at religion and criticizes it for its adverse role in social development. His famous assertion that “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions, the opium of the people” (Marx, 1970) shows an unfavourable perception towards religion. For Marx, religion serves as a form of solace for the oppressed and inadvertently a tool for perpetuating subjugation and discrimination in the society. This dual role of religion complicates its ability and utility in bringing about social progress and collective wellbeing that leads to development in the society. Though Rorty does not directly link his religious stance to economic development specifically, however, his view also augments his pragmatist bent in solving social issues and enhancing liberty in a free society.

J. S Mill’s thesis on religion also notes the adverse effects of religion on society. Religion according to him places constraints on intellectual freedom. “The worth of a state in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it, and a state which dwarfs its men,

in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes, will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished" (Mill, 1978). Although, Mill does not exclusively target religion, his view, is on every dogmatic system or pattern that stifles and suppresses individual rational freedom and growth which aligns with Rorty's call for a secular public sphere that is devoid of harmful beliefs, particularly religious beliefs. Although Rorty's position on religion is rooted in his pragmatic philosophy which places priority on consensus and practical outcomes over metaphysical absolute, his view reflects a broader critique of metaphysics as hindrance to social cohesion and growth. It is within the above background that this work sets to respond to Rorty's approach to religion as a "conversation-stopper" with the intension of objectively countering his claim using a metaphysical curve. Although Rorty's philosophy clings towards democratic philosophy where people come to participate in conversation with the hope of finding alternative metaphors not dominated by modern metaphors of objectivity and rationality. But the distress question is: what would be the fate of man in the world devoid of rationality within which religion lays its foundation? The answer to the above question is what this work intends to address.

Rorty's Approach to Religion

Rorty criticizes the role of religion in public discourse in his essay "Religion as a Conversation-Stopper" to be resistant to rational deliberation which is a fundamental requirements for pluralistic societies to thrive. He rather places or demotes religion to a private sphere where it will be useful in inspiring an individual's moral action and personal ethos but should not dominate nor dictate public or unanimous decision-making in any given society. When it comes to religion, Rorty thinks that it is a matter of "cultural politics", that is, instead of trying to find some rational basis for religion, we should ask whether religious beliefs and practices are conducive to human flourishing or not in any given culture. It is up to particular communities or cultures to make their case that their religion facilitates social and political goals. That is, a matter of cultural politics, as opposed to philosophizing about supernatural entities, if any, exist. Having relaxed evidentialist restrictions against religious beliefs, Rorty insists that religious beliefs are best when they are private and subjective. Religion is like poetry, which can be intensely meaningful for individual lives, and it should be assessed as such. Indeed, he endorses a spirituality of sorts, along these lines. But when religious beliefs are brought into public discourse to support or oppose a policy or a law, they stop conversation short. Ultimately, Rorty acknowledges that we should not prohibit such appeals to religion, but we should discourage and oppose them when they support oppression and inequality.

Rorty argues that religious beliefs and their nature often inhibit conversational dialogue because they rely on certain absolute beliefs that are not evenly and universally shared. His view of religious commitment as leading to unproductive conversation informs his assertion that, "Religion is a conversation-stopper- a conversation that are harmful or discourages inclusivity and liberal dialogue. If somebody says, 'I would never do that because I'm a Christian,' or 'because I'm a Jew,' or because I'm a Muslim,' that is supposed to be a sufficient reason for doing or not doing something. But this is not a reason that secularists can accept" (Rorty, 1999). This assertion shows that when framing moral or political decisions in a way that is explicitly religious, a common ground is not found with those who do not share similar or same belief. By this, individuals foreclose the possibility of social

cohesion within a heterogenous society. This view serves to buttress his commitment of secularism as a way of fostering and enhancing inclusivity and democratic dialogue. Rorty further remarks that "Religion does not offer a common vocabulary for negotiating differences, instead, it asserts finality, claiming a divine sanction that forecloses discussions" (Rorty, 1994). So the absolutist nature and commitments of religious beliefs impedes freedom of rational and flexible conversation without giving room for dialogue. He holds that religious framework is intrinsically problematic in any given public discourse. This of course led to his critic on religion as relying solely on divine authority which cannot be verified in secular principles. He contends that, "When a religious speaker takes part in a conversation, he claims to be able to back up whatever he is saying by something that is not a topic of conversation-"God's words". This makes conversation impossible" (Rorty, 2005). For Rorty, human experience and contingent truths should be the guide and prerequisite for public discourse and not metaphysical appeals which alienate those outside the religious circle or tradition.

