Religious Instructions in Schools: Of What Use?

J.O. Fasoro

Department of Philosophy, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria.

Abstract
Those who clamour for the introduction (or reintroduction?) of religious instructions to the (Nigerian) schools are of the view that such an educational policy will inevitably or even logically lead to moral regeneration and hence discipline of the Nigerian youths. This same group of people have also advocated the return of some schools to their original owners, namely, the various church denominations. This, it is believed, will promote discipline among pupils and students at the various levels of their educational development. My thesis in this paper has both negative as well as positive aspects. The negative aspect holds that the (mere) introduction of religious instructions to schools may not succeed in promoting the much desired discipline and good citizenship among the Nigerian youths. The positive aspect of the thesis of the paper is that, in order to achieve the aims and objectives of a policy such as the introduction of religious values to schools, it may be necessary to compliment that programme with moral instructions. It is argued that one more thing that is required for the success of the programme is, since it is not being planned that the Nigerian leaders, especially politicians would be compelled to go back to these schools where moral and religious values would be taught, an avenue must be established through which similar type of education would be imparted to this class of people as well. In that wise, we would have a class of people who would be prepared to show leadership by (good) examples, and not those who pay lip service to the eradication of social vices in the Nigerian Society.

Keywords: moral regeneration, humanism, fundamentalism, religious instructions, justification.

INTRODUCTION
The argument in this paper goes beyond the traditional African conception of morality in which there was hardly any difference between what was moral and what was considered to be religious. Since moral rules and principles are often conceived as universal (Sellars, et al, 1970), that is to say, moral rules and principles apply to all rational moral agents with equal force irrespective of their cultures and nationalities, then the arguments in this paper are not restricted to Africa, Asia, Europe, or any geographical environment for that matter. In the traditional African context, for instance, various social, political and religious acts were imbued with certain well-defined prohibitions. Among such activities were dancing, planting of farm crops, betrothal, birth, puberty rites, death, as well as burial. Any breach of these rites was severely punished, either by the people themselves or were believed to attract the displeasure of the gods and the anger of the ancestors. In these traditional societies, according to Alson (1967:152):

...Moral rules are not thought of as obligation in their own right or as conducive in some direct non-magical way to the welfare of the community, they are the commands of supernatural being and are worthy of obedience, simply because they are his commands. The penalty for disobedience is disaster in the world and condemnation in the next.

Perhaps, the alleged traditional conceptual link between morality and religion might have informed the advocacy for the introduction of religious instructions to schools as part of their (school’s) curriculum. In that context, both religion and morality strove and claimed to prescribe ideal behaviour for their followers. Religion was said to aim at laying good standard of living and good conduct was believed to be a product of morality Bamisile (1990:2). In Africa, God is considered as the core or pivot of all religions and the giver of moral law, hence their (Africans) moral ideas and ideals take shape and determine their thinking of that God and his relation to them (Ibid).

It is however the contention of this paper that this (traditional African) conception of morality is inadequate for the simple fact that even though certain areas of convergence may be discerned between morality and religion, yet their areas of divergence are also noticeable. As it will be argued very shortly, it will be a mistake to think that the introduction of religious values to schools will eventually enhance good citizenship. Any system of morality that is hinged basically on what the scriptures enjoin will be inadequate for the moral education of youths. In addition, such a system will be socially and philosophically unsatisfactory because the justification or non-justification of human conduct will equally have to be based on the
The following, therefore, are among the reasons why it is contended in this paper that religion and morality should not be confused in the training of Nigerian youths.

(i) A person is not urged to imbibe moral ideas for a promise of either heavenly bliss or condemnation. In religion, however, the concept of salvation plays a very crucial role in the life of a believer. Sometimes the heroic mien of the devotee hinges on his hope for divine reward. The humanist does not fear his eventual loss of a heavenly home. As already argued, one could be moral without being religious as the cases of atheists, humanists and agnostics, and others have shown. Similarly, a person may be religious without being moral. Many so-called religious people have sometimes been caught to be engaged in acts that are both ungodly and immoral.

(ii) It should be observed that not all religions have identical doctrines and objects of worship. For instance, in Buddhism, no God is worshipped as the ultimate reality. Islam does not regard Jesus as the son of God or Allah, but he is seen as God’s prophet or servant. In addition, polygamy is frowned at in Christianity, but Islam accommodates it. The taboos and prohibitions that are associated with one religion differ from those of others. On the other hand, the universalizability of moral rules and principles is a characteristic feature of most ethical theories. Morality also cuts across religious barriers because whatever the religion that is professed by a person, the question as to whether or not his conduct is morally commendable or condemnable may still be asked.

