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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Ike, Obiora F.
Publisher	Printed and bounded by BEW IT LTD
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-15 23:36:42
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166342

Chapter Twenty

Cultism Versus Freedom and Learning in Educational Institutions in Nigeria

The Reality of Conflicts and Crisis:
We need not look far to discover that all around us, there are a number of conflicts and crisis of varying dimensions. It is not that these conflicts are new, perhaps they manifest other forms, but in our times and in our country, Nigeria, they seem to have assumed alarming and disproportionate levels, leading to deaths, agony, wars, stress and social disorder. We find these conflicts, call it crisis in the dialectic of contradictions between governments and their citizens, between trade unions and employers, between the social and racial groups and classes, between ethnic groups within our country and in the age gap of the youth and the elders.

The educational institutions reflect also these contradictions in manifold ways. Crises and conflicts have led to deaths in Nigeria between February and March 2000, of over one thousand innocent citizens in a faked religious crisis between Christians and Muslims over the attempted introduction of the Sharia Penal Code on the level of State Criminal Justice System in Kaduna State. The tensions, even as we share this lecture within the Nigerian State do not seem to lessen but have assumed greater dimensions, costing lives, leading to social upheaval and the general destruction of lives, property and peace of the *'Bonum commune'*.

But why, why these destructions, people ask? For people of good will everywhere, and for me as a Christian, this situation poses very important question: 'What should be our attitude to the conflicts in which we find ourselves and which we see around us? Should we take sides or must we always remain neutral? Does it concern us? How do we manifest it? This, in my opinion is the crux of the matter during this seminar on *Cultism versus Freedom and Learning in Educational Institutions*. Where do we stand?

The Challenge of Truth
I desire to reflect in this context on a matter, which bears great relevance to the topic under discussion. It has to do with the confusion of the present times and the lack of certainty, call it perhaps the lack of a definite and sure

orientation to guide people's lives and societal destiny. There were times, in those days, when people were sure of their beliefs and the customs of their fatherland. Today, it is fashionable to question everything including oneself. People these days postulate the position that; the old certainties are gone. Virtue is gone. Truth is gone. Shame is gone. Integrity and credibility are gone. The traditional answers seem redundant. New thorny questions occur with ever increasing frequency. Today, the vocabulary of right and wrong, of duty, and the neglect of duty, of sin or of shame has become difficult to use. Our age is confronted by decisions; which previous generations did not have to face. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that many people have rejected the traditional sources of ethical illumination. Yet a further source of complication is the new global and pluralistic environment. Culture is a thing of the past, they believe.

John Scally in his editorial to the book: Ethics in Crisis, Veritas, 1997, Dublin p.9 demonstrated that;

> *Although pluralism is not new, the scale of it in contemporary society is marked by an almost bewildering proliferation of opinions, beliefs and world views. This pluralistic ambience is potentially of great value to ethics, bringing a more vigorous intellectual confrontation with basic ethical problems and a more open and public debate about ethical questions.*[1]

In the light of the moral diversity, and the proliferation of moral languages issuing from our plural and global world, what must remain central to humanity after the fact of relativity is acknowledged? Nothing? Something? What? Several questions emerge. Could legislation cover these ambiguities in life? Are any ethical principles universally applicable? What are they? How do we cope with the contending characteristics of our age, it's evident cultural pluralism, it's rapid social change, its linguistic destruction of authoritarian and centralistic claims? This is the challenge young students face as they leave home for the first time and enter tertiary institutions. Some lose all they got from their parents in one week or semester. They imbibe the new slogans, lose their roots and end up as the bird called 'bat', neither here nor there. Some join bad company and lose direction.

> *'There is no such thing as truth', they teach even the little ones. "Truth is bondage". Believe what seems right to you. There are as*

[1] John Scally, Ethics in Crisis, Veritas, 1997, Dublin p. 9.

> *many truths as there are individuals. Follow your feelings. Do as you please. Get in touch with yourself. Do what feel comfortable.*

This is the language of the time and they speak to those who prepare the jails for the young, for those who undermine the truth and perform the work of tyrants

The Philosophy of Nihilism

Permit me to offer a modest rational explanation about the confusion and the crisis in which our society finds itself. It is an excursion into philosophy. Philosophy itself is the love of wisdom and the search for meaning in life. As '*Philos*', love, it has continued as an art and as '*Sophia*', wisdom, itself has remained a science, to provide the intellectual and rational 'humus soil' upon which theories and actions are founded. The problems of the present, the cultism existent in university premises and institutions of learning need rational explanation and receive such in what philosophers call Nihilism, from the Latin meaning, nothingness. Friedrich Nietzche the German philosopher of the 18th Century spent much of his time on this idea.