Rorty argues that religion often relies on faith base claims that are difficult to debate or reconcile with secular reasoning" (Rorty, 2005). In his view, Rorty thinks that invoking religious beliefs in discussions about morality or even politics tends to halt productive dialogue and resist critical scrutiny. Rorty suggests that for democratic deliberation to succeed, or flourish, conversations should at least, prioritize rational arguments over religious assertions that may not be universally debatable. This clearly demonstrates Rorty's understanding of religion and where it should be relegated to in the society. Rorty admits that "In the privatized domain of individual conscience, religious belief can be a valuable source of comfort and moral inspiration" (Rorty, 2005). But Rorty did not call for the total abolition of religion in the society but rather advocates for its relegation to the private sphere. This shows that he acknowledges the individual personal value, hence religious beliefs should not however intrude nor interfere with the public space which places priority on shared secular vocabularies for negotiation and reaching a far better consensus for the progress of the human society. Rorty draws a distinction between religion being a basis for public policy and a private moral compass. He writes, "A liberal society is one which has come to terms with the fact that it is a community of communities. It has learned to subordinate the claims of faith to the interest of civic peace" (Rorty, 1991). Rorty insists that an ideal society requires a secular public sphere in which individuals from divergent backgrounds are able to relate and deliberate on issues without invoking stiff and unbendable religious authorities.

What then is the Place of Religion in Human Development?

Indeed, democratic societies where most religions are practised, encourage open-ended dialogues that fosters the progress and development of such societies. However, religion, Rorty queries, often obstructs this kind of open-ended conversation which is one of the basic requirements of the free society. Rorty observes that, "The problem with religious beliefs is not its falsehood, but its function in discouraging discussion by creating finality where none should exist" (Rorty, 1991). The inherent "conversation-stopping" of religion as Rorty asserts, undermines the cooperative and collective problem-solving dexterity which is very essential for addressing challenges that confronts every society. This basic quality of religion is antagonistic to human development, slowing progress and advancement in the society. But then, religion has played key roles for the success and development of humanity especially in

Europe that pulled ahead of the rest of the world. The most common explanation is the fact that faith anchored on reason or rooted strongly in christianity's commitment to rational but rigid theology, made the development of the West possible. It is on the strength of this that Rodney advanced a revolutionary yet controversial idea that "Christianity and its related institutions are, in fact, directly responsible for the most significant intellectual, political, scientific and economic breakthroughs of the past millennium". In Rodney's *Victory of Reason*, he argues that "what has propelled the West is not the tension between secular and nonsecular society, nor the pitting of science and humanities against religious belief. Christian theology, Rodney asserts is the very font of reason: While the world's other great systems emphasized mystery, obedience, or introspection, Christianity alone embraced logic and reason as the path toward enlightenment, freedom and progress. That is what made all the difference" *Rodney, 2006*.

In Rorty's view, for human development to thrive, it demands a conducive environment, an intellectually free environment where mutual respect is valued above certain absolutism and dogmas. These among others are requirements for secular public discourse to thrive. Appealing to religious authority for Rorty, marginalizes those who do not share the same faith and beliefs, creating a divisive mindset in the society and advancing exclusivity rather than fostering inclusiveness. Hence he thinks that, "a society in which religion dictates public policy is one where people with no access to the particular faith are excluded from participation" (Rorty, 1991). This exclusionary dynamic for Rorty, hampers the collective and broad-based collaboration vital for advancing different aspects of the society like science, education, agriculture, healthcare and other essential sectors which form the pillars of human development. But is religion resistant to change? According to Rorty, religious institutions resist progressive reforms and play the role of perpetuating hierarchies in the society especially and particularly in areas such as gender equality, and scientific innovation. He remarks that, "Religious doctrines by their very nature tend to prioritize timeless truths over the needs of the present, thereby slowing the march for progress" (Rorty, 1991). In this regard, Rorty sees religion as a conservative force that stops or hinders the realization of human potentials by giving primacy to the adherence of established doctrines over adaptive and forward-thinking solutions to emerging problems. The disturbing questions is: does religion really impede scientific and technological advancements? Are there countries and societies with firm religious beliefs that yet experience development? Rorty states that, "Religion, when confined to the private sphere can serve as a source of comfort and moral inspiration without interfering with the collective pursuit of human development" (Rorty, 1991). His view suggests that religion hinders collaboration in the society for human development. Religion being important to individuals for their ethical lives translates to the inculcation of values that treat others with courtesy and respect which are crucial ingredients for any form of development in human society. Many religious values and beliefs are vital for any human development and they are first imbibed by individuals before they are transferred to the society and translated into visible developmental strides. The sum total of what can be termed collective human development is only a product of individual beliefs and values which is most often largely influenced by religion.

