

The Problem of Separate Faith-Based Schooling in a Pluralist Society (A Philosophico-Religious Analysis of Separatist and Isolationist Ideologies of Learning)

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Abstract

Every society craves naturally to live in communion and understanding with the persons and the groups found in it. This is also in line with the aphorism that man is a 'being-with-others', as against the separatist and segregationist opinion of each person living 'for-itself'. Whereas the first denotes man as altruistic and out-reaching, the latter sees man as selfish and isolated from others around him. To live in communion with others means exercising a high sense of understanding (*verstehen*) and empathy for his environment. On the contrary, it entails indifference and apathy. To understand others can be manifested in the effort any government or any society makes to establish institutions of learning which either integrate the citizens or segregate them leading to divisions and separatist tendencies. Religious institutions can be the clearest examples of such integrative tendencies or separatist ideologies. In a pluri-religious and diverse cultural society like Nigeria, it is most pertinent to seek avenues for enhancing empathy and mutual understanding between each other, which in this paper would be analysed as a pedagogical problem.

1. Introduction

It is the aim of this paper to *examine, analyse, and justify* the pedagogical problem underlying the introduction and operation of any kind of separate faith-based schooling in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and pluri-religious society like Nigeria. It is intended that such an exposition would help in the formulation of an educational policy that would help both teachers and pupils to cope with the related difficulties of sectarianism and denominationalism in a heterogeneous society. The paper wishes to establish that sectarianism endangers two of the fundamental elements of empathic communication – speaking and listening. The other two principles of empathic communication are reading and writing. To communicate mutually is to endeavour to understand the other, especially from his own standpoint. It is the aim of this paper to establish that separatist ideologies originate mainly from the negligence of the basic principles of speaking and listening mutually to each other, especially in a heterogeneous society. The result is exclusivist tendencies which lead to conflicts and crises of various dimensions. It is advocated that efforts should be made to encourage the spirit of collaboration through empathic understanding and communication. These are qualities that can really enhance sustainable development, especially in the third world.

2. Operationalisation of the Problem

2.1 Explanatory sense-making approach

In the operationalisation of this pedagogical problem, there are both issues of explanatory sense-making and empathetic sense-making. There is the question of explanatory sense-making because: a) the use of the term 'separate' in relation to the chosen problem refers to a kind of denominationalism or sectarianism, both of which are often equated, referring to exclusion of others. It is the close relation between the pedagogical understanding of separate faith-based schooling and exclusivism that brings the explanatory sense of the problem; b) closely associated with the operationalisation of this problem is the mechanism of the exclusion imbedded in the practice of separate faith-based schooling in a pluralist society like Nigeria – which affects to a great and negative extent the growth of a child subjected to the mentioned system of education. An alternate mechanism of mixed faith-based schooling would act as a possible option or mediation between the extremes of sectarianism and exclusivism. The search for such a mechanism of balance could be attributed to the explanatory sense-making approach.

2.2 Empathetic sense-making approach

There is also an empathetic sense-making approach in the operationalisation of this pedagogical problem because its justification of the practice of separate faith-based schooling raises the crucial and philosophical issue of the balance between theory and practice in educational science. For as David Carr argues, "it is for this reason that those approaches to teacher training that belittle the relevance of theoretical reflection to effective educational practice are invariably regarded as 'deprofessionalising'" (Carr, D. 2003:51). Without this clear distinction of the problem, it would be difficult to understand or *verstehen* (Branssen, J., 2001:16165-16170) the peculiar situation of Nigeria as a pluralist society when planning its educational policy. In fact, the special

problem under consideration raises the question of the form of normative reasoning ultimately concerned with promoting the well-being of others in a wider moral sense (Verstehen).

