

A THOMISTIC INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL UNITY

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Abstract

This paper contends that theological education promotes national unity when it recognizes the need to construct a notion of ‘the common good’ as the basis of national unity. It examines the human person as a rational, relational, and religious being whose rationality provides a common denominator with other rational beings of different persuasions. It also examines the notion of the common good as one associated with higher purposes and a virtuous life, which can only be realized in an ideal political community. Utilizing the analytic and synthetic methods, it draws from Thomas Aquinas’ Natural Law tradition to present a compatibilist notion of faith and reason as necessary tools for the identification of the common good, which ultimately leads to due order in society. Due order is maintained in a multi- religious entity where members of each religion are equipped with the philosophical tool of rationality which encourages inter-faith dialogues, thus leading to an effective management of tensions and conflicts and an enthronement of peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Common good, national unity, rationality, theological education

1. Introduction

This paper argues that theological education as distinct from theological indoctrination fosters national unity when it espouses the notion of a common good desired by all rational beings. It asserts that indoctrination is a deliberate attempt to set up a religion as the only valid religion, discouraging other alternative religions and encouraging the suppression of all other possible understanding and criticisms of the beliefs taught in the ‘valid’ religion. Indoctrination neglects the fact of pluralism, which is a demanding factor of the twenty-first century state, and in the face of which, the call for unity becomes an urgent and pertinent task.

This paper therefore provides a theoretical background for a theological education which would foster national unity, with particular emphasis on the common ground shared by all rational beings. However, to proffer such a theoretical background imposes an initial intellectual obligation to clarify what is meant by theological education, national unity, common good and how theological education, through the recognition of the common good, can foster national unity. This paper is therefore divided into three sections. Section one attempts a definition of what theological education is; section two provides an analysis of the concept of national unity, with particular emphasis on its role in multicultural societies; and the third section examines the notion of common good, its relationship to national unity, and concludes with how theological education can be instrumental in achieving national unity, and ultimately, a peaceful and well-ordered society.

2. What is Theological Education?

As the name implies, theological education is education about theology. Education itself is the process of acquiring the art of utilization of knowledge (Whitehead, 1932). Derived etymologically from the 16th century Latin word *educare*, meaning to bring

up, train or rear, it is also defined as “the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university” (Dictionary, 2018). In pre-colonial Africa, character formation and skill acquisition were inseparably linked. Pre-colonial education was geared towards the need for sharing and transmitting cultural, religious and moral values; and the impact of these values on the work ethics of society (Mosweunyane, 2013).

Education in pre-colonial Africa was thus, value-laden and participatory. Its value-laden and participatory features were truncated by the colonial adoption of John Dewey’s theory of education which proposed a scientific and humanistic approach to education, to the detriment of the hitherto value-laden approach. Dewey’s theory of education rested on the fundamental assumption of the human person as one who is naturally good and thus, does not need a divine being to make him/her good. To explain the presence of evil in the world, Dewey simply asserted that the evils in society arise out of the evolutionary adjustment process, and such evils can be addressed by humans without recourse to any divine being. How? Through the utilization of the human intelligence. The scientific method of research is human intelligence in praxis, and is best suited for resolving all social ills (Dewey, 1998). Dewey defined education itself as an accumulation of experiences that stimulate both growth and the capacity for further growth (Dewey, 1998).

In an attempt to restore African education from a system which had robbed the African child of innovativeness, originality and creativity (Fasokun, 1999), Aliu Babatunde Fafunwa defined education as the aggregate of all the processes by which a child or young adult develops the abilities, attitudes and other forms of behaviour which are of positive value to the society in which he lives, with primary emphasis on learning through the use of the mother-tongue rather than colonial languages (Fafunwa, 1974). This presents a picture of education as a process through which a person learns the necessary tools for adding value to his/her society. Such tools are typically embedded in the social and cultural practices of a people; thus, education is a process of transmitting the culture of a people to the young members of society in a manner that ensures continuity and growth, and also ensures social control and rational direction of society.

