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Theological Education and Character Formation in Nigerian Christianity: A Reflection

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Abstract

This paper presents theological education and character formation in Nigerian Christianity. Some theologians and religious scholars do not offer any practical recipes in dealing with the major pressing problems of theological training for Christian ministry today in the 21st century Nigerian society. Some priests, lay workers and laity alike find it difficult to practice the Christian character traits which Jesus Christ himself exercised perfectly. The proper examination of these problems engages the aim of this paper. The method of approach is analytical based on the review of related literature.

Introduction

It is the position of this paper that, if the diverse religious groups in this country endowed with sound moral, spiritual, aesthetic and intellectual gifts as they are, could engage in theological education not theological indoctrination, the future stability and prosperity of the nation could be

guaranteed. Religion is a reality in human experience and pervades through life. It describes man's relationship with the supernatural world or the ultimate reality, generally referred to as God (Brown, 1980). What people call religion today refers to religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, African traditional religion (ATR) and the like. These religions belong to a particular people's way of interpreting reality, or to their belief system through which they relate to the seen and unseen world around them.

Throughout history, therefore, religion is known to be the basis of the identity and location of a tribe, a nation or a community. This religious identity has been the foundations of the separation of each from the other and the cause of intra- and inter-ethnic group conflicts. For example, religious conflicts have been known to exist between the Canaanites and the Israelites, the Jews and Muslims, the Muslims and Christians (as in Nigeria, Sudan and Egypt), the Hindus and the Sikhs, the Roman Catholics and the Protestants or even the conspicuous rivalry between Catholics and Anglicans in Anambra, Imo and Enugu states of Nigeria. These conflicts more often than not are consequent upon theological indoctrination by these religious groups.

Indoctrination is a deliberate attempt to set forth one line of argument so forcefully, as repeatedly, and so uncompromisingly that the learner is unable to consider other alternatives. Thus while education aims at producing people with critical and analytical minds, indoctrination tends to suppress the development of such minds. In fact indoctrination seeks to remove understanding and to suppress all possible criticisms of other beliefs that are taught or transmitted. Whereas education aims at greening up the mind to develop it, indoctrination aims at restricting the mind from proper development. This distinction is praiseworthy of note as the researcher navigates to consider "what theological education and character formation in Nigerian Christianity: A reflection" is all about.

In summary, what is being said is that every community has its own religion. The relationship between God and human communities has taken different forms. Each particular religion has a particular character, because of the people who practice it. The aim of this paper is to create awareness of true missional Christians who have reflected deeply about their own theological engagement and who are thereby able to champion their ideas intelligibly and spiritually in writing, character, learning, and speaking.

Clarification of terms

'Theology', according to its etymology, is the science concerning God (Vos, 1975). As a frequent instance, the definition of theology as "the science of religion" may be examined. If in this definition 'religion' be understood subjectively, as meaning the sum-total of religious phenomena or experiences in man, then it is already included in that part of the science of anthropology which deals with the psychical life of man. It deals with man, not with God. If, on the other hand, religion be understood objectively, as the religion which is normal and of obligation for man because it was prescribed by God, then the further question must arise, why God demands precisely this and no other religion? And the answer to this can be found only in the nature and will of God. Therefore ultimately, thus in dealing with religion, one will find oneself dealing with God. From the definition of theology as 'the science concerning God' follows the necessity of it being based on revelation.

Theology arises whenever there is a belief in a Theos, a god. Some scholars consider theology as a form of thinking that seeks to explain or systematize beliefs of a people about their god. Macquarrie (1966) citing Tillich posits that theology forces a religion to make careful description of its beliefs and concepts. Theology is an intellectual quest that aims at attaining the highest possible degree of intelligibility, charity and consistency in its attempt to investigate, explain and systematize the understanding of the religion of a people. What is implied here is that theology is rooted in religion. So while theology is a way of thinking, religion could be seen as a way of living.