It is only through Nihilism, the strange denial of truth and the faked belief in nothing positive or good that we can explain the failed leadership of the Nigeria state after forty years of survivalist Machiavellism of political experimentation. Nihilism helps us also to explain the lack of intellectual vigour in high institutions which push students, rational beings, to a cultic condescension of drinking human blood, planning evil, and lashing out harm on people instead of healing society by a productive salvific ingenuity. And what do they gain by the sadistic infliction of pain? Nothing? This nihilism manifests itself in other untruths, which has led the Nigerian State to;

- Failed orientation of values, evident in the socio-psychological, cultural and historical realities of the country.
- Failed utilization of resources and personnel.
- The cult of mediocrity and meanness.
- Tribalism, ethnicism and religious syncretism and bigotry.
- The corruption of bribery, inducement and mistruth in the civil service, the armed forces, business and industry, educational social and cultural institutions, civil and state.
- The question of 'having more' instead of 'becoming more' in being and having, essence and existence, (J.P. Satre). This is noticeable in random acquisition of property even where the acquirer remains

dwarf in his/her personal, spiritual and intellectual development, but is rich in material acquisition of titles, honour, money, and land. How fulfilled?

- "The anything goes philosophy of life" lacking in any principles, standards or values, apparent lack of patriotism and coherent consistent principles of life.
- Financial misdirection, false investments, misappropriation, materialism and in fact inferiority complex. These and many more are banes of our society.

How else could one explain a life-style that cannot stand the test of truth, of value, of liberty and the future, except to resort to nihilism as philosophical hermeneutic, an interpretation of a paradigmatic phenomenon of cultism and its attendant scenario?

What is Nihilism?

The word Nihilism is Latin, which literally means 'Nothingness'. According to Peter A. Angeles in the dictionary of philosophy, nihilism in epistemology is:

- The denial of any objective and real ground or state of truth.
- The theory that nothing is knowable. All knowledge is illusory, worthless, meaningless, relative and insignificant.
- No knowledge is possible. Nothing can be known.
- The psychological and philosophical states in which there is a loss of ethical, religious, political, social values.
- The sceptical denial of all that is regarded as real, unreal; knowledge, error; being, non-being; illusory, non-illusory; the denial of the value of all distinctions.

Nihilism in ethics refers to the theory "that moral values cannot be justified in any way, not by reason, by a God, by intuition, by conscience, or by the authority of the state, or law". Moral values are:

- Expressions of arbitrary and capricious behaviour.
- Expressions of loose feelings and reasonless social conditioning: and
- They are worthless, meaningless and irrational.

Metaphysical Nihilism is the theory that**:**

- The universe is meaningless and without a purpose;
- Human life and its activities are of no value or significance;
- Nothing is worth existing for.

Political Nihilism is the belief that social organization is so corrupt that its destruction is desirable. Sometimes coupled with a form of anarchism whereby no constructive alternative form of organization is deemed possible, terrorism, violent revolutionary activities and assassination are advocated. Do we not experience this in secret cult activities? The Greek philosopher Gorgias propounded an extreme form of scepticism sometimes referred to as nihilism, which denied the possibility of knowledge and doubted whether anything existed as nothing can be said to exist. The stronger nihilistic version is that, nothing exists.

> *If anything did not exist, we would not be able to know it, and if we were able to know it, we would not be able to communicate it.*[2]

Having used the word scepticism, it may be useful to clarify its origins as a;

- State of doubting;
- A state of suspension of judgement;
- A state of belief or unbelief. Scepticism ranges from complete, total disbelief in everything, to a tentative doubt in a process of reaching certainty.

It is my firm conviction that aberrations persistent in our society and environment owe their origin to this form of Nihilism, which is the lack of standards, values, meaning and a philosophy of life that is positive in content. A wrong understanding of the universe, of the creator, of man shall lead to a failed action in the world. The consequence of course is clear-emptiness, nothingness. It is the origin of idleness, destruction and cultism. An idle mind, they say is the devil's workshop.

Cultism in Educational Institutions

Sr. Susan Oduah *JMJ* in her book *"Catch them Young", (1999, Markurdi, Onaivi Printing and Publishing Company)* has literally and systematically dissected the phenomenon of cultism in educational institutions. In four chapters, she asks the questions and offers the answers to the topics:

> *What is secret cultism? The dilemma of secret cultism; the devils disguise; spiritual implications; the devil; myth or reality; the*

[2] Peter Angeles Dictionary of Philosophy P. 259.

> *clues/signs of a cultist; How to get out; and prevention of membership.* [3]

She notes in her preface that:

> *Secret cultism among the youth is indeed a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the moral fabric of our society. It has spread rapidly, feeding on the youthful exuberance of students on campuses to the touts in motor parks and has finally come to settle its ugly bulk at the very doorsteps of our homes.* (Ibid, preface, p.v).

