

Critical Thinking in a Deeply Religious Society

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I was born and brought up by staunch Christian parents who, with strict discipline, imposed upon me their Christian values and ideals. When I was still a kid, my parents, particularly my father, read Bible passages out loud to me every evening during family devotions. This was always my worst time of the day, never one I looked forward to. My father would then proceed to give a long, boring sermon. Depending on his mood, when I fell asleep he would either ask me to stand up or kneel down, or he would flog me. He encouraged me to read the entire Bible, and memorize several passages. Right from my mother's womb, I was already tagged a Christian child. I had no choice about it. Religious and Christian garbage was forced down my throat, and I was of course expected to swallow it all without questioning what it was about. We were Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians, as most people in Southern Nigeria are. Even many in Orthodox churches more often identify themselves with one Charismatic sub-group and fellowship or another. Besides the Christians, there are a good number of Muslims, traditional religionists and animists. One can easily sense the tense interreligious struggle in the air.

Nigerians are generally religious, if not overly spiritual. We believe God is responsible for everything that exists and happens, and we believe that he can intervene whenever called upon. When there is any problem in one's personal life, family or even the nation, one simply

has to pray. And pray. And if the answers are not forthcoming, keep praying. We are always in a search for the best way to serve God and to be served by him, and so it is not unusual for Nigerians to run from one church to another, from one prayer house to another. If the condition goes from bad to worse, we even change religion. But never do we abandon religion as a whole. We believe in miracles. We believe dreams are real. We believe in such things as demons and living spirits of the dead. We also believe in local 'native doctors' and 'witches' who have power to heal and afflict, bless and curse, and to divine. It is in this deeply religious and superstitious environment that I grew up.

I, myself, became a devout Christian by the age of 17. As a Christian, I read a great deal of Christian literature, classic and contemporary, historical and doctrinal, in my private study, which I took seriously. I was also religious in church attendance and rose to the rank of being an ordained minister. And so I can say that I am sufficiently acquainted with the Christian faith, with almost all that it entails. What I have seen in all these years – 18 years of passive Christianity and seven years of active Christianity – are numerous doctrines, many of which are different, so totally different from one another, that one may ask if these are really of the same family of religion. Many practices, too, and forms of worship are of this nature. This could be baffling to a new and sincere convert who wishes to practice his new-found faith in the best way

possible. Even worse, this could prove repulsive or, to a lesser extent, silly to the young believer or other non-believers of above-average intelligence, what with the diverse doctrines and practices of the different denominations that all claim to be the one, true typification of the Christian religion, and the attendant violence that normally follows such schisms and fundamentalism.

This situation, to say the least, was quite unsettling to me, and so I set out, like a number of other inquisitive and liberal Christians, to search out what authentic and unadulterated Christianity was, as handed down by the Christ himself and his first disciples, and even as predicted in the Jewish Scriptures or the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. What I intended to do was to relate my findings as candidly as I could in a book, not minding who or what denomination might be offended. It is in a bid to avoid causing this offence, I believe, that many of these Christians who have enquired into true Christianity have failed to report their discovery, choosing instead to keep it to themselves or to a few close ones. I personally know a number of this sort of people, many of whom have become apostates themselves.

Indeed, the findings are startling. A great number of doctrines and practices of the Christian community from medieval times to the modern period are not at all similar to those held by the early Christians. In fact, when juxtaposed, the so-called Christian doctrines and practices of today appear to be outright alien, if not pagan. Some doctrines are given an entirely new meaning, others are phased out, while new doctrines that never existed, such as the doctrine of God being in three persons, the acceptance of

which cuts across almost all denominations, or the practice of infant baptism, observed mainly

by the Catholic Church, have gained pre-eminence. I also discovered that early Christianity had its own fair share of divergence among various Christian schools of thoughts and rituals. Where was the Christian love and unity? Furthermore, Christ and his disciples may not even have existed after all. Besides, the Christian Bible is a collection of contradictions.

Even more, I came to realize that the stories of this single, supreme God in Abrahamistic religions, as well as the stories of his variants in other theistic religions, are all fables, myths and legends. Altogether, they are be-

liefs of ancient, primitive, superstitious folk, not based on sound human reason or scientific knowledge. Just like their cosmology, they are baseless and, to the discerning educated ears of today, they sound incredibly ridiculous. In the light of current concrete evidence revealed by modern science for the billions of stars in our gargantuan galaxy beyond our observable heavens, and billions of other similar galaxies in a universe much bigger, grander, older and complex than the ancient prophets of our religions could have imagined, every lingering simplistic notion of a Creator God falls flat on its face. It does not take blind faith to believe in an invisible God lurking somewhere in this vast physical universe, it takes blaring foolishness.

As I grew older, I observed that everyone around me was simply convinced that the religion he or she was born into is the one true religion while all others are not only false, but also reprehensible. How convenient, I thought. Their defence for their religion was narrow-minded

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and illogical. I, on the other hand, was not judging the religion of my upbringing nor those of others around me; I was not questioning which was better or which had 'divine' approval. I was instead scrutinizing them, exploring their essence and ideologies. This was due to my appreciation of the scientific method as a young science student and my deep love for education and the pursuit of knowledge. Luckily, I went to some of the best schools around, and read some of the best books, secular and sacred alike. All these fuelled my rational mind. Besides, I had always been quite precocious. I came to discover that religion according to one definition "involves the commitment of one's consciousness to beliefs for which one has no rational proof or even sensory evidence." In other words, it demands the suspension of one's judgement. I am a rational human with a healthy dose of scepticism in my highly evolved mind. I just cannot see how I can ever be willing to live with the unintelligible. I can no longer induce a trance-like illusion of understanding in conceptualizing these beliefs, much less integrate them into the rest of my knowledge. Perhaps, the mistake my religious parents made was providing a sound education for me and a learning environment in which critical thinking thrived. But God should have known better and impeded them. After all, many of his prophets in our church prophesied with an infectious assurance that I was going to be a "great man of God."