Having defined what education is, it is also pertinent to know what theology is. From its etymological roots *theo* and *logos*, theology is literarily translated as the science concerning God (Vos, 1975), or the study of God. It is also defined as “a process of bringing to speech who I am as a person of faith and as a product of my historical, geographical, social and cultural environment” (Trokan, 2013, p. 146); and as an intellectual quest aimed at attaining the highest possible degree of intelligibility, charity and consistency in its attempt to investigate, explain and systematize the understanding of the religion of a people (Nmah, 2013); among other definitions. It is distinct from religion, in that while religion is the belief in, and worship of a superhuman deity, with a primary focus on morality and God, theology is “an investigation of the nature of Deity, deities, and divinity; an intellectual framework for religious belief and practice; (and) an organized expression of the meaning of numinous or sacred experiences” (Kraemer, 2013).

Worthy of note here is the fact that theology, which is mostly practiced by Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars is viewed as a faith-imbued intellectual activity with the aim of providing justifications for the beliefs held by the theologian whose foundational stance is a belief in what s/he is studying (Louth & Thielicke, 2020). Religious studies on the other hand is often regarded as a more comparative, systematic and scientific study of the different religious beliefs, institutions and cultures of the world due to its presentation of texts and findings in a manner that precludes religious scholars' necessary acceptance/adoption of the beliefs they study. Anthony Akinwale explains this distinction this way

Whereas the study of religion in most Nigerian universities combines the phenomenological and comparative approaches, theology, while not ignoring the phenomenological and comparative approaches, sees religion as more than a mere phenomenon. Whereas other approaches see religion as a mere phenomenon explicable by unaided human intellect, theology sees religion as a revealed phenomenon...theology is the approach of a scholar whose starting point is adherence to the doctrines and beliefs of the religion, and whose intent is to demonstrate the conceptual possibility and intellectual honesty in adhering to such doctrines and beliefs. (2007, p 141).

From the above definitions, theological education can be defined simply as the preparation of church leaders for the current and coming generations. A more formal definition is that of Diememe Noelliste, who defines it as the formation of the "people of God in the truth and wisdom of God for the purpose of personal renewal and meaningful participation in the fulfillment of the purpose of God in the Church and in the world" (Noelliste, 1995, p. 299). It is a study geared towards priestly formation, Christian vocation and is typically structured such that the student achieves a balance between spiritual formation, academic excellence and personal development. It is also a study that is deemed vital for the transmission of Christian tradition to future generations; necessary for the renewal and continuity of church leadership; essential for authentic and contextual mission of the church in contemporary times; and necessary for the interaction between church and society (Conway, 2010).

Theological education has undergone considerable change over the years, but from the Christian perspective it has focused predominantly upon imparting knowledge of the Bible in the western model, with the beginnings of an effort been made now to discern God's ways in the present world. Prior to this effort, theology was taught using what is referred to as the banking method (Trokan, 2013). This method is typically assumed as the proper method of transmitting knowledge; the teacher is the repository of knowledge which s/he transfers to the student(s) in a 'deposit' like process. This process excludes the possibility of students reflecting on the deposited knowledge to arrive at new knowledge, as aptly captured in the Humean and Kantian theories of knowledge. In David Hume and Immanuel Kant's theories of knowledge, knowledge is acquired through perception from the external world and such acquired knowledge is reflected upon to arrive at new knowledge.

A closer analysis of Noelliste's definition of theological education highlights the fact that theological education is education which is geared towards a particular purpose, which is the transformation of individuals. These individuals are transformed in their nature as social beings, to actualize a mission – the fulfillment of God's purpose on earth. This implies that theological education should produce people who have been transformed from what they were, to become persons who in turn transform and influence their social spheres of influence.

This in turn implies that rather than have a theological education structured as a continuous process of theoretical knowledge acquisition, the curriculum for theological education should be structured to create a proper ethos that integrates theory with practice. This becomes necessary in view of the fact of an increasingly connected world abounding with pluralism of cultures, religions, doctrines and beliefs. Using a pluralistic world as a backdrop, and bearing in mind that the final product of theological education should be individuals with the ability to affect their world, theological education needs to encourage critical reflection in order for proper and informed relations to contemporary issues facing the local and wider church settings. Collaboration among seminaries and theological schools is a feature of the world we live in now, but while collaboration among people of the same faith is premised on the similarities between beliefs and doctrines, interreligious dialogue suffers from a lack of common ground in the sense of similarity of faiths/beliefs.

