

A Christian Critique of University Education in Nigeria

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Abstract: The standard of University education in Nigeria has drastically fallen. This is a fact, accepted by Christians and non-Christians alike. What these two groups disagree about include among other things, the causes of this fallen standard. This also leads to disagreement over the solutions. Various re-organisations have been suggested and carried out, especially since the commencement of Olusegun Obasanjo's administration in 1999. However, the desired effect had not been realised. This study gives a critique of the Universities from an evangelical Christian perspective and suggests that the Universities, like but more than other segments of the Nigerian society, require personality transformation and historical Christian ethos in relation to education. It is the conviction of this writer that evangelical Christianity has the resource to produce the personality changes, considering the phenomenal growth of this type of Christianity and its involvement in establishing private universities in Nigeria.

Key words: University, education, christian, critique, religion, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The short history of Nigeria vindicates the truism that Christianity and education always go hand in hand. Before, during and after colonisation, Christianity has been involved in the making of a new elite (Ajayi, 1965), through education in the area now known as Nigeria. Before private universities are allowed in Nigeria in 1999, Christian Missions and churches had been involved in the establishment of primary, secondary (including modern and high or grammar), teacher training, vocational and theological schools. It is also, a well-known fact that the quality of education produced by these schools when the missions and churches were running them was high, academically and morally. The graduates of the schools were disciplined, hardworking and brilliant. The high quality that the missions and churches gave education then is what is spurring the state governments to return the schools to the churches and even allowing private universities. The Christian churches had been in the vanguard of establishing these private higher institutions in Nigeria.

The involvement of Christianity in education as seen in Nigeria, both at lower and higher levels, is a reflection of what had been going on in Christian history whenever and wherever Christianity becomes entrenched. In fact, the modern university system is Christian in origin as remnant relics of the church in the academy. Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge, were originally Christian

Catechical schools. Similarly, the best universities in the world today (Institute of Higher Education, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 2005), which are mainly in the United States such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia and Brown, were Christian in origin. Without doubt, the ethos contributed by Christianity and the European Enlightenment contributed to making these universities the best.

The inseparable union of Christianity and education can only be explained by one underlying philosophy of Christianity that Jesus is the logos, the organising and governing principle of the world (Macquarrie, 1977). The same truth is affirmed in Colossians 2: 3 when the author writes that, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ. In spite of Tertullian's brusque comment:

What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? What between the Academy and the church? (Bettenson, 1990).

Other Church Fathers, such as Justin Martyr, Clement and Origen of Alexandria continued the tradition. Augustine of Hippo and Anselm of Canterbury were continuing the tradition and explaining the connection between Christianity and education/knowledge when they termed their preoccupation as Faith seeking understanding. In Christianity, faith is not divorced from knowledge; it is not schizophrenic. Modern groups that are so prevalent in Nigeria, divorcing faith from

knowledge are pseudo-Christianity. This is because in the process of acquiring knowledge, Christianity transforms consciousness of the student to Christ-like. It is paideia,

A process of culturing the soul, schooling as character formation (Kelsey, 1993).

Unfortunately, the Nigerian educational system, especially the state university, at present is quite opposite this. Its products are far from ideal. Hence, the need for the Christian impact. It is thus, that the present involvement of private institutions, especially the churches in education is welcomed. This Christian impact needs, however, to be clearly spelt out. This is what this article seeks to do.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methods adopted for this presentation are descriptive and critical of what is considered to be deplorable situation of government universities. The paper proposed what can be considered as Christian contributions to reviving qualitative higher education in Nigeria. The study begins by setting forth the undesirable characteristics of Nigerian university system at present. How the Christian Church and individual can make impact on the society at large through university education are then considered, before we conclude.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Nigerian educational scene: For anyone, especially an evangelical Christian, who is interested in working for quality university education system, the Nigerian higher education system is in a very grievous state. The enormity of the problem will assail a concerned educator on visiting any of our university campuses, especially government-owned universities. On entering the campus, the confident nudity that will set upon her will be flagrant. On coming closer to the brazen nudists, our visiting educationists will discover that they and their counterpart male scamps believed they are in the university for two reasons-to make shakara (i.e., to be gaudy) and to get certificate at all cost. Hence, the educator will discover that although all of them have minimum requirements to enter a university, their standards do not come at all, closer to the requirements. That is, their O'level results, Joint and Matriculation Board Examination (JAMB) results and admission have been forged. It should be emphasised for the notice of those who are outsiders to the system that this picture is not an exceptional case; it is a very common occurrence. The resultant confirmation effects of this picture for the outsider are the rampant stories of cult clashes in the universities.

However, the government and the stakeholders, particularly the National Universities Commission (NUC), the organ of the federal government with the mandate to manage the universities, recognise this problem and had from 2005 admission, employ the method of having a post-JAMB qualifying examination to be conducted by each university for the applicants, to sieve the forgers of results from genuine candidates. But, it is sad to say, the scamps have powerful fathers and the nudists heavyweight political sugar-daddies that the university administrators must listen to. Hence, the candidates who get higher marks in the recently established post University Matriculation Examination (UME) examinations being conducted by the universities are not necessarily the brilliant ones. Rather, several times, the admitted candidates entered the universities through nepotism. It is not unusual then to discover that in the semester examinations in the university, the ruffians are always desperate to cheat. Unfortunately, woe betides the invigilator who dares to restrain them!