Several books and articles on this phenomenon exist. An in-depth study of these confraternities helps one discover their weaknesses, their sources of motivation, their false promises and emptiness, their need for salvation; their methods of operation and the trap set for unsuspecting youths, which has a potential to be used to set them free. Many cult members want to come out. They have discovered the futility of it all. They need help. There is a way out and there are helpers. All is not lost. This is their chance and they must make use of it. Nothing will happen to those who decide to come out. Fear is not an answer.

Doubt is not a way. An enlightenment campaign is the sure way to their real freedom. Even the Senate of Nigeria, the national assembly and the presidency of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo have joined in this anti-cult campaign. Recently, many cult members have renounced their memberships and are still in good shape. Many were lured or threatened into them. They need freedom, liberation from sin, from cultism, from fear, from death, from the devil. If African slaves in America have got freedom, Nigerian youths under domestic cultic influence need also this freedom. Let them have it. Let us help them. The time for the truth has come. This truth is based on standards. There is meaning in existence. It is a unique chance. Students, staff and other people are challenged to make use of this opportunity. A stitch in time saves nine. Opportunity sometimes comes but once. Nihilism is neither an option nor a way.

[3] Sr. Susan Oduah JMJ, "Catch them Young", 1999. Markurdi; Onaivi.

Secret Cultism

According to Sister Oduah Susan;

> *A secret cult is made up of regular youths who for one reason or another come together and take a blood vow, cutting the thumb and other acts, promising to "watch one another's back". As with any other organization, they have rules with which they carry out their activities and when failed to adhere to, punishment is meted out to the person. The large community feels that a person who becomes a member of a secret cult is stooping low but research has proven to the contrary because these persons actually think that they are achieving a level which is above that of other people.*[4]

It is a total brainwash scheme, accompanied by a show of comradeship which is of course false, which changes the ideologies of an individual, deceives them into perceived gains after becoming secret cult members, some of which include promises of:

a. Job opportunity after school.
b. Assurance of legal counsel in case of trouble.
c. Exam leakage assistance.
d. Connections to the top.

At any rate, the promises are empty. They cannot be fulfilled because they are based on falsehood. Hard work, not cultism is the road to success anywhere in the world.

Awakening from Nihilism

With the benefit of hindsight, the 20th Century, which produced great technological and communication successes for mankind, chased away various forms of diseases and made the universe a global village, yet the 20th Century failed to offer to a yearning humanity a deeper meaning of life and a deeper spiritual awareness on the truths that guide mankind. Having arrived at the moon, many people believed that they have overtaken God. A generation wrong about the mysteries of God would almost certainly be wrong about mankind. Materialism tended to replace spiritual wealth. No other century witnessed two grand style world wars costing humanity over one hundred million lives and as much as the same number in refugees and displaced people.

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[4] Loc.cit.

The 20th Century gave humanity novel weapons of mass destruction, including the atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, the napal bombs, various forms of ballistic missiles, biological and chemical weapons that made human life look cheap. As we open a new chapter in a new millennium, it is imperative to look into our past mistakes in the historical epoch just gone and make amends. The unexamined life, according to the sage Socrates, is not worth living. The world definitely must have drawn four painful lessons from the ashes of the 20th Century, namely;

Fidelity to Truth
Even under conditions of Nihilism, fidelity to truth is better than cowardice. If we remain faithful to the truth, inner liberty is obtained.

Dictatorship is Empty
The boast by dictators that dictatorship is more vigorous than 'decadent democracy' was empty. Participatory democracy is better than one-man rule. Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Idi Amin, Bokassa, Doe, Abacha, Babangida and Buhari etcetera have been exposed. Dictatorships lead to concentration camps in manifold forms.

Economic Freedom
The claim that socialism is morally superior to capitalism and better for the poor bas been proved empty and we have become witnesses. An open liberal market economy brings the best in human beings and their ingenuity more than a communist, rigid planned economic system, which creates slavery, poverty, stagnation and oppression

Neutrality is a Betrayal
Vulgar relativism and its subjective culture undermines the culture of liberty and knowledge that it is preferable to take a position on an issue than to remain neutral.

Lessons
Even for those unsure there is a God, a truth is different from a lie. Torturers can twist your mind, even reduce you to a vegetable, but as long as you retain the ability to say yes or no as truth alone commands, they cannot own you. The prison literature of our century abundantly testifies that the endless scroll of honour in our century went to those personalities who even tied on a stake insisted on their identity as free men and women, refusing to compromise truth for whatever they believed, and refusing to

cheapen their positions by just signing to keep quiet or tell a lie before they are freed. By accepting torture in the face of its alternative, we have such great names today as Andrew Sakharov, Maximilian Kolbe, Vaclay Havel, Anthony Enahoro, Nelson Mandela, Lech Walesa, and Julius Nyerere, to mention but a few.

Like Michael Novak has clearly demonstrated:

> *"To obey truth is to be free, and in certain extremities, nothing is more clear to the tormented mind, nothing more vital to the survival of self-respect, nothing so important to one's sense of remaining a worthy human being, of being no one's log, part of no one's machine, and register to death against the kingdom of lies – nothing is so dear as to hold to truth". In fidelity to truth lies human dignity. There is nothing recondite in this.*

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn has this insight in 1970 upon receiving the Nobel prize in his address: that;

> *One single truth is more powerful than all other weapons in the world, communism advancing everywhere, truth would prevail against the lie; and that those who clung to truth would overturn tyranny.*

He was correct. We are the witnesses today. We must learn today that we human beings do not own the truth. Truth is not 'merely subjective', not something we make up, or choose, or cut to today's fashions or to tomorrow's pragmatism. We obey the truth. We do not 'have' the truth. Trust owns us, truth possesses us. Truth is far larger and deeper than we are. Truth leads us where it will. It is not ours for mastering. Truth is the light of God with us. In obeying truth, a man becomes aware of participating in something greater than him, which measures his inadequacies and weaknesses.

Challenges on Freedom

One point that many ardent souls of our time most passionately disseminate, for example, is vulgar relativism, what I call "Nihilism with a happy face". For them, it is certain that there are no truths, only opinion, my opinion, your opinion. They abandon the defence of intellect. There being no purchase of intellect upon reality nothing else is left but preference, and will is everything. They retreat to romance of the will. Vulgar relativism is an invisible gas;

odourless, deadly that is now polluting every free society on earth. It is a gas that attacks the central nervous system of moral striving. This most perilous threat to free society today is neither political nor economic. It is the poisonous, corrupting culture of relativism. The people know this while the intellectuals do not. If our intellectuals better knew this, they would be sounding the alarm.

Freedom cannot grow, it cannot even survive in every atmosphere. In the wearying journey of human history, free societies have been astonishingly rare. The ecology of liberty is more fragile than the biosphere of earth. Freedom needs clean and healthful habits of one human for another. Freedom needs entire rain forests of little acts of virtue, tangled loyalties, fierce lives, and undying commitments. Freedom needs particular institutions and these, in turn, need peoples of particular habits of the heart. There are two types of liberty: One is a pre-critical emotive, whimsical liberty, proper to children. The other critical, sober, deliberate, response and proper to adults. Liberty is not the freedom to do what you wish but it is freedom to do what you ought. Human beings are the only creatures on earth that do not blindly obey the laws of their nature, by instinct, but are free to choose to obey them with a loving will. Only humans enjoy the liberty to do what we ought to do or not to do it.

It is this second kind of liberty, critical, adult liberty that lies at the living core of the free society. It is the liberty of self-command, a tolerable mastery over one's passions such s bigotry, ignorance, and self-deceit. It is the liberty of self-government in one's own personal life. For how, James Madison once asked, can a people incapable of self-government in private life prove capable of it in public life? If they cannot practice self-government over their private passions, how will they practice it over the institutions of the Republic? Can there be a free society among citizens who habitually lie, who malign, who constantly cheat, who do not meet their responsibilities, who cannot be counted on, who bribe or corrupt and shirk difficulties, who flout the law, or who prefer to live as serfs or slaves, content in their dependency, so long as they are fed and entertained? Freedom requires the exercise of conscience; it requires the practice of those virtues that include courage, courtesy, ingenuity, and respect for individual choice, a patient regard for hearing evidence on both sides of the story.

The question for our millennium is whether we can survive the most insidious attack from within, from those who undermine the virtues of our people, doing in advance the work of "the father of lies", the devil. If a people

composed of 100 million citizens are guarded by 100 million self-governing consciences, otherwise called inner policemen, then the number of policemen on its streets may be few. For a society without inner policemen, on the contrary, there are not enough policemen in the world to make society civil. Can all the sufferings of our ancestors on behalf of liberty have been endured that we might be as we now are?

Conclusion

What must we do? What we must do is self-control, self-government; self-command; openness to the future; openness to God. Nihilism builds no cities. Great cultures are built by vaulting aspiration by the Ethos of truth and love of justice and realism. We must learn again how to teach the virtues of our ancestors; the commandment of God, the teachings of Jesus Christ, which celebrate virtue, character and nobility of soul. It is a constant struggle to maintain a free and sane society on the political, cultural and economic levels. The cultural struggle will be the one that will take the stage most strongly in the new millennium. This is the challenge posed on all who are involved in the education of the youth in our country. It is a generous challenge and a fulfilling one at that. It gives joy to be called to join in this new rebirth of a new nation, a new people in a new time. It is my joy to invite you all to join the bandwagon as we begin this new journey.