3. National Unity

National unity is defined in various ways, and the first definition typically proffered in conversational situations presents national unity as a form of government composed by a coalition of political parties. While this definition follows the line of argument made in this work on the notion of peaceful co-existence, it does not explicate the concept of national unity itself. As a political/philosophical concept, nation unity has numerous definitions. An acceptable definition is that it is a situation where members/citizens of a country possess a mutual understanding of what makes them one country, and act in ways that encourage, prolong and sustain such 'oneness'. This does not in any way imply that such citizens act in uniformity or homogeneity; rather, it advocates that multicultural societies can achieve peaceful co-existence where each nationality recognizes diversity, and acts to minimize sectional practices which are disruptive to such co-existence (Etzioni, 2002).

It must be noted that the concept of national unity is often denounced in its conceptualization as a utopian ideal. In this sense it is romanticized as the sole determinant of peaceful co-existence in multicultural societies. While this view can be acknowledged as one that places too much emphasis on the importance of national unity, it must be noted that national unity is indeed an important and necessary condition for societal peace where national unity is underpinned by racial and religious tolerance (Etzioni, 2002). Unity makes it possible for the citizens of a nation to act as a cohesive whole, mostly through their representatives, allowing them to achieve set goals as a nation, rather than as component individuals. However, national unity is possible only where there is an underpinning feature of a common identity shared by all citizens of a nation, and can only be fostered by having a common goal.

An example of a multicultural country which rose from ‘humble beginnings’ to an enviable success story through its citizenry’s pursuit of a common goal is Singapore. Singapore rose from a third world status to an enviable position in the committee of nations, an achievement which has been credited majorly to the unity of its citizens. Some fifty years ago, Singapore had no natural resources and was tagged one of the developing nations of the world. Now, it is touted as a fully developed nation, with a high standard of living; an achievement credited to the unified pursuit of a better life by its diverse citizenry (Keong, 2013). Nigeria is also an example of a multicultural country. However, Nigerians have not been able to articulate a common good to which all Nigerians aspire towards, and this has resulted into a high level of intolerance towards members of other nationalities, ideologies, religions, beliefs and doctrines. Of particular importance to this work is the plurality of religions in the country. Comprised of citizens belonging to three main religions, namely Christianity, Islam, and traditional African religions, Nigeria has been particularly bedeviled by religious intolerance, and although it is often referred to as a secular state, it is more accurate to describe the country as a multi-religious society, judging by the overarching influence of religion in all aspects of our national life.

In Nigeria, devotion to the teachings of Islam and Christianity on the part of their respective adherents without a requisite acknowledgement of the inherent humanity of the ‘Other’ has resulted into an unprecedented level of religious intolerance. Religious intolerance or fanaticism is the inability of an adherent of a particular religion to acknowledge, accommodate and accept the right of others to live by another faith different from his own. Invariably, such an attitude is connected to the conviction that one’s religion is the only divinely ordained path to spiritual enlightenment and immortality in heaven. Consequently, a religious fanatic believes strongly that his religion is unquestionably superior to other religions, and those who belong to other faiths must be converted. An extreme form of this belief is practiced by some Islamic sects who believe that in the absence of the possibility of conversion, non-adherents must be killed.

3.1. Theological Education for National Unity

In the Nigerian context, the theologian is faced with problems stemming from cultural, religious and ethnic differences. The contemporary Nigerian nation pays lip service to the idea of a ‘Nigerian essence’, and identification is done on the basis of ethnic and religious affiliations. This has resulted into a divided society, one where each religion or ethnic group views itself as primary over others, and searches for ways/ methods of asserting primacy over others. This does not paint the picture of a society of people living in peace and harmony, and the terrorist attacks by Boko Haram insurgents can be seen as a result of having the mind-set that one’s religion is the ‘One’. It has therefore become imperative to restructure theological education in order to address the concerns of national unity. This restructuring must be one where the final products of a theological education operate on the foundation of the facts that

1. All humans possess dignity, and
2. The continuous existence of a collective of people is inherently dependent on their mutual recognition and pursuit of (a) common good(s).