Theology is usually historically and culturally conditioned. It seeks through its participation in the faith of a religious community, to express the context of that faith without undue exaggeration, omission or distortion. And it does so in the clearest and most coherent language available for its own time. Theology as an intellectual discipline differs from philosophy. While theology expands convictions about God, man and the world on the basis of faith, philosophy reflects on the same themes with reason and experiences as its points of reference.

Vos (1975) divides theology into four great department namely exegetical theology, historical theology, systematic theology and practical theology. Exegetical theology in the wider sense comprises the following disciplines:

    (a)   the study of the actual content of holy scripture;

(b)   the inquiry into the origin of several biblical writings, including the identity of the writers, the time and occasion of composition, dependence on possible sources among others. This is called introduction;

(c)   the putting of the question of how these several writings came to be collected into the unity of a Bible or book which is technically called canonics;

(d)   the study of the actual self-disclosures of God in time and space called biblical theology.

When looking at the process from the point of view of the divine activity the order requires to be reversed, the sequence there being,

(a)   the divine self-revelation;

(b)   the committal to writing of the revelation-product;

(c)   the gathering of the several writings thus produced into the unity of a collection;

(d)   the production and guidance of the study of the content of the biblical writings (Vos, 1975).

"Education," according to Fafunwa (1974), "is the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he lives; that is to say, it is a process for transmitting culture in terms of continuity and growth and for disseminating knowledge either to ensure social control or to guarantee rational direction of the society or both" (p.17).

Here education created enlightenment among Nigerians that were exposed to European civilization and Christianity. Uchendu (1993) defines education as a social process designed to induct the rising generation into the membership of their society. During the period of Christianity under review, there were two types of education namely informal and formal education. Informal education is an indirect system of education whereby a child learns by observation and by imitation while formal education means direct education. As aforesaid, informal education could be defined as learning that takes place accidentally without premeditated schemes unlike formal education where everything is systematically planned.

As regards character, Macquarrie (1981) opines that character means a distinguishing mark, and hence when applied to human beings it denotes qualities or traits that distinguish them from other human beings. In psychology the meaning is slightly different. It is the basic behavioural pattern of the individual and its sub-structure, which gives a certain shape or bent to the personality, but is not the whole of it. Character refers to the typical or characteristic aspect of personality. It depicts fame, individuality, morality, personality, quality, reputation, and temper. Characters do not change, but opinions alter as characters are only developed. Character is not made in a crisis, but it is only exhibited.

The glory of God is seen in his holy character of goodness and good works (0'Donovan, 1996 cf. John 17:4). In other words, Jesus perfectly reflected and revealed the holy character of God by his goodness and good works. God wants man to demonstrate his character of goodness and good works.

Methods of doing theology

Edgar (2012) classified different approaches to theological education such as 'Athens" (which stresses the role of the academy in transforming the life of the individual), 'Berlin" (which represents a university model which focuses on the need to educate competent professional to strengthen the life of the church), and 'Geneva' (which represents an explicitly confessional seminary approach to training). Kelsey (1993) examines theological education using an a-historical typology referring to 'Athens' and 'Berlin' representing two very different approaches. He maintains the two normative types of theological education as it exists in North America. It moves around an axis comprising these two poles.

By 'Athens' he means that the goals and methods of theological education are derived from classical Greek philosophical educational methodology. He argues that the early church adopted and adapted this model whose primary goal is the transformation of the individual. It is all about character formation. It is not primarily about *theology*, that is, the formal study of the *knowledge* of God, but it is more about what Kelsey (1993) calls *theologia*, that is, gaining the *wisdom* of God.

The second pole of Kelsey's typology is what he refers to as "Berlin". In his evaluation of it, Banks (1999) prefers to call it the 'vocational' model in contrast to the 'classical' model of Athens. Whereas the classical model is

derived from antiquity, the Berlin model is derived from the enlightenment. Berlin represents this approach to education because the University of Berlin was deliberately founded as a new form of Research University as part of the Prussian reform of education undertaken along enlightenment lines. Banks (1999) added also 'Jerusalem' (a community based model which focuses on the need to train missioners to convert the world).