(iii) A person who utters ethical statements or one who makes moral judgments, or, again, one who adheres to certain moral rules and principles, is expected to be able to justify his belief or conviction. In that case, he is expected to adduce reasons for his statements and judgments without necessarily referring his critic or interlocutor to one chapter or verse of a particular holy book, or to what was revealed to him in a dream or vision. The religious person may however ‘justify’ his belief by supporting it with certain portions of the Bible, Quran, or Odu-ifa, as the case may be. There seems to be no point at which moral reasoner may be said to have reached the end in his bid to justify his moral claims, at least in the face of new, relevant and countervailing facts. This means the same as saying that justification in ethics is an open-ended exercise. This should not be surprising since human actions and conduct are subject to the vagaries of daily experience. In addition, the ability and readiness to ask ‘why questions’ are a hallmark of moral reasoning. However, no devotee of, say, Ogun dare question the authority of that deity, the same goes for Sango. A Christian would not as ‘why should God…?’, nor would the Muslim query the actions of Allah. Since there are no such authorities as above in morality, the reasoner is free to raise questions about what is said to be either ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

(iv) The most important feature of morality, I think, is that each actor or actress is responsible for his or her actions. Consequently, punishments and/or rewards are based on individual merit and/or demerit. In addition, no moral agent is (morally) obligated to persecute others for the simple fact that he wants other people to act in the way he wants. On the other hand, a religious man may be sometimes allowed within the purview of his religious doctrine to do what one would ordinarily regard as immoral acts. These may include murder, forceful eviction of a group of people believed to be sinners or, at least, irreligious, to avoid contamination. In fairness to some religious fundamentalists, the act of soul-winning tends to condone some element of persecution of non-believers. The way in which some members of some religious groups carry out soul-winning mission leaves much to be desired. These people are not prepared to compromise anything that is contrary to the doctrines of their respective religion, be it for the maintenance of peace or for the avoidance of conflict. In ethics, however, the moral reasoner is expected to try as much as possible to adopt rational procedure (reasoned arguments) to convince the moral sceptic. He does not need to force his views on the sceptic. All he needs to do is to adduce cogent and plausible reasons, valid arguments in support of his
conviction. In religion, however, nothing less than the truth is required, and since the religious man knows the truth (perhaps through dreams, visions, revelations, and divine inspiration), he cannot accept anything less. Morality on the other hand, and as once hinted, is a product of human relations, hence it will be stupid of anyone to persecute his fellow men and women since the word ‘persecute’ or ‘persecution’ already conjures moral evil. Morality is meant to cater for the welfare of man within the society. I am however aware of the fact that the moralist may sometimes carry his theory to a ridiculous extreme thereby misusing such ethical term as good, bad, right, wrong, ought, ought not, and the rest. But my thesis is that, in such a case as this, it is the said moralist that may be accused of not applying moral concepts correctly, which is different from what obtains in the religions where a single person may ‘see’ what the entire members of the community or society may not ‘see’.

The objectivist theory, so far from minimising the use of force to settle moral conflicts, can be, and constantly has been used to justify it. It is no accident that religious persecutions are the monopoly of objective theorists Nowell-Smith (1954:4).

Of course, one possible area of conceiving morality and religion as two sides of a coin borders on human welfare. It may be argued that both morality and religion cater for human welfare. Even here, this submission can be maintained only if it is argued that religion is a social phenomenon which is meant to cement good relationship among the people, both adherents and non-adherents. This social phenomenon must then be devoid of anti-social tendencies such as persecution, intolerance, as well as victimisation as currently being perpetrated in Nigeria by the Boko Haram sect. While morality may be said to be humanistic, religion on the other hand is supernatural. Since morality is here construed as a social phenomenon, then it should be expected that there are acts that are believed to be either morally right or wrong without reference to divine retributions, laws or injunctions. This act (e.g. murder, fornication, theft etc.) is said to be morally wrong because the moral reasoner believes it to be so, and he can adduce objective reasons for why the act is believed to be wrong without citing any authority, whether secular or sacred. Morality as a product of social relations begets certain values and obligations. However, in his persistent search for a peaceful, harmonious, and commodious life, man creates certain values for himself and at the same time endeavours to recognize similar values in others. One of such values may be said to be his invention of or adherence to particular religious ideas and ideals. But the fact still remains that not every one includes religion as part of his or her values, and those who do not practise one religion or the other cannot be said to be more involved in anti-social activities more than the devotees of the various religions. While morality is man-made, religion is either man-made or culturally imposed.