But do Religious Dogmas Impede the Growth of Knowledge?

Religious dogmas are fundamental beliefs and convictions held by religious traditions. They are often regarded as truths that are unquestionable and sometimes draconian. Various religious thinkers and scholars have put forward contrasting definitions of dogmas. Karl Rahner defines dogma as “a proposition formally revealed by God and proclaimed as such by the church authority that is binding for all believers” (Rahner, 1969). In the same vein, Avery Dulles defines dogma as “symbolic expression of faith, safeguarded by religious authority that guides believers in their understanding of divine truth” (Dulles, 1983). On the other hand, Bertrand Russell defines dogma as “an unquestioned set of beliefs that resists scrutiny and inhibit the pursuit of objective knowledge” (Russell, 1957). This is similar to Ludwig Feuerbach who thinks that dogma is “human projections of ultimate concerns, codified into rigid beliefs that can obstruct intellectual freedom.” What constitutes epistemological orientation and inclination as Agbakoba noted “is the choice of the source(s) of knowledge that is based on one’s methodic approach or/and the final epistemic authority in a community. Reason, Sensory perception and Intuition were in ancient times the sources of knowledge but intuition –not in the Cartesian intellectualist sense but rather a tilt towards divination and séance, fell out of favour as a source of knowledge by an act of legislation that was ‘suggested’ by Plato, “Indeed, Plato seeing the credulity of ordinary folks before the practitioners of magic suggested against sorcery, he recommended the death sentence of a prophet or a diviner who brings mischief on a citizen through sorcery, and a penalty or fine (to be determined by a court) in the case of laymen” (Plato). This implies the potency of power and legislation in determining acceptable and unacceptable sources of knowledge and their methodic approaches’ Agbakoba, 2019. However, it is pertinent to keep in mind that Plato only ‘suggested’ and did not out-rightly propose or legislate for a dualistic view of knowledge in an official sense as was later blatantly pronounced and propagated by the Church.

The judgment concerning the sources of knowledge that is a common epistemic discourse known to be rationalism and empiricism, was not made by Plato or the Greeks and neither can it be said that it was made by any other ancient culture or tradition in the then world but rather by the Judeo-Christian culture. This epistemic legislation was Mosaic in framework and outlook. As a result of the church dominance in Western Europe –Roman Empire, her scholarships, education and her Universities became mediums for the application and propagation of its epistemic stance through her philosophical books and became virtually influential, unhindered and penetrative. This also led to the firm dualistic outlook concerning the sources of knowledge as we prominently have today. So, the development and advancement of modern science (which combines rational and sensory sources) arose largely because of the orientation, legislation and epistemic outlook of Christianity –inherited from Judaism. This is also why there were such people as Ockham and Roscelinus who inclined towards empirical source of knowledge; St Anselm and Thomas Aquinas leaning towards a rational bent. These philosophers laid the foundation of systematic and rigorous dualism of epistemological root –empiricism and rationalism, which is a common epistemic discussion among the Western world today. By this, the rationalist philosophers, empiricists and most modern philosophers and scientist like Francis Bacon, Immanuel Kant e.t.c, who had strongly contributed to epistemological advancement in the world must give credit to the church for laying the foundation upon which their philosophical contemplations and ideas were built and thrived even to the advent of science.

This basically shows and accentuates the profound and staunch influence of religion underpinning the growth and development of knowledge. The fusion of the methods of facilitating reason and facilitating observation went hand in hand with a conception of nature. Indeed Galileo's method was meant to account for the motion of natural bodies conceived in a secular dualist if not materialist and non-vitalist manner. This was possible as Agbakoba, 2006 argues" because of the dualistic conception of reality in Christian thought-which Descartes, apparently unintentionally, pushed to its starkest philosophical limits with his methodic doubt and rationalism.

