Chapter 13
Prospects and Challenges of Teaching Religious Ethics in Nigerian Universities

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ABSTRACT

Human societies are quickly drifting into serious moral decadence as various ills are plaguing the world. This situation makes the teaching of religious ethics, the academic discipline that studies the morality of human act based on the tenets of various religions, a necessity. In some parts of the world, the teaching of religious ethics is booming. Unfortunately, the opposite is the case in Nigeria. Teachers of religious ethics are few in the country. This chapter investigates the reason behind this unpopularity of religious ethics as an academic discipline in Nigerian universities. The chapter exposes in great measure challenges facing teachers of religious ethics in Nigerian universities. To do this, the author employs the phenomenological approach of religious studies. The author also draws insights from religious ethics and cultural hermeneutics. The author recommends that the teaching of religious ethics in Nigerian universities should be encouraged through provision of scholarships and research grants.

INTRODUCTION

"An unexamined life is not worth living" -Socrates.

Human beings are equipped by nature with intellect. They are capable of acquiring knowledge, reflecting on that knowledge, retaining and building upon knowledge so acquired. Thus, they are rightly referred to as *homo sapiens* (wise man). This process of acquiring knowledge is what is referred to as education. Education has been and is still a means of transmitting a society's culture from one generation to another. It is the process of bringing about a relatively permanent change in human society. Education is meant to pass on to new generations existing knowledge of their physical environment. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 1975) International Standard Classification of Education defines education as comprising organized and sustained communication designed to bring about learning. Implied in the above definition is the fact that what goes on in the institution we call school is intended to be education but equally clearly education may be carried on outside formal schools. Education is a very dynamic and multifaceted enterprise. It has numerous features and aspects. It goes from the home to the wider society. It can be formal and informal. It may involve one or more individuals. In short, human beings are said to learn from the cradle to the grave.

Before the coming of the missionaries teaching in Nigeria was carried out at an informal level. Parents were the first teachers of the children and by extension their first teachers of ethics. Then, Nigerian society like other African societies was a better one. Moral standards were high, with cardinal virtues such as temperance, forthrightness, honesty, truth telling, and integrity being inculcated into individuals from childhood. Sanctity of human life was upheld. Communal living was the order of the day; with people having mutual respect for each other and fighting for the common good of the community. During this period, being traditional worshippers, the deities dictated the "dos" and "don'ts" which manifested as taboos and moral standards. The society was peaceful with minimal crime rate as deities were the custodians and enforcers of rules and regulations. Offenders received immediate punishment by the gods without discrimination.

With the introduction of formal education by the missionaries, teaching/inculcation of morals in Nigeria was carried out in a more formal setting, basically in schools and churches. Moral instruction was a prime subject. Teachers who doubled both as teachers and church workers were saddled with the job of inculcating morals. Touchstones for the determination of right and wrong moved from the whims and caprices of the gods to that of the Christian God as recorded in the Bible.

This Christian morality inherited from the missionaries was in many places embraced with gratitude. However, in many respects it has been ill-adapted to the

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