There are three methodological approaches to doing theology, namely the descriptive method which is technically referred to as the phenomenological method; the method of interpretation technically referred to as the principle of hermeneutic; and the method of application, that is, the method of applied or practical theology. A briefly discussion of the above methods of studying theology was made as follows:

a. The phenomenological method: This method seeks to provide a careful analytic description of the context of theology by letting man see the phenomenon by removing as far as possible, concealment, distortions and whatever else might prevent man from seeing the phenomenon as it actually gives itself. The merit of this method is that it promotes objectivity, clarity and precision in the task of theology.

b. The hermeneutic method: It seeks to provide deliberate and explicit principles of interpretation that would make revelation, tradition and scripture relevant and meaningful to each succeeding generation.

c. Applied theology: Theology needs to be applied within the context of a religious community, where it seeks to bring the faith to clear and coherent expression. Hitherto it becomes a mere academic enterprise that gives theory primacy over practice. Consequently, if it happens, this is to have a theology lacking in responsibility and authority, a theology that is a disinterested form of philosophy of religion; a theology that is mainly a cerebral activity, concerned to legitimize, expound and extrapolate certain kinds of proposition accepted as true; a theology that has no inbuilt concern to apply 'truths' to various life-situations (Macquarrie, 1966, pp.1-3).

It may interest the reader if it added here that liberation theology leads to transformation of indigenous societies. African (Nigeria inclusive), Asian and Latin American theologians profess an over-riding concern for the

application of theological truths to specific life situations. They seek to bring about justice and liberation for man from oppressive forces by a continuous inter-play between theory and practice (Kirk, 1983; and Lugira (n.d.); Mbiti; and Lipner, 1983). Biblical theology deals with the process of the self-revelation of God as deposited in the Bible.

Macquarrie (1966) divides the discipline of Christian theology into three categories namely systematic theology, symbolic theology and practical or applied theology.

Systematic theology-This is that branch of theology that seeks to articulate all the constituent elements of theology in a coherent whole. It is a philosophical theology (or natural theology) that is descriptive rather than deductive. It performs the function of providing a link between secular thought and theology and investigates the conditions that make any theology possible.

Symbolic theology-This is the unfolding and interpretation of great symbols or images in which the revealed truths of faith are set forth such as the doctrine of the trinity, creation, the fall of man, incarnation, atonement, eschatology, and whatever else that belongs to the specific faith of the Christian church. This is, however, the core of the theology and it corresponds to what is usually referred to as dogmatic theology.

Applied or practical theology

This is the third component of theology and it is supremely concerned with the expression of faith in concrete existence, in institutional, cultic, and ethical aspects of the life of faith. It covers areas such as pastoral theology, homiletics, liturgies, Christian ethics and the like.

Theological education and character formation in Nigerian Christianity

Having considered what theology is all about, and what education implies, one is now in a position to understand what theological education and character formation mean and do not mean, and what its objectives should be. God made the angels to show his splendor, as he made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But men he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of their minds.

In Nigeria, most of the Christian churches have theological colleges such as Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu, Trinity Theological College Umuahia,

Methodist Theological Institute Umuahia, School of Divinity Umuahia, SS Peter and Paul Major Seminary Ibadan, Seat of Wisdom Seminary Owerri, Trinity College of Ministrial Arts Aba, Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN) Bukuru, Missionary Seminary of St. Paul Abuja, School of Ministry of Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries Lagos among others where they train their priests or ministers, evangelists or catechists and other categories of church workers. These colleges in affiliation with some of the nation's universities with departments of religious studies/theology help to train theological tutors, academics, church administrators or religious or theological consultants. People need the services of these theological colleges established on the basis of non-biased minds now that some churches have become big business ventures and many church workers are seeking for improved theological training.

Traditionally, church theological colleges offer programmes that are only limited to theological courses such as church dogmatics, systematic theology and practical theology. The suggestion here is that theological courses should now include the study of secular view-points such as humanism, capitalism, socialism, communism, feminism, cultural values, bioethics, climate change, environmental ethics and other modern scientific, intellectual, political, social concepts and systems.

Now that the true essence of religion in its socio-ethical values and obligations is gradually losing its meaning, authority and influence in its encounter with secularism and industrialization, there is the urgent need to educate the Christian person in a way to be able to interpret life according to Christian norms, solve problems with a Christian approach and distinguish Christian thought, action and behaviour from a non-Christian one. For a Christian theological college to be relevant to the modern man, and be able to achieve this goal, it should be able to offer well articulated view of its faith as a force for snapping identity and as instrument for social and political change. Theological colleges should help Christians to commend their faith to unbelievers and to those of other faiths in a manner that is intelligible, rational and reasonable. To accomplish these objectives, theological colleges should include the following in their curricula:

i.   The historical approach to the study, not only of their own religion, but of those religions outside Christianity. This is to enable them to understand their life styles, worldviews and basic communal religious ideas,

ii.   the comparative approach,

iii. the normative approach which seeks to identify what the normative, theological and ethical views of the present day are, in the face of the critical challenges presented to people's traditional criteria of truths and values; and

iv.   the dialogical approach which prepares the students and members to enter into dialogue or meaningful relationship with other religions with regard to tolerance, harmony, peaceful co-existence and the above mentioned aims.

The ideals of theological education are often undermined by theological colleges that engage in indoctrination rather than in education and missiology. Through indoctrination, they present their particular brand of parochial theological views so forcefully, so repeatedly and so uncompromisingly that the learner is unable to consider other alternatives. To guard against this tendency, the ideas of theological education especially in a multi-religious society such as Nigeria should be protected from distortion and devaluation through indoctrination and wrong education. In this way, theological education could become a veritable instrument for promoting harmony, good neighbourliness, and stability in an unstable multi-religious society like Nigeria. It will also help to produce not only the kind of manpower needed by the Church, but also the kind of Christians needed by the society (Meakin, 1979).

This is necessary in the face of declining spirituality and morality among many of the priests or pastors of souls whose lives are characterized by deceit, hypocrisy, lack of the knowledge of the scripture, error of fact, very poor human relations, lack of commitment and their other negative life styles. Some priests even engage in transacting money-yielding businesses with lay people, and some become priests turned contractors going on flashy cars. This has resulted to poor response by the people to the good news and in participating in Church activities.

This has also given room for many conflicts, spiritual barrenness, moral decadence, rivalry and bankruptcy in character among many Christians particularly in Igboland and Nigeria in general. These type of people were described by Idowu (1973) as samples of the 'parrot-like' or 'robot-like' worshippers of the Prophet Isaiah 29:13 (p.24) or whom St. Paul describes as

'holding the form of religion, but denying its power' (2Timothy 3:5). In fact, our present embarrassment with regard to Christian practice in Nigeria is due to our confusion at this vital point. The Church in Nigeria is baffled by the dilemma consequent upon her demanding Christian moral values from people who do not really understand what she is talking about; that is, we have no clearly defined basic theology of Christian living. Is it not sad to say that 21st century Nigerian Christianity has not developed a theology which bears the distinctive stamp of Nigerian thinking or meditation? Theologically, she has been spoon-fed by Europeans all along. Her theology is book theology; that is, what she reads in books written by European theologians, or what she is told by Europeans, is accepted uncritically and given out undigested in preaching or teaching. What this reveals is the sad fact that Christian Nigerians have not yet begun to do their own thinking and to grapple spiritually, morally and intellectually with questions relating to the Christian faith. The Church in Nigeria has not produced theologians whose thinking bears the distinctive stamp of indigenous originality; and this, to say the least, is a signal mark of failure so far.