Logically, religious dogma is often rooted in reason which of course inspires deeper inquiry that unfolds new discoveries. In this case, religious dogmas anchored on rationality promote the growth of human knowledge by providing logical approach to understanding the world. This rational approach strongly emphasizes skepticism, evidence based logical reasoning which enable individuals to interrogate assumptions. So, rationality relies on consistent logic, universal truth, which serves as a fertile ground for knowledge to transcend personal inclinations and cultural limits. Dogmas though inherent in reason demands that ideas no matter how valid ought to be testable, and open to revision and refutation. This is clearly seen in the paradigm shift of geocentric to heliocentric models which ensure that knowledge is evolved with more provable evidence. Religious traditions especially those rooted in monotheism have as far back in history provided a worldview that sees the cosmos as governed by rational laws. This particular belief in the divine order of the universe has encouraged scholars and even scientists to seek understanding through systematic observation and experimentation of the natural world, attempting to discover and unveil the mysteries that underlay these laws of the universe. The belief by the scholastic philosophers in a rational Creator and divine wisdom inspired early scientist to systematically explore the natural world and the phenomena that exist in them accentuates rational foundation of science and this has a nexus with dogmas which are products of an intelligent and reflective thinking.

Agbakoba argues that. "The orientation of the religious ideology, Christianity, at the epistemological and ontological level was very instrumental in the emergence of the empirical science in the area dominated by the culture of the Western (Latin) church' Agbakoba, 2006. This suggests that religious beliefs have a cognitive undertone and influences humans behavior, including the pursuit of knowledge. This was why Rodney also asserts that, "the human inclination towards religious beliefs systems is not a primitive survival mechanism but a sophisticated framework that has evolved to make sense of the world" (Rodney, 2004). This framework intrinsically buttresses the systematic investigation of the universe, as underpinning scientific methodologies. This makes a case against science which takes a position that the authenticity of knowledge is only valid if it adheres to and follows the scientific method. This strictness is equivalent to that of religious dogmas that try to make arguments for absolutes. But the question is; does science really have a method? If yes, who sets that standard as a universal blueprint to acquiring authentic knowledge? Does this method not infer a sense of strictness and absoluteness to acquiring knowledge and if it does, does it not basically behave itself in the same manner as a dogma? This shows nothing but the fact that the same rationality that underpins the pursuit of knowledge in science is not far-fetched from that of religious dogmas. And from antecedents, religious dogmas holds sway to exploring the search for truth about the universe in a rational manner.

Scholastic philosophers sought to reconcile faith and reason, seeing the two as vital for the discovery of truth. This was why Aquinas as cited in Stranford Encyclopedia asserted that, “faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth”. The Christian doctrine of creation may have encouraged science by assuming that creation (being the product of a designer) is both intelligent and orderly” (Stranford Encyclopedia, 2023). All these opinions demonstrate that theological and scientific pursuits, though distinct, can be mutually reinforcing, little surprise why Albert Einstein opined that, “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind” (Einstein, 1954) Though not traditionally religious, his assertion emphasizes that religious dogmas provide a scaffolding for scientific exploration by proposing a purposeful and intelligible creation. But then, Rorty’s pragmatism attempts to eschew metaphysical absolutes, however, on a deeper analysis, he owes a debt of gratitude to religious traditions. This is why Cornel West observed that, “Rorty’s pragmatic atheism cannot escape its Protestant inheritance of skepticism and dogmatism” (West, 1989). By this, the obvious necessity of religious dogmas is providing the dialectical foil for innovation in the philosophical realm.