Our visiting educator must have become overwhelmed with the moral problems confronting the university education in Nigeria by now. She might, however, hope that before the students pass out, they might have been transformed by their education. Unfortunately, this is usually not the case. Not just because of the incessant strikes of the university staff paralysing the educational system generally, but also because of the quality of teachers, the teaching materials and even the environment. All these and many more factors combined together to make the student, twice as much a child of hell as when she matriculated.

On interacting with a lecturer, the visiting educator may discover that he has a very shallow knowledge of his area of specialisation. If he is not shallow, usually his knowledge has become outdated, because the resources and materials he relies upon are very outdated. The curriculum must have helped if a competent educationist drafts it; unfortunately, it is also very outdated, quite irrelevant to contemporary issues and perhaps aimless. To make the matter worse, the lecturer himself has no consciously articulated aim, goal and interest for teaching the course/topic that is if he teaches at all. It is not unusual to find teachers who simply tell the students what he expects of them in the examinations. The most important and discouraging thing about the lecturers for an evangelical educator is that, their lives do not impact positive influence on the students. At least, from a Christian point of view, this is as important, if not even more important than the teaching. A teacher's life must be exemplary, as Jesus demonstrated in his own life as a teacher. As all teachers know, living example has more effect in teaching than discourse. However, this is a rarity

in Nigerian universities and this among other things, is what makes the nudists brazen. It is the same reason why their counterpart male scamps remain obstinate, because usually, they and their lecturers scramble for the nude girls and the girls enjoy and even relish the game.

The environment of modern university in Nigeria neither inspires quality education nor transforms consciousness either. To return to our education reformer visiting a Nigerian university: if she has been trained in one of the ancient Christian universities in the west and is artistically sensitive, she will discover that both the architectural structures and the mottoes of many universities, lack spiritual depth. They neither inspire qualitative and purposeful living nor do they serve as guides and rules of behaviours. In fact, many university administrators and teachers do not know the significance of this spiritual dimension of education in turn, the students are not aware of it. Moreover, because the university requires a lot of funding, the quantity of students, irrespective of the limited number of lecturers and classrooms, is what the administrators are concerned about. Since higher number of students will mean more funding source from students' fees, the universities admit more than what they can cope with. It is not unusual to find that an average number of students in a class is sixty. In General Studies courses, it is possible to find as much as 500 students in a class. How will a teacher cope with such a huge class both in teaching and in marking? The majority of the students in such a class are bound to learn nothing in the class and the teacher is bound not to be thorough in marking. In fact, some insidious teachers would utilise such opportunities to enrich themselves: they sell hand-outs and award marks on the basis of buying the pamphlets.

Thus, the large number of students becomes double advantage for the teacher and double tragedy for the students, but with a long-term damage to the society. What a tragedy it is, when many of the courses taken in the university are thus!

Once again, one must acknowledge the reforms that Obasanjo regime is trying to put across in these areas through the NUC. By assessing the facilities of the universities, the NUC has limited the number of candidates that can be admitted by each university. Thus, for instance, this writer's university, the University of Ado-Ekiti, Ado-Ekiti that used to admit an average of 5000 students per session has been limited to 1900 students. It was by further persuasion from the university management that the NUC agreed to increase this to 2400 candidates. Similarly, the NUC conducts regular accreditation of courses in the universities to correct some of the anomalies pointed out above. However, these reforms can only be successful if they are sincerely and

faithfully carried out. The 'if' is emphasised because, this appears not to be the case as of now. To cite an instance, the November 2005 accreditation exercise was not sincerely and faithfully carried out, to any insider observer with integrity. How can the Law Faculties of the University of Ibadan, University of Nigeria, Nsukka and Obafemi Awolowo University failed accreditation, when many of the lecturers of law in many other accredited universities are postgraduate students in these named first generation universities? The insiders know the answer: these older universities did not 'settle' the accreditation panels since they were their alumni. Hence, they failed the exercise.

The degeneration in the universities necessarily reflects in the polity of the nation, since what the society requires of anybody aspiring to positions of leadership are acquaintance with the people in power (nepotism), level of certificate and bribery. Augustine of Hippo's comment is quite apt for the Nigerian society in this wise: *Remota itaque iustitia quid sunt regna nisi magna latrocina*, that is a state which is not governed according to justice would be just a bunch of thieves (Benedict XVI, 2006). The Nigerian society is equally not unlike human society in the state of nature as described by Hobbes (1981), the 17th Century English political philosopher. In Russell (1961) paraphrasing:

In a state of nature, before there is any government, every man desire to preserve his own liberty, but to acquire dominion over others; both these desires are dictated by the impulse to self-preservation. From their conflict arises, a war of all against all, which makes life nasty, brutish and short. In a state of nature, there is no justice or injustice, there is only war and force and fraud are in war, the two cardinal virtues (Russell, 1961).