It has made many to abandon the faith and to resort to traditional religious faith. Theological training must change a sinner or a drunkard so as to get victory over liquor. The drunkard and the like begin a new life in the spirit. Most Christians are like the foolish Galatians that tried to continue in the flesh by works.

Conclusion and recommendations

Religion, it is known in history among religious groups is a living and developing organization that has been on the move from the past into the present and into the future. It contains in itself, if properly enhanced, some cherished values that can promote human rights, human relationships, and human virtues epitomized in love expressed in friendship, kinship, good neighbourliness, benevolence, self-sacrifice, self-control, mutual respect for members of the group, principles of rule of law, loyalty and rational obedience to constituted authority among others (Iwe, 1991).

In spite of these noble merits, one still finds that religion In Nigeria is ambivalent. On one hand, it promotes group solidarity and on the other, it fosters group fanaticism, fundamentalism, rivalry and intolerance. Equipping the disciples in theological education should incorporate among others.

i. Disciplines of Christian living such as the discipline of prayer, fasting, study, simplicity (cf. Eccl. 7:29), submission, service, genuine confession, worship and the discipline of personal quiet time.

ii. Modern disciples need to learn new techniques in church administration and pastoral care (Uka. 2002).

iii. Themes on the Bible, terrorism, militancy, environmental degradation, unemployed, marginalized communities, injustice and poverty according to Rowland (2007) should be taught.

A missionary vision of theological education will only value intellectual dimensions of training inasmuch as they contribute to the formation of Christ-like character in missional leaders. A missional vision of theological education should be:

1. Train leaders how to think as opposite to telling them what to think. Through books, articles, media, speaks, discussions, conferences, workshops among others may freely (and wisely) expose leaders to various biblical/theological traditions and perspectives.

2. Conjoin all intellectual study with missional practice. A missional vision of the Church and theological education is characteristically and relentlessly incarnational.

3. Develop a community based assessment of a leader's process of character development. When character formation is the central issue in the equipping of missional leaders, time frames are perfunctory.

What constitutes theological education is the content. The spirituality, both individual and communal, which permeates the educational process, is critical. It is not just that theological education (or liberation theologies) has a different content; it is more profoundly different in that it has a different methodology.

The established methodology of First World theology–often regarded as a universally valid norm–has recently been challenged. The theologies from Europe and North America are dominant today in the churches and represent one form of cultural domination. They must be understood to have arisen out of situations related to those countries, and therefore must not be uncritically

adopted without people raising the question of their relevance in the context of Nigeria or Africa per se.

Indeed, people must, in order to be faithful to the gospel and to their relatives, reflect on the realities of Nigerian situations and interpret the word of God in relation to these realities. People should reject as irrelevant an academic type of theology that is divorced from action or spiritual virtuous character. People should be prepared for a radical break in epistemology or metaphysics which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on the praxis of the reality of the Third World (Torres and Fabella, 2007).

In training for Christian ministry today in the era of technological and practical know-how coupled with theological education in the 21st century university, Christian character is far more fundamental than competence. Doing the right things for the wrong motives will ultimately prove to be unsustainable. What is needed is a radical restructuring of theological education to make spiritual, moral and intellectual formation premier in theological colleges. Getting a quality theological education means better spiritual, intellectual and character formation.

Character is the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual. It is characterized by trustworthiness, respect, honesty, courage, responsibility, fairness, caring, integrity, and citizenship. Christian character is formed when one surrenders to Christ (2Peter 1:5-7 cf. 8-11). Heeding Peter's words keep us from being useless and unfruitful in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Christian character traits in Peter's words are the high standards of right and wrong that God laid out as absolutes in his word. Jesus exercised them perfectly. True Christians work hard to follow that example.

It is stated categorically that sound theological training and quality character formation are the panacea to mal-ecclesiastical administration, wrong oral theology, indoctrination, unemployment, terrorism, proliferation of churches, corruption, bad governance and the like in Nigeria.

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