On the Metaphysical Response to Rorty’s Postulation on Religion

My approach here is to offer counter-arguments about Rorty’s claim on Religion as conversation stopper. Metaphysics attempts to explore the fundamental nature of reality and seeks to answer profound questions about mind and matter. It also seeks to develop ideas that go beyond abstract theorization to consider the practical implications of questions about reality in a complex, interconnected and ever evolving world. It is important to recognize the fact that metaphysics is a force that tries to reveal deeper truth and the deeper meaning of reality. And in doing that, it unveils the vistas of inquiry that trigger conversation in contradistinction to Rorty’s postulation of religion as a conversation stopper. As a higher form of inquiry, it tries to address the questions about what lies beyond empirical observation, probing further into the actual nature of ultimate truth and meaning of life, while at the same time, emphasizing the need to transcend mere practicalities and engage in issues that question the ultimate origin and being of a thing. So, this sort of inquiry provides a platform for further investigation that fosters the deeper reflection which most often, fires conversation that encourages intellectual growth which usually manifests in civilization. In this light however, Soren Kierkegaard acknowledges the fact that “Faith, far from being irrational, is the highest passion of humanity, uniting the finite and the infinite” (Kierkegaard, 1985) For Kierkegaard, faith is a leap into the infinite. It demonstrates how religious creeds inspire individuals to pursue higher ideals and engage in more constructive conversations with others. This suggests that religion which is underpinned by metaphysical reasoning, enriches the lives and vocabulary of humans rather than foreclosing public discourse as Rorty would want us to believe. Take for instance, the idea of *substance* which some scholars interpreted differently, with little nuances to depict “God”, pushed David Hume, 1748 into further conversation and reflection and remarked that “all we can know is the flow of impression and as such, we have no impression of the connection between the world of experience and something outside of experience”. Hume further rejects all empirical arguments that rest on the premise that every event must have a cause, and argues that causality is just a habit of mind based on constant conjunction of a particular event in our experience. His position is that neither reason nor experience can definitely rule

out either the possibility of god's existence. This of course, led to further conversation as his philosophical pendulum swung from rational certainty to that of skepticism which give room for further search in man's quest for knowledge.

Again, the question, *does God exist*, mostly asked in religion has triggered an interesting yet exciting conversations as against Rorty's claim and as such sparked intellectual reflections that seems to usher in a better approach that is nearer to the awareness of God. Cressy Morrison in an attempt to further enrich this conversation infers that:

So many exciting conditions are necessary for life on earth that they could not possibly exist in proper relationship by chance. The earth rotates on its axis one thousand miles per hour; if it turned at one hundred miles an hour, our days and nights would be ten times as long as now and the hot sun would then burn up our vegetation each long day, while in the long night, any surviving sprout would freeze. Again, the sun, the source of our life, has a surface temperature of 12,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and our earth is just far enough away so that this external fire warms us just enough and not too much (Morrison, 2012).

He continued that, "if the sun gave off only one half of its present radiation, we would freeze and if it gave half as much more, we would roast. Had the ocean been a few feet deeper, carbon dioxide and oxygen would have been absorbed and no vegetable life could exist. So, because of these and host of other examples. There is not one chance in millions that life on our planet is an accident" (Morrison, 2012). We can rightly say that living bodies are billions of times too complicated, too statistically improbable to have come into existence by sheer chance.

Contributing further to the above question, Plato contends that the cosmos must therefore be the work of intelligence even though he did not develop a specific theory of creation. The theory of creation holds that things are created *ex-nihilo*, that is, out of nothing. But Plato's explanation of the origin of the visible world bypasses this theory of creation. Plato notes that, "that which becomes must necessarily become through the agency of some cause" (Plato) which he referred to as *Demiurge or Divine Craftman*. The demiurge according to him does not bring new things into being rather arrange what had already exists in chaotic form, which according to him came into being through the reflection of the form. And this form, is expressed through a medium he calls *receptacle*, the nurse of all becoming. So in this sense, the history of religion represents just a large- scale dialogues where thinkers agree and disagree or what religion tends to represents, as against the claim of Rorty on religion as a conversational stopper.

Critical Remarks

Richard Rorty's view on religion raises significant philosophical considerations. His essay on "Religion as a Conversation-Stopper" firmly sees religion as an irrational activity that hinders public discourse which in turn, impedes human development. His argument has indeed been overly criticized for oversimplification without taking into cognizance that the multifaceted nature of religion has some prospects that merit careful considerations. Considering Rorty's claim on religion through an objective lens seems to holds some prospects that cannot be easily ignored but must be analyzed within the ambit of human

society and its development. One of the prominent strengths of Richard Rorty's position lies in its pragmatic emphasis on fostering inclusive dialogue in diverse societies. This cannot be overlooked especially in our modern society. Rorty argues that religion, when it is invoked as a source of authority within the public sphere creates barricades to consensus. Rorty feels that, "Religious claims functions as conversation-stopper, cutting short the back-and-forth reasoning required in democratic societies" (Rorty, 1999). His argument here is particularly relevant in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society like Nigeria where competing ideological views hinder cooperation among individuals with diverse backgrounds. His advocacy for the privatization of religion, seeks to create an atmosphere where all people and participants rely solely on right rational and private principles accessible to everyone, regardless of their religious inclinations and commitments.