3. Distinguishing descriptive from justificatory theories

In the selected problem of separate faith-based schooling, one could point out the aspect of *explanation* as well as of *justification*. With regard to the former, one could talk of the explanatory sense-making approach in view of the search for the mechanism to explain separate faith-based schooling as a problem in a pluralist society, which is Nigeria. Thus, while we search for explanation, we could talk of an explanatory theory. At the same time, one could talk of a justificatory theory in relation to separate faith-based schooling from the point of view of its relevance and significance for the social and moral life of the people. In the social context of Nigeria, one could talk of the ‘negative impact’ of the introduction of a strictly sectarian or denominational schooling system that excludes the majority of the children within the school age. As a result of the negative influence such a discriminatory educational practice would have on the life of the people, there is need to look for a solution – a solution that would bring about a better functional school system. It is this later analytical search for solution that raises the question and possibility of justification/justificatory theory. But before we seek

4. Discrepancies between the problem and the research or investigation

The purpose of this philosophical investigation is to contribute towards a more relaxed and congenial schooling environment for a heterogeneous society like Nigeria. Such a conducive atmosphere of learning would be devoid of fanaticism, segregation, and intolerance. From my investigation and analysis of the problem of separate faith-based schooling in Nigeria, there is no doubt that the question of ‘what’ type of education and educational policy that suits a society arises. There arises at the same time the question of the ‘why’ of the policy chosen by the government or the authorities concerned. It even questions the relevance of theoretical learning and the actual practice that teachers encounter in the field after training.

There is no doubt that there is a certain vulnerability that arises in the theory and actuality of practice, especially bearing in mind the selected problem of separate faith-based schooling in Nigeria. In this case, one would not be wrong to argue that the empirical or statistical generalisations to which much social scientific research aspires may appear unable to capture or accommodate the fine-grained particularities of real-life pedagogical association and engagement. This is a double-sided argument – having strong and weak aspects. On the weakest perspective, the trouble with the generalities of much research-based educational theorising is that they stand in urgent need of situational interpretation or contextualisation, as already mentioned with the special problem of separate faith-based schooling in Nigeria. Again, taken from the stronger point of view, the trouble with such generalities is more that they are generalisations over matters that cannot be generalised.

With reference to the problem of separate faith-based schooling under consideration, it is not impossible to introduce such a system in a place where there is an official state religion, whether Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Christianity. But to do so in a pluri-religious society like Nigeria, there might be difficulties of applying such a religious ideology into justifiable practice. In such a situation, one could rightly argue with Paul Ricoeur that ‘at this point, ideology has ceased to be mobilising in order to be justificatory; or rather, it continues to be mobilising only in so far as it is justificatory’ (Thompson, J.B. ed. 1983:225). But, like all ideologies, the one of introducing a separate faith-based schooling in a complex society like Nigeria would be all simplifying and schematic. Here, thought loses rigour in order to enhance its social efficacy, as if ideology alone could mediate not only the memory of founding acts, but systems of thought themselves (Thompson, J.B. 1983:226).

The imposition of a separate faith-based schooling in a pluralist society like Nigeria may be compared to the example of rote learning (Carr, D. 2003:55), which although produces quick mathematical results in children in the short run, does not in the long run conduce to the cultivation of a principled appreciation of mathematical or numerical concepts and relationships. Thus, in the same way, although mixed faith-based schooling in a pluralist society like Nigeria might demand more difficult learning strategies and take a longer time to actualise, it will produce better results in terms of the achievement of other valid educational goals concerned with the development of interpersonal and social skills and/or moral virtues.

The difficulty of translating theoretical education into practice, especially from the point of view of the problem already mentioned, should not discourage student teachers and mature practitioners who continue to complain that their theoretical education is utterly worthless from a practical perspective, and that any time spent learning about such theories in academic training is completely wasted. For me, the insistence of some teacher educators that a thorough initiation into social scientific theories of human nature or learning that are not just practically useless but theoretically mistaken is a *sine qua non* of professional education becomes relevant for our study.

The problem under consideration raises also the fundamental issue of the rational objectivity of an exclusive religious education in a pluralist society. It bothers on the region of human evaluation. In this sense, one thinks of the religious and moral implications of stringent indoctrination of children through separate faith-based

schooling, bordering on the possibility of valid normative argument against violent coercion, which might succeed only by begging the question in favour of the very liberal-democratic values that eschew such coercion (Carr, D. 2003:59).

5. Empathetic Communication: Empathic Listening

In line with the pedagogical problem under consideration, one can use the communicative principle of Listening as a model for promoting peace and harmony in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria. With Stephen R. Covey (2004:238), one might ask: “What training or education have you had that enables you to listen so that you really, deeply understand another human being from that individual’s own frame of reference?”