It may then be argued that morality and religion are important aspects of human existence. Perhaps. But the important question is whether or not one can exist, or at least be conceived, without the other. In other words, it may be asked whether moral values can exist without some religious props in the education of youth. This paper believes that this is possible. On the other hand, can the teaching of religious doctrines alone achieve the much sought discipline among Nigerian youths? This paper does not think so.

The significance of the research is to show that reintroducing religious instructions in schools in Nigeria will not solve the problem of moral decadence among the youths. It is then argued that what is needed is (a) leadership by good example; and (b) the inclusion of moral instructions in schools to complement religious instructions.

Religious Instructions in Schools: Of What Use?

From our discussion thus far, it may now be argued that moral instructions and religious instructions may be combined in the education of youths in the sense that it is assumed that a truly religious person may not find it too difficult also to imbibe moral virtues. The assumption is based on the fact that the prohibitions in the religion as well as those acts believed to be morally wrong constitute areas of ‘don’ts’ in both institutions, and they are meant to promote good human conduct. The religious man, for instance, will try to abstain from those acts which he believes to have the likelihood of attracting divine displeasure even if he does not attach equal importance to the contempt that is likely to follow his being involved in mundane immoral acts. He may therefore strive to act morally because of his belief that God or the gods is/are watching him. Similarly, once the moral agent is rationally convinced that a particular act is bad, it will be morally inconsistent of him to indulge himself in that act. It is not, again, being argued here that the religious man does not reason about his conception of good and bad acts, right and wrong decisions, however, our thesis is that if and when the conclusion of his reasoning conflict with what is contained in the holy books on the same matter, he may accord more importance or weight to the sanctity of the latter. Secondly, the prominent roles which vision, miracle, dream, and revelation play in the religious man’s conception of such ethical terms as good, bad, right, and so on, appear to negate the process of objective justification of human actions and conduct. This is the more reason why it is argued in this paper that both religion and morality must be allowed to complement each other in the...
education of the Nigerian youths. This suggestion is however different from saying that by introducing religious instructions to schools as part of their curriculum, the dream of producing disciplined youths will be realized. On the contrary, unreasoned religious indoctrination may only lead to bigotry, fanaticism and intolerance.

The solution to contemporary Nigerian social, economic, political, as well as religious problems does not lie only in going to churches, mosques, or shrines. In addition, it may safely be said that one of the few things that Nigeria and Nigerians have in abundance today is religion. Contemporary Nigerian problems stemmed from immorality rather than irreligiosity. These problems are self-created and self-imposed or self-inflicted. And since it was not God that created them in the first place, he may not be the only one to solve them.

If my argument that Nigerians already have an abundance of religions, and that God did not create the present day Nigeria’s social, economic, political and moral problems, has any substance, then the questions are: Why the proposed introduction of religious education to schools since Nigeria already has abundance of religions and religious people? What is to be done to those who are already out of school and who do not intend to go back there? The bane of the country’s problem is traceable to bad leadership. The country is in dire need of people who are prepared to lead by examples. If it is contended that the introduction of religious instructions to school will enhance the much desired discipline among the youths, then, what type of education programme is to be designed for the Nigerian leaders, both civilians as well as members of the armed forces and the police? Which of the numerous religious doctrines are to be adopted and why? Religions of the world do not have identical doctrines or injunctions. They do not also emphasize identical values. Will the advocate of religious instructions in schools allow the inclusion of African and oriental religions? It cannot be denied that one basic feature of almost all known religions is absolute conformism. They share this feature with traditional African moral education. In the religions, nothing can be more authentic than what is contained in the holy books, and any attempt to circumvent the contents of these books will be resisted by the devotees of the various religions. Indeed, any interpretations and translations that are at variance with what these same scriptures enjoin are also met with stout resistance no matter the level of education of such interpreters and translators. In the same vein, conventional morality tends to promote cultural and moral conformism. In that wise, the moral agent does not discover what is right or wrong, rather he conforms with what his culture takes to be right or wrong without questioning it. This, one is compelled to infer, must be the type of morality which the advocates of the introduction of religious instructions to schools believe to be derivable from such policy. In the contemporary heterogeneous, highly urbanised, technological age, that type of education is, to say the least, patently anachronistic.

On the other hand, critical morality (that is, the type of morality which this paper opines should be combined with religious instructions in schools) does not require the support of religious or metaphysical assumptions for its validity. For instance, such contemporary meta-ethical theory as contractarianism and rational choice may be seