

RELIGION AND MORAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A SEARCH FOR A MORALLY DECOLONIZED MIND

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Abstract

Generally, religion is said to be a relationship between a person or a group of persons and the supernatural or a (some) transcendental element(s). It is a kind of relationship between a believer and a deity/God that is believed to exist. Today, almost every religion claim to have been inspired or revealed by God and as such, make reference to God for its various claims. Experience has shown that religion socializes people's morality in various forms and degrees. It has also been observed that many people, especially in Nigeria, find it very difficult or are very unwilling to question certain moral teachings of their religion and as such, they tend to willingly accept and evaluate every moral action based on their own religious beliefs alone. This observation is understood in this study as religious colonization of the mind. In this regard, some pertinent questions disturb the mind of the researcher: What is the relationship between religion and moral education? To what extent can we say that the religious minds of many Nigerians have been colonized? How can the religious minds of Nigerians be morally decolonized? Therefore, employing the philosophical methods of analysis and phenomenology, this study seeks to address the above and the related questions. The study focuses on Christian and Islamic religions in Nigeria. It observes that there are some conflicting religious beliefs which give rise to conflicting moral education. In view of this observation, this study recommends, among other things, the development and proper application of Critical Ethical Intelligence (CEI) among people of religion in Nigeria. This, in the view of this study, will serve as a sure way to morally decolonize the minds of many Nigerians.

Keywords: Religion, Moral Education, Moral Decolonization, Critical Ethical Intelligence, Religious Beliefs

Introduction

On several occasions, I have heard people say: “My pastor said that this is good,” “My priest condemns this act” and “This is against my religion”. The other day I happened to participate in a discussion where a colleague of mine shared the experience of another colleague. Thessy said that her pastor instructed them that whenever they have problem with a colleague in the office or whenever they are scolded by their boss, that their only response should be “God bless you”. According to Thessy, the pastor said that it is only God who can defend one. This is the type of teaching received by Thessy from her pastor. So, one day, Thessy had a problem with a colleague and the matter was reported to their boss. The boss invited Thessy, asked her some questions and even scolded her. What came out of Thessy’s mouth was “God bless you”. The boss felt embarrassed and was highly annoyed with Thessy. This was the beginning of Thessy’s problem which later led to her dismissal.

The above scenario is a typical example of so many things that happen in our society. There is a general notion that whatever a priest, a pastor or an Imam says is always correct and cannot be questioned. Also, religious leaders tend to dictate everything about how people should behave in the society. This has led to so many problems and disagreements in our society. And as such, it constitutes a serious philosophical problem to the present researcher. Therefore, the study is set to examine the relationship between religion and moral education. It is also the thrust of this study to find out how we can objectively and rationally justify the moral teaching of various religious groups. And so, the paper begins with clarification of some concepts: religion and moral education. It also tries to establish the connection between religion and moral education as experienced in Nigeria. Finally, this study ends with an evaluation and a conclusion.

Religion: A Conceptual Clarification

It is important to note that there is no universally accepted definition of religion. Each scholar or religious believer defines the reality of religion from his or her subjective notion. The concept of religion means different things to different people. Some people are of the view that religion is whatever one believes in strongly or whatever one is committed to in a deepest sense. This view presupposes that there is no person without a religion. This is because there is no human person that is not committed to something in a very strong way. The implication of this understanding is that if a person believes strongly in politics or business, politics or business becomes his religion. In this regard, Joseph Omoregbe observed that “religion is not synonymous with belief even though belief is part of it. It does not begin and end with belief”¹ The understanding of Omoregbe’s observation is that it is not any kind of belief that can pass as religion.

Elsewhere, I argued that “religion has to do with a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe”² In this sense, religion is seen as a search for the ultimate cause and nature of the universe. It is in doing this that the religious person develops a kind of relationship with the Ultimate Cause of the universe (God). Some scholars, such as Tom Humpur and Joseph Campbell are of the opinion that the concept of religion is derived from the Latin word ‘religere’ which means to bind again; to connect.³ The implication here is that religion reconnects the believer with a supernatural being. In the words of Durkheim, religion is seen as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things.”⁴ One thing that is clear in the understanding of Durkheim is the sacredness of religion. This means that religion has to do with certain beliefs and practices with reference to the sacred realities. It is also important to note that sacred realities are not limited to God, deities or spirits; they also include rocks, mountains, trees, rivers, etc. This understanding is in agreement with the position of C. O. T. Ugwu who sees religion as “faith and practices involving the

relationship between mankind and what is regarded as sacred.”⁵ Ugwu went further to relate religion with “belief in the supernatural and code of ethical behaviour.”⁶ In this regard, religion is concerned with morality. Joseph Omoregbe presented a detailed understanding of the concept of religion:

[Religion] is something that links or unites man with a transcendental being, a deity, believed to exist and worshipped by man. Religion is essentially a bi-polar phenomenon. On the one hand is the transcendent being, the deity he believes to exist and which he worships. Whether such a deity really exist or is simply the figment of the imagination of the religious man is not important to the concept of religion, as long as the deity is really believed by the religious man to actually exist.⁷

The view of Omoregbe as cited above presents religion as a relationship. At this point, it is important to note that there are varied notions about religion either from the anthropological, sociological, psychological, Marxist, theological or philosophical viewpoints. However, for the purpose of this study, we shall adopt the understanding of religion as an established relationship between a believer and a supernatural being believed to exist. This relationship is guided by certain beliefs. Religion is also seen, in this study, as the worship of supernatural being or deity believed to exist. With this basic conceptual clarification of religion, we shall quickly look at the notion of moral education.

Understanding Moral Education

By a simple definition, morality has to do with the rightness of human behaviour. Etymologically, the concept ‘morality’ is derived from the Latin word ‘moralitas’ which simply means “character, proper behaviour”. From this etymological understanding, morality is seen as the principle for determining the

proper way of life or the acceptable way of life. Thus, a moral behaviour is an acceptable way of life in a given society. This acceptable way of life or code of conduct is informed by religious beliefs, cultural beliefs, social beliefs, etc. We have to note here that the detailed discussion on the concept of morality is outside the scope of this study. However, I wish to state that the idea of morality is related to the idea of rightness or goodness of human behaviour. One important thing to note is that the whole talk about morality presupposes human freedom and responsibility. This is a very important point to note in any discussion on morality.

On the other hand, education is understood as the process of learning. It is an ongoing activity that begins from the cradle to the grave. This means that education, as an existential reality, begins the moment a child is born and terminates in death. There are two views concerning the etymology of education. First is that education is derived from the Latin word ‘educere’ which means to lead out. E. M. Nwabuisi observed that this understanding presupposes that “the learner has innate ideas which only need to be squeezed out or pulled out and expanded.”⁸ The second view holds that education is derived from the Latin word “educare” which means to form, to train. In this sense, education is the process of training the mind of the human person to accept a particular way of life. It is important to say that the concept of education can be taken holistically both as *educere* and also as *educare*. Education is all about the process of actualization of potentialities. In the words of Festus C. Okafor, education is seen as “a process of acculturation through which the individual is helped to attain the development of his potentialities and their maximum activation when necessary according to right reason and to achieve thereby perfect self-fulfilment.”⁹ For L. A. Cremin, education is “a deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, attitudes, skills and sensibilities.”¹⁰ On a general note, education involves all the experiences of an individual

through which knowledge is acquired. This understanding embraces both informal and formal education.

Having analyzed briefly the concepts: morality and education, I shall now focus on the understanding of moral education. Simply put, moral education is the systematic process of teaching or training an individual within the framework of a particular moral standards. The presupposition here is that moral teaching is always based on the religious, cultural or social background of the originator of the moral education. Moral education deals with the process of socialization within the perimeter of a given moral standard. It is a learning process that is geared towards helping the learner to develop a good sense of right behaviour that is acceptable or that is morally permissible. In a nutshell, moral education is all about character formation; that is, proper training of the character of an individual to imbibe the acceptable belief system. One important thing to note is that moral education is aimed at making the individual person a good citizen or an active member of a given society. And so, without mincing words, this study states unequivocally that moral education is very important in every society. This is because of the simple fact that it helps to mold the character of people in a given society. Therefore, having made this brief clarification, the next subtopic shall focus on the relationship between religion and moral education. This is to help us ascertain the extent religion influences our moral standards.

Religion and Moral Education in Nigeria

It has been argued by some scholars that the human person is a religious being. Religion influences the kind of moral standard an individual person holds. This is a factual claim that has been confirmed by experience. Many people tend to act in such a way as to protect the religion they profess. In Nigeria, for instance, there are many religions which include Christianity and Islam. These religions – Christianity and Islam – have certain values that they

cherish individually. These cherished values form the basis for their respective moral education. While the Christian sees the Bible as the major source of his moral teaching, the Moslem respects the Quran as the embodiment of his inspiration and moral teaching.