"Uncritical dogmatic adherence to religion," wrote Professor Douglas Anele, a renowned atheist, "is the most significant cause of Nigeria's underdevelopment. The widespread belief among Christians, Muslims, and traditional religionists that strict adherence to their various faiths and rituals can solve Nigeria's hydra-headed problem is a fatal mistake. It misleads people whose thinking might otherwise be fruitful and, as a result, stands in the way of reasonable solutions to our developmental problems." To make matters worse, youths are indoctrinated and brainwashed not to accept scientific thinking even before and while they still go to school, from elementary to higher institutions.

How can an educated, rational mind fail to see that religion has never had any meaningful benefit whatsoever throughout history? It is more of a curse than blessing. Its essence has been negated by the damage it causes, given that it remains almost entirely the source of modern barbarism, terrorism and conflict. It is, undeniably, a threat to civilisation since it is obviously incompatible with scientific reasoning, world peace, freedom, civil rights, equality, and good government. It hampers the advancement of science and technology, as was seen, for example, in the dark ages. It only takes sound objectivity and sincere rationality to concur with me that religion is an anachronism in this age of Enlightenment that began in Europe in the eighteenth century – an anachronism becoming ever more pronounced in this twenty-first century. It no longer serves the purpose for which it was invented. In fact, it has had and continues to have nothing useful to offer in today's world. The 'hope' it once offered is far outweighed by the hope, safety and comfort science has brought. The sense of morality it once inculcated in the lives of people has been replaced with a far better system of ethical codes and state laws provided and enforced by various secular governments. The usually erroneous or substantially incomplete explanation to life and the surrounding world it once proffered is now silenced by the amazing, undeniable facts and predictions of science. The endearing pomp it once possessed has been quietened by modern scientific discoveries and achievements.

Frankly, a great majority Nigerians go to places of worship because they seek children, long life, good health, financial breakthroughs, etc. Were these needs met by the application of science, technology and good governance, they would not have resorted to these religious, superstitious and frivolous searches for remedies. An environment of insecurity, illiteracy, poverty, poor health care delivery, and gross underdevelopment has continued to nurture Nigeria's deep religiosity into the twenty-first century. In the same vein, religion and superstition have inhibited Nigeria's development. (A chicken and egg problem.)

One serious step that can be taken to curb these social attitudes favouring non-scientific endeavours that have continued to inhibit enhanced scientific activities and national development is the incorporation of critical, scientific thinking into education: elementary, secondary, and tertiary education. Critical

thinking has to be taught and studied systematically and purposefully at all levels of education, including, at least, the first year of tertiary education for the humanities. Even if students do not further their study of science and technology in tertiary institutions and as a result do not go on to become professional scientists, engineers, and technologists, their experience of science and technology gained from the elementary and secondary levels and the first year of their tertiary education will be sufficiently rich and relevant. Such scientific literacy will equip them to contribute to our country's development in an increasingly competitive and rapidly changing world. In other words, if all students in this developing country, including those in the arts and humanities as well as sciences, were imbued with the curiosity that characterizes scientists and the competence that characterizes engineers and technologists, all would be in a better position to participate in the solution of the indigenous problems of social and economic development.

There is a need, therefore, to imbue the science culture in every Nigerian so they have the proper and requisite foundation on which to develop our science and technology which will in turn develop the country. This is why great emphasis should be put on effective science education to help lay the needed foundation, starting from the nursery level and continuing through the primary and secondary before getting to the tertiary level. The government must design specific policies on science and technical education which must be implemented and sustained to promote science and technology curricula

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at each level of education. This, of course, must include increased funds which should be provided and properly utilized in the educational system. When scientifically and technologically literate citizens equipped with critical scientific thinking skills abound, they will be able to contribute to problem-

solving in the society. Ignorance, superstitious beliefs, religious beliefs, and other social attitudes which have forever inhibited third world countries will be significantly erased over time.

In retrospect, I consider my religious labelling and forceful indoctrination as a young vulnerable child as a form of child abuse. Nevertheless, I should be quick to thank my semi-literate parents for providing me with a sound education, which enabled me to form my own informed opinions. Arguably, 99% of Nigerian parents are religious; however, they owe it to their children to provide for them a sound education and an environment where critical thinking and scepticism can thrive. The government should also endeavour to incorporate critical thinking into school curricula and get serious about defending the civil liberties of believers, non-believers and young children. If we lived in a society of mature adults, we would allow people the respect and freedom to believe anything they like so long as they do not impose it on others. Just because we may think it is wrong or nonsensical should not matter. My problem with Christianity and religion in general is not that anyone believes it, that is their right. What I challenge is the way it has been imposed upon people and impressionable children through the use of fear, guilt, violence and the suppression of critical thinking and alternative thought. •

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