The prospect of this approach has the potential to resolve conflict within a pluralistic society, as conflict can easily ensue when people with different religious beliefs try to enforce and instill their beliefs on others. Where religious and cultural diversity is the norm, privileging one religious claim over another risks suppressing dissenting voices which brews unhealthy relationship within the society. Rorty's position therefore, aligns nicely with the principles of liberal democracy, which prioritize fairness, equity, equality and mutual respect. His insistence on religion being kept private intends to neutralize its negative divisive potency that hinders freedom and a healthy dialogue. More so, Rorty sees religion's excessive indulgence on immutable doctrines as inherently conservative, hindering the versatility, adaptability and flexibility needed to respond to contemporary challenges that confront humanity. Rorty's opinion is that, "Progress is not about discovering eternal truths but about solving present-day problems. Religion, by its very nature, is often at odds with this endeavor" (Rorty, 1991). There is the potential for societies to achieve collective progress unburdened by theological constraints and dogmas. Issues in the world today, such as climate change, social justice and public health are solved through evidence-based research rather than appeals to ineffective divine authority. His approach of course, facilitates collective collaboration of participants in conversation and empirical evidence for collective productive action.

Rorty's thesis no doubt has potentials to strengthen democratic institutions as democracy itself thrives on open-ended conversations where participants negotiate their differences through dialogue. His position on religion as a 'conversation-stopper' is important with regards to enhancing common and equal footing discussions among the members of the society, free from unnecessary hierarchies and abstract contemplations, often imposed on the minds of individuals by religion, which of course, impede free rational discourse. This view nevertheless dovetails with John Rawls' idea of an overlapping consensus, where individuals with diverse worldviews agree on shared principles of justice. This is why he notes that, "In a pluralistic society, the exercise of political power must be guided by public reason, which excludes doctrines that cannot be reasonably accepted by all citizens" (Rawls, 1993). Taking on a different view, conflict is not only a result of differences in religious beliefs, hence, Rorty opines that religion fosters conflict in the society. Conflict is basically a disagreement, a product of differences in ideologies, beliefs and orientations. Every idea has a source and a man is the product of his ideology and acts basically from that worldview. Some may get theirs from their religious nurturing, others may be through parental inculcations, others may be from wide studies which inform and shape their belief systems and some from experiences of life. There are cases of conflicts that have occurred in

most secular nations and societies. The question remains, if religion fosters conflict, then what triggers such conflicts in such society where religion is greatly minimized in practice? This means that religion may not necessarily be a conflict-trigger as proposed by Rorty because ultimately, there may be other factors that trigger conflict within the society even when there seems to be near absence of religion.

Every society that has thrived has been founded on certain solid moral values which have served as a vehicle of development and progress in the society. Every society whether secular or sacred needs justice to thrive. Every society needs ethical values to enhance cooperation and collaboration. Most of these values are the core tenets of religion and the gospel they preach. When a society lacks these values, development would be a mirage and anarchy and doom will be the destiny of such society. It remains a case therefore, that, the values a secular society needs to attain human development are the basic values religious beliefs initiated and tends to propagate. This means that religion inadvertently fosters right moral formation that usher in human development and of course, not a conversation stopper as advanced by Rorty. Besides, Rorty's attempt to remove metaphysical truth as a foundation and replace with dialogue among equals is inconsistent with his idea of pluralism and solidarity.

Conclusion

Rorty's secular thesis of religion as a conversation stopper, resonates profoundly among the postmodernists, even as Rorty fails to understand that Christianity's commitment to rational theology triggered further rational discussions that propelled or was directly responsible for the success of all round developments especially in Europe. In this case however, there is need for a balance in both secularist and religious spheres that should engender healthy conversations and mutual respect devoid of ideological blackmail. This balance, I think, would nevertheless facilitate a more inclusive approach that would enable religion and secular society to co-exist constructively without obstructing or undermining conversations in a liberal society.

More so, Rorty's approach to Religion sought to reconcile the classical metaphysical realism posed by idealism, empiricism and postmodernism. Even as his ideas on religion though persuasive, but it is, as well, deeply rooted in relativism and skepticism and of course, lacks a clear direction for a harmonious synthesis of reason and faith.

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