4. The Common Good

As a socio-political concept, the common good is best defined as what is in the public interest. It denotes those goods/activities that serve all members of a given community and its institutions, and, as such, includes both goods that serve no identifiable particular group, as well as those that serve members of generations not yet born (Etzioni, 2015). As a normative concept with a long and contested history, there is no universal agreement on what it entails, how it should be balanced against individual goods, and if and by whom it should be enforced. Having deep religious and political roots, it is a concept which rarely receives adequate attention in contemporary socio-political discuss. This paper therefore attempts to highlight the principal lines of Thomas Aquinas' thought on the nature and constitution of the common good, with particular emphasis on why this concept is a necessary foundational concept for teachers and students of theological education, with the ultimate aim of revitalizing interest in this concept.

4.1 Thomas Aquinas and the Common Good

Thomas Aquinas relied heavily on Aristotle for his notion of common good. In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines the good as that which all things desire. Everything has a nature, which is a form to which it must conform. Everything also has an end, and the end of a thing lies in the fulfillment of its nature (Aristotle, 1941). For plants and inanimate objects, the inclination to achieve perfection is motivated by internal principles/features/properties which lead them from one state of existence to another in a predictable manner. In humans and other animals, the inclination towards perfection is motivated by knowledge and love. Knowledge is derived from experiencing the world, and such knowledge consists of the determination of things that are beneficial or harmful to them. Once acquired, knowledge enables animals to discover their position/niche in the world, and operate within this position/niche as an established being.

If the good is that which all desire, happiness is that which is sought by all. Everything is done to achieve happiness, and for humans, happiness is the final end. This is where Aquinas builds up Aristotle's position to arrive at the fact of the common good. For Aquinas, social groups are ordered by law. While laws might be coercive, they are primarily accessed through reason which dictates that humans share a common goal – human flourishing. Using this as a fulcrum, Aquinas identifies three (3) inclinations that are possessed by human namely: an inclination towards existence in a manner suitable to his/her nature (which is shared by all other things); an inclination to live as members of the animal kingdom which encompasses identification of one's position/niche, fulfillment of natural biological 'obligations' including propagation of the species (which is shared by other animals); and lastly, an inclination to live in society (which is the human beings' natural habitat, as rational and political animals, and within which humans can attain well-being) and a desire to attain perfection (Aquinas, 1947).

This final inclination is peculiar to humans because of the social aspect of their nature which dictates society as humans' natural habitat. This implies that humans cannot exist outside society. This position is justified by the fact that it is impossible to conceive of a human baby surviving and growing up outside of a community of people

to take care of its needs. If humans cannot exist outside of society, it then becomes necessary that society itself must be one that is conducive enough for humans to achieve their ends. Society is intrinsically necessary to man, and following from Aquinas' position that all things are ordered towards their ends, it follows that society also has its own end to which it is ordered. This end, for society, is the 'common good'. In the sense that society is ordered towards a particular end, and humans cannot live outside of society, the common good becomes the supreme human good, differing qualitatively from the particular goods of individual members of the society, although directed toward the same end: attaining the knowledge of God through virtuous living.

According to Aristotle, the common good consists of actions performed for the mutual advantage of all citizens of any particular society. The sole purpose of humans living in society is to ensure that they attain their ends. Extrapolating from this, Aquinas argues that the notion of the common good implies a mutually shared concept among members of society. While he asserts that this concept is found in the knowledge of God, this paper argues that it is also found in the notion of a peaceful and well-ordered society.

4.2 The Common Good as Knowledge of God/ Well-ordered Society

Aquinas affirms that God loves all human beings, and that all human beings desire one thing – the knowledge of God. To know God is to love Him, and thus, anyone who claims to love God must also love those God loves. This is further buttressed by the fact that a human being is a social being who should help others of his/her kind to achieve/attain their ends with the hope/belief that these others would reciprocate when s/he is also in need of help. Consequently, humans ought to live in mutual love, which is often manifested where people help out strangers with no hope of reciprocity.

Thus, the pursuit of the knowledge of God requires participation in public life. Since the human being's particular good is interwoven with society's common good, it follows that all actions which are inimical to attaining the knowledge of God are actions which are contrary to the common good, while actions which encourage the actualization of the common good are in the interest of all. Public, peaceful participation in societal life encourages the actualization of the common good where such participation is done with due order and proportionality.