The aforementioned question simply tells us that we cannot appreciate ourselves without understanding each other as unique and different. Empathic listening insists that a shift in paradigm is very important in order to achieve appreciable result in resolving this pedagogical problem. It encourages us to listen with the aim of understanding; not just listening with the purpose of giving a reply. Empathic listening helps us not to project ourselves and personal programmes into the other people’s behaviour and life. When we project ourselves into other people’s lives, we close up in ourselves with the danger of isolating everyone who does not fit into our stereotypes. It is the idea of such internalised stereotypes and prejudices that are often translated into religiously-motivated isolationist schools and even fanatical sects and groups. Let us consider the danger that might accompany ‘separate-faith’ based schools or groups in a heterogeneous society.

6. Uni-sex school system ideology and separatism

It is important to make further clarifications in order to understand what a really “separate-faith-based” school system means in our context. There are several schools established by either the government or private organisations and churches for the sole purpose of training girls or boys according to the models and values which would help them to become responsible persons in the society. For instance, there are Federal Government Girls’ Colleges all over the country which are popularly called unity schools. Although they are schools for girls only, they are not separatist; they are not discriminatory; neither are they religiously exclusive of other faiths. The same thing applies to some model private schools which are meant for girls only. There are also some for boys. Even seminaries abound where only boys are trained either to become catholic priests or are formed to be responsible children in future. The underlying *leit-motif* for their establishment is neither segregational nor separatist in operation. The latter would have the sense of prejudice and brain-washing whereby anything outside the confines of their school or school formation is to be regarded with suspicion and discrimination. The major purpose of sending those children to such schools is not just learning and character-formation but myopic view of their religious or cultural background and orientation. This is where the danger lies in a diversified society like Nigeria, or any other country with diverse cultures and religions.

A separatist school, either rooted in a religious, cultural or even occultic orientation has a very grave consequence for the society where it operates. It denies the children brought up in such an environment from having a wide perception of the world. They might see their enclosure as the proper criterion for measuring other values, which turns out to be a boomerang for the entire polity. Apart from a narrow perception of the world, they might also grow up to be very aggressive and violent, especially to every one considered a foreigner to their group. Violence breeds violence and spreads like a wide fire. Since violence has the tendency to destroy, such children would not hesitate to consider every person or institution outside their fold as a danger that should be eliminated. It is a common knowledge and experience that the easiest targets are religious institutions different from their own. Actually, this is the reason for much religious violence in pluralist societies and communities.

There is a practical manifestation of the dangers inherent in separatism as illustrated in a sect, which many doubt their religiosity or true Islamic foundation, called *Boko Haram* (cf. *Kukah, M.H. 2010:1-10*). As a separatist ideology, Boko Haram is a typical case of an enclosure with an assumed religio-political bias. Its activities in most states of Northern Nigeria have shown how separatist ideology can disrupt the unity that should hold a diverse society like Nigeria together. Boko Haram or struggle against any kind of Western influence through education or culture drove its separatist and myopic ideology to the point of unleashing societal violence and destruction on the whole populace. A very close study of the activities of this sectarian movement shows an encapsulation of the young people to the degree of brain-washing and hatred for anything or any person outside the immediate family of the Boko Haram Sect. In the long run, it has been confirmed that its ideology makes it both anti-Islam and anti-Christian alike. It is also against democracy because the sect claims that it has a western orientation. Every kind of public and state institution – police, army, civil societies and institutions – are hated and abhorred because their orientation seem too liberal, open, and democratic for them.

In the past few weeks, there have been serial bombing incidents in Nigeria – a new phenomenon not completely foreign to the Boko Haram separatist and isolationist orientation of violence and violent destruction of any open-minded society and related culture of ‘otherness’ and mutual co-existence. From all rational indications, it is obvious that Boko Haram and similar exclusivist schools of thought – religious or political – cannot provide the

much needed ideal for progress and development in the world. The two world wars in the 20th century should remind us constantly of the ills of violence and bloodshed. According to S.O. Anyanwu (2009:40), “Wars, together with violence inherent in them and the crazy, wasteful arms build-up that goes hand in hand with arms conflicts, were some of the most obvious exhibitions of the culture of death in the twentieth century”.