Experience has shown that Nigerians tend to behave in accordance with the demands of their religion. People consider certain behaviours as moral or immoral simply because their religion approves them. In fact, many people tend to accept and evaluate every action from the point of view of their religion. And as such, religious belief becomes the yardstick for evaluating a moral action. The other day, I witnessed a discussion among some persons concerning certain practices in their community. One of them said: "My pastor said that this is wrong"; another said: "Members of our church do not behave in that way". This type of scenario, as stated earlier, actually constituted one of the factors that prompted this study. The issue is that it does not matter whether what the religious leader said is rationally correct or incorrect; the argument is that since a pastor, a priest or an Imam has said something that thing **MUST** be correct. Religion has become the focal lens through which many Nigerians interpret reality. Many people no longer see things as they are, but merely as dictated by their religious leaders. The point is that the rightness or wrongness of human behaviour is now premised on one's religious background.

There are instances when priests and pastors dictate what is morally acceptable with reference to having church wedding before traditional marriage or even giving details concerning burial and funeral ceremonies. Some people have been seen to be immoral simply because they did traditional wedding prior to church wedding. In some churches in Nigeria, some parents have been excommunicated or given corporal punishment for allowing their children to get married to a person from a different religious background or denomination. In this sense, religion determines what is morally acceptable with regard to the choice of spouse. This

is an existential fact observable in most churches in Nigeria. Religion is so powerful in Nigeria today that it dictates how people should behave in almost every spheres of life. Many families, communities and states have been in turmoil because of varied and opposing religious cum moral teaching. This is the case both among Christians and also among Moslems. Nigeria has experienced varied forms of crises based on the type of moral education received by religious believers. The lingering issue of Boko Haram is a typical example of the negative effect of religious cum moral education on our people.

Religious leaders in Nigeria exercise not only religious rights but also moral rights. This goes to affirm the position of this paper that religion is a serious factor for determining what is morally justified or not in Nigeria. Today, we see religious leaders delving into politics, culture, and social life of people. By so doing, they claim to have the final word concerning the rightness and wrongness of human behaviour. Many Nigerians take recourse to their pastors and Imams for almost every moral decision they would like to take. No wonder Mbiti said that Africans, and in this context, Nigerians, are notoriously religious.¹¹ An average Nigerian allows his/her religion to permeate everything he/she does.

It has also been observed that every religion in Nigeria – Christianity and Islam – claims to have absolute truth concerning the morality of the human person. While the Christian claims that his moral teaching is the best, the Moslem affirms that his moral teaching is second to none. Religion, in this sense, has colonized the mind of many Nigerians: Christians and Moslems alike. This is where problems oftentimes do arise. The fundamental questions now are: How do we truly decolonize the minds of Nigerians from the clutches of religious cum moral education? How do we truly and objectively ascertain the correct moral teaching? Must we accept every religious cum moral teaching from our religious

leaders without questioning? To what extent should we question the moral claims of our religious leaders? These and the related questions constitute our guide in the subtopic that follows.

A Search for a Morally Decolonized Mind: Towards Critical Ethical Intelligence

From our discussion so far, it has been observed that most religious believers – Christians and Moslems – do not question the moral teaching of their respective religion or denominations. Also experience has shown that there are observable conflicts with reference to varied and opposing moral teachings of different religions. The clear fact is that the way and manner people conceive moral education especially with regard to individual religion constitute a serious problem. Religion has really taken over the mind of many Nigerians; it dictates the way and manner many Nigerians see and do things. This observation speaks for itself in our contemporary Nigerian society. And so in a bid to come out from this problem engendered by religious bias, this study proposes the development and proper application of Critical Ethical Intelligence.

Being critical simply means asking questions to get more clarifications.¹² In the words of Paul Kurtz, critical has to do with “the probing and analytical application of intelligence to a problem.”¹³ From this perspective, Critical Ethical Intelligence (CEI) as understood in this study, means that we have to critically and rationally examine any moral teaching before accepting it. It hinges on the development of the culture of inquiry. CEI is not concerned about being critical for critical sake. No. It means, in this context, that one has to take a second look at every teaching coming from the church or the mosque to ascertain the extent it is in accordance with practical reason. Simply put, CEI means the use of reason and experience in evaluating human behaviour. The emphasis is that one has to live one’s life in accordance with reason

and not simply based on some dogmatic teaching. In this line of thought Paul Kurtz remarked:

There are two opposing approaches to morality and ethics that have been in constant conflict in human culture. The first is best exemplified by Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed, who declared that moral principles are divinely inspired and who enunciated them without any effort at rational definition or justification. The second is typified by Socrates, who sought to use reason to define and justify his ethical ideals and continually subjected them to critical scrutiny.¹⁴

The above quotation from Kurtz goes to buttress our understanding of Critical Ethical Intelligence. The implication here is that we have to properly subject every moral teaching to rational and critical scrutiny before actually accepting it as a moral teaching. This study is by no means downplaying or neglecting the relevance of religion in moral education; it is simply arguing that practical reason **MUST** play its part in moral education. Richard Dawkins once said: “My father told me to believe nothing without reason.”¹⁵ CEI can also be understood in this sense: not to accept any moral education without proper rational justification. CEI is not concerned about moral justification based on revelation or simply intuition. Any moral teaching based on revelation or intuition has to be subjected to rational and critical scrutiny before it can be accepted. This is the position of this study.

The idea that belief in God and/or a specific religious tradition is necessary for moral conduct is thus highly questionable. Even if one accepts faith in God and a specific religious tradition as a legitimate interpretation of God’s word revealed in history, this itself is open to various interpretations. For example, the hundreds of

different Protestant sects have reached different conclusions about any number of moral practices. It is similarly true for orthodox, conservative, reform or humanistic Judaism, for conservative or liberal Roman Catholics, and for Sunni and Shia Muslims.¹⁶

The above quotation agrees with our earlier submission that religion is based on belief in God. But it has also been observed that every religion has different conceptions of God and this necessitates the type of moral teaching it propagates. This goes to affirm the importance of CEI as a tool for evaluating the moral education of every religion. CEI is simply a call for a paradigm shift from the culture of accepting every teaching from the church or the mosque without proper inquiry. CEI argues that there is need for proper critical scrutiny of anything that worth the name moral education. It is true that the culture of believing hook, line and sinker whatever the religious leaders said has existed in Nigeria for a very long time; it is also true that this culture of believing without inquiry has caused serious problems to our society. It is high time we started to make a U-turn. We have to develop a questioning mind. We must not accept every teaching from the church or the mosque without proper application of human reason. This is the goal of Critical Ethical Intelligence.

Conclusion

In this study, we have been able to see the relationship between religion and moral education. It is an existential fact that most of our people tend to believe everything they hear from the church or the mosque without questioning. This study considers such attitude as moral colonization of human mind and such it is very inadequate, problematic and a major source of some of the religious and social crises that we have experienced in Nigeria. The position of the researcher is that we have to move from the culture of believing without inquiry into the culture of inquiry before believing. This is what Critical Ethical Intelligence, as postulated in this study, is all

about. CEI, as proposed in this study, argues that we have to allow practical reason and experience to play their part in our moral decision-making. In this sense, this study submits that any moral education of any religion that does not have regard for the value of human life, the principle of justice and fairness, and other fundamental human rights should be discarded.

This study proposes the introduction and teaching of CEI both at the primary and secondary schools in Nigeria. It is the strong conviction of the researcher that the early proper teaching of CEI to our children will enable them to develop the consciousness and love for the culture of inquiry. It is also the strong position of this study that the development and proper application of CEI will help to morally decolonize the minds of many Nigerians and also go a long way to minimize and possibly eradicate the excesses of religion in the area of moral education. Therefore, this study calls on the different organs of the government and the concerned NGOs to do the needful in this regard. Workshops, seminars, conferences, etc. should be organized in this regard to raise the consciousness of our people towards Critical Ethical Intelligence. This will help to reduce the negative effects of religious fanaticism as experienced in Nigeria and further correct some erroneous religious orientations of Nigerian people. CEI is what Nigeria needs now in the midst of thousand and one religious groups with varied belief systems. There is no gainsaying the fact that CEI is the pragmatic tool for a morally decolonized mind irrespective of one's religious affiliation!

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Endnotes

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- ³ See, Betty Sue Flowers (ed.), *In the Power of Myth with Bill Moyers* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 34.
- ⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915), 37.
- ⁵ C. O. T. Ugwu, *Man and His Religion in a Contemporary Society* (Nsukka: Chuka Educational Publishers, 2000), 2.
- ⁶ *Ibid*
- ⁷ J. I. Omoregbe, *A Philosophical Look at Religion* (Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 1996), 3.
- ⁸ E. M. Nwabuisi, *Philosophy of Nigerian Education in Modern Times* (Onitsha: Etukokwu Publishers Nigeria Ltd., 1992), 4.
- ⁹ F. C. Okafor, *Philosophy of Education and Third World Perspective 2nd ed.* (Enugu: Star Publishing Company, 1984), 16.
- ¹⁰ L. A. Cremin, *Traditions of American Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), viii
- ¹¹ J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1985), p. 1.
- ¹² See, E. J. O. Ndubisi, "Philosophy and Its Unique Methods" *Tansian University Journal of Arts, Management and Social Sciences*, Vol. 2. No. 1 (2015), 29.
- ¹³ Paul Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1986), 62.
- ¹⁴ Paul Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988), 19.

¹⁵ Paul Kurtz, “Where are the Secularists?” *Free Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1997/98), p. 20.

¹⁶ Kurtz, *Forbidden Fruit*, 35.

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