The primary goal of aspiring to leadership position in Nigeria is to get money and power; you get one to get the other and it does not matter which comes first. Force and fraud are the two cardinal virtues! Anybody who wants to prevent the powerful from acquiring any of these two is simply eliminated and the law enforcement agencies can only get to the root of a criminal case that the powerful wants them to get to. The police themselves are starved of weapons and funds; only the cronies of the powerful are well fed. The politicians and the political parties have no guiding principles: hence, they easily decamp to any party that will give them money and power. The nation is not lacking in endless empty promises. Apparently, the populace approve this, as long as only their relatives are in power, or the politicians share some money among their sycophants.

The most saddening event in all these is that the Church is involved in these rots, both inside and outside the Church. Some Church leaders are sycophants of the decadent politicians because of a pot of porridge and many are even decadent themselves. The tussle for power in the Church may not be better than that in the society at large. But, the Church knows that this is a failure on its part. However, this is not the concern of this writer in this article. Rather, the concern is how the Christian Church can contribute to the reform of the society through university education.

The christian contribution to reviving university

education: The summary of the history of salvation as depicted to Christians in both the Old and New Testaments is that after successive failures to establish a relationship with fallen humanity, God turned to a particular segment of it, Israel. The election of Israel as depicted in God's covenant with the nation is not to privilege, but to service. Both Jewish and Christian traditions agree that the implication of God's covenant for the rest of humanity is made explicit in Exodus 19: 5, 6: Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,

This passage is crucial for the whole biblical doctrine of the Church (Richardson, 1958).

Israel as a kingdom of priests is to represent God to the whole world and to represent the world before God. The importance of the Exodus passage can be seen in the fact that the author of I Peter quoted the passage and applied it to the Church in I Peter 2: 9-10. Hence, the Christian Church had been commissioned and enabled to perform the task of being the light of the nations, which the old Israel had failed to become. The Church is now a kingdom of priests, representing God to the whole world.

The replacement of Israel is made possible by the event of the Christ. It was His death and resurrection that brought about the Christian Church, We, Gentiles, that once were no people are now God's people; once, we have not received mercy but now we receive mercy.

What is the implication of this for the Christian Church in Nigeria? It means that as a kingdom of priests, the Church is to demonstrate to the Nigerian society what God expects; the Church is to be exemplary. In other words, Christians are to be the light of the world; they are to be the salt of the earth (Matthew 5: 13, 14). The task

now is to spell this out in practical even if short terms in relation to the university education in Nigeria. This involves both the Church as an institution and the individual as a Christian.

To begin with the Church's contribution as an organisation, the recent involvement of the Church in establishing universities in Nigeria is a welcome event. It is hoped that the Christian ethos that had been brought to bear at lower level schools will similarly be brought to bear on the Christian universities. But universities are not primary and secondary schools neither are they theological seminaries. Hence, it is important for the administrators of the Christian universities to put our critical appraisal of government universities in mind, for as a Yoruba proverb says: Agba to jin si koto ko ara yooku logbon, that is, the bungle of an elder should be a lesson for younger generation. By now, the administrators must have known that universities are very costly to run. They must not because of this admit candidates more than what the university facilities can cope with; this will automatically defeat the purpose for which the university is established. Similarly, the qualities of teachers employed have to be carefully watched. The qualification of teachers expected to teach must not just be a born-again Christian with a higher degree. As Dockery (2004) advises, we need to encourage excellence in producing quality art, outstanding literature, great music, serious scholarship and first-rate research, while developing Christian scholars and students who can be salt and light in the academy (Dockery, 2004). It also means that such apparent non-issue as architectural design have to be carefully considered.

In modern Nigeria, it is the individual Christian that has more responsibility in reforming university education. This is because there are many professing Christians in the universities that have been critique. The question is: where is their impact? The universities are full of campus fellowships, as pastors can be found among lecturers in every Department. But, where is their testimony as Christians? The Christians, as individuals should bear in mind that they have responsibility before God to live out Christianity before the society at large. The lecturers, especially should reflect carefully and realise that, they are moulding the society of the future by their living, teaching and publication. Since, anybody who goes to the university in Nigerian society will definitely be a leader, that is a senior staff, the Christian teacher should bear in mind that, the young students before them will be in positions of power, at most in a decade after. What will the students remember of the lecturer?

CONCLUSION

The University education in Nigeria is in a very sorry state. This study has given a detailed picture of the problems. However, it has also been demonstrated that Christianity has contributions to make to reform the university system. The church as an organisation is already contributing by establishing the universities. But, the administrators of Christian university should be careful of the rot that had pervaded government schools-moral, intellectual and spiritual. The individual Christian, especially the lecturers have a lot to contribute. The most important of this is that, they should always be conscious that by their living, their teachings and their writings, they are deciding the future of the Nigerian society.

It needs to be said that the Christian contribution is a necessity if the Nigerian society is to be reformed and if Africa is to escape the quagmire of problems it is facing. Christianity is growing very fast in the continent, but so are the problems. How can the growing evangelical Christianity contribute to solving the growing problems? An avenue with a lasting impact is by helping in the education reform.

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