7. Mixed School-system and Separatism

We have seen that schools that operate as uni-sex are not necessarily separatist, though one cannot completely rule out the danger of the current separatist tendencies, translated by the words, *occultism*, *denominationalism*, *sectionalism*, *extremism*, *fanaticism*, *fundamentalism*, etc of having penetrated their fold. However, we should not forget that aberrations are not the ideal. It is common sight almost everywhere to observe that the effort to bring children together for the purpose of learning how to live together has not always helped to achieve the desired goal, that is, proper formation. In other words, even in a mixed environment of learning, there are possibilities of building up separatist tendencies and mentalities which go a long way towards destroying the congeniality of mutual co-habitation and co-existence.

The Curriculum of Studies of public schools and mixed schools should have a programme of studies that uplift interreligious dialogue and ecumenical interactions. The Catholic Church through its document, *Nostra Aetate*, NA (1965) has enhanced the possibilities of religions relating through rational and theological discourses. In fact, NA, no.1, emphasises that all peoples comprise a single community and have a single origin. In no.2, it states categorically that the Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in other religions (Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc). It was a tremendous departure from the past, the Second Vatican Council, being really the first Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church to declare openly and without equivocation the desire to have an open approach to the other great faiths in the world. (see Sullivan, M., 2004:58). The World Council of Churches (WCC) has also made and continues to encourage world religions to live at peace with one another.

8. Suggestions and Recommendations

With the growing tendency in terrorism and fundamentalism all over the world, there is need for a school system that is open-ended and ‘other-oriented’. That would be the antidote to discrimination and separatism in any school system and society at large.

Since education is a vital aspect of building a society through the formation of its young people, separatist faith-based or ideological schools should not be allowed to become the norm, especially in a multi-cultural and pluri-religious society.

There is need for an intensified course of study based on dialogical encounter and discourse between people of different faith orientations. Such an exercise would help to reduce the tendency to ‘compel’ people to follow a particular religion or the other (cf. Sura 2:256)

The high-rate of unemployment among the youth makes them a ready tool for such fundamentalist groups like the Boko Haram who use them to perpetrate evil in the society.

The government should device an effective tool of checking the activities of Secret Societies and Cults in the schools, especially in the higher institutions of learning.

Since some of these separate and separatist-faith based schools and groups provide breeding grounds for terrorism, the government should pass an official Bill and Law, probably called ‘Anti-Terrorism’ Law to be *in tandem* with the existing universal fight against terrorism.

But all efforts towards the eradication of separatist ideologies in relation to learning, especially in a democratic society cannot be fruitful without the institution of responsible leadership through genuine and proper electoral process. This means that military dictatorship is completely ruled out in this kind of system. It means that a leadership that derives its mandate from the people provides a pedestal for an open-minded society because such a leadership would be confident and focused (cf. Newswatch, January 24, 2011, p.21).

To make progress in dialogical encounter, both Muslims and Christians need to overcome their age-long attitude of mutual suspicion: many Christians accusing Muslims of being anti-intellectual and Muslims seeing “Christians as easy prey to secularism” (Renard, J., 2005: 93)

Love remains the most effective means of tackling separatist ideologies and exclusivist attempts to block interreligious dialogue and other types of dialogues in a democratic and multicultural society. In his farewell

discourse to his disciples, Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment: love one another; You must love one another just as I have loved you. It is by your love for one another, that everyone will Recognise you as my disciples” (Jn. 13:34-35).

Peter’s address in the house of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, and what we may regard today as a pagan, he confirmed the universality of God’s love for humanity – a love that condemns isolationism and exclusivism in relating to other people. Peter said, “I now really understand that God has no favourites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears him and does what he is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35; Nostra Aetate, nn.1-5).

9. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is appropriate to argue and conclude that there is need to admit the fact that responsible teacher deliberation is primarily neither theoretical in the manner of the truth-seeking inquiries of physicists or historians, nor technical in the manner of the means-end reasoning of good crafts persons, but more a form of normative reasoning ultimately concerned with promoting the well-being of others in a wider moral sense. Teachers require not only some technical competence for the efficient achievement of more immediate instrumental goals and objectives, but also intellectual and moral resources and capacities for critical interpretation of information or knowledge claims, and for a principled and/or discriminating deployment of technique. Thus, in this present case, it is clearly not safe to assume that because separate faith-based schooling is appropriate for imparting moral values in a completely Muslim environment, that it is educationally proper to adopt such a practice – even if we endorse those goals to which practices would be effective means – in a complex and pluralist society like Nigeria.

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