4.3 Rationality and the Common Good

The human being is a rational animal whose rationality enables him/her to participate in the eternal laws. This participation imbues in humans certain natural basic propositions, better known as natural laws. Natural laws are known through the application of reason, but humans derive variations of laws from natural laws which are applied to existential issues of social life. However, given that all laws have their causes/source in the eternal laws created by God; it is not out of place to conclude that all laws are naturally directed towards achieving the common good. Aquinas categorically asserts this conclusion by stating that the purpose of law is to promote the common good. Since the natural law is nothing more than human participation in the eternal law, and reason is the principal tool of this participation, when a human being acts in accordance with reason, s/he acts in accordance with virtue.

Humans exist within the context of social structures. The social nature of humans is an integral dimension and society is germane to the achievement of human happiness, as

such happiness can only be attained within the societal framework. Thus, society, being the human's being's natural habitat, is the only habitat within which human being can find self-realization. In society, humans apply their rational and social aspects to achieve a domain necessary for human survival. This domain is regulated and preserved through transmission of experiences and discoveries over ceding generations. This becomes the culture through which society is sustained, and in which moral norms are delineated to ensure preservation.

The human person is characterized by rationality, relationality and religiosity (Akinwale, 2017). Rationality enables the human being to subordinate her/his appetitive and emotional aspects. This is necessary for the human being's attainment of both particular individual good and the common good. The Hobbesian transition to civil society aptly showcases this ability to utilize rationality as a tool for the achievement of both individual and common goods. The Hobbesian state of nature was populated by humans who exhibited egoistic tendencies in the pursuit of their personal goods. This egoistic pursuit was dictated by their emotions and appetites, and ultimately led to a state of anarchy, where each human rose up against the next human. Eventually they came to the realization that if the prevailing chaotic state were to continue, it would not encourage human flourishing. Recourse was then made to the rational aspect of the human nature which dictates that the continuous survival of the human race can only be achieved where there is peaceful co-existence.

Prior to Hobbes, Aquinas' natural law theory argued that humans possess the capacity to know the right way to live in society. This knowledge is attained through the human rational nature. Underpinning Aquinas' theory is the notion of the 'common good' which is shared by all humans by virtue of their rationality. Rationality imbues one with an appreciation of the fact that being human accords one a certain level of dignity. This dignity is to be respected and protected in all measures. Thus, implied in the notion of the common good is the recognition of the dignity of the human person, an inherent dignity that must be respected in the pursuit of person

4.4 Theological Education and the Common Good

The Nigerian nation is currently plagued by indices of underdevelopment, including poverty, institutional corruption, ignorance and differing shades of neo-colonialism. Multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious contexts make it difficult for a wide acceptance of theories that aid development. The Church has tried to contribute its own quota through theological education as seen in the establishment of schools, institutes and centers for lay studies and seminaries. However, it must be noted that inter-religious dialogue is only possible through rationality and recognition of a mutual common good. As Akinwale notes "peoples of divergent religious and political affiliations can (only) enter into dialogue or a common ground located on the intellectual faculty that is our common possession" (Akinwale, 2017, p. 133).

Theological education should place more emphasis on interfaith encounters which would result in mutual action towards the achievement of the common good. Interfaith/Interreligious dialogue however implies knowledge of other religious traditions, an example being the Catholic theological tradition which teaches courses in Islamic religious knowledge. We must also note that the basic fundamental to being a Christian is the 'mission' which theological education is meant to prepare for.

Theological education must thus prepare for mission praxis leading to an orientation towards the world to whom God has sent Christians. All subjects should be studied not in abstract theory, but with full awareness of the practical implications of topics studied, particularly with regards to the mission of evangelizing.

Theological education itself is renewed by learning new ideas generated by missionary praxis in the world. The church is called to work in the world, and understanding the world demands that theological education be interdisciplinary in nature. This would ensure a working knowledge of the world in which the mission takes place.

5. Conclusion

While there is no formula for what it takes to train a successful and faithful minister of the Church, it is possible for products of theological training to achieve a level of success as people of God. This would obtain where theological education has moved beyond intellectual theorizing to instilling in students a deeper personal ‘appropriation’ of their faith. This would in turn result into a love for the truth, which the Christian faith teaches is – ‘God is Love’, not only in abstract terms, but also in the demonstration of this truth. Products of such training would be persons who recognize that members of other faiths living alongside deserve no less mutual awareness and respect as other Christians. They would also know that all members of society, irrespective of their religious or ethnic affiliations are equally able to comprehend the necessity of working together to achieve a peaceful and well-ordered society. This, in essence, is the common good which this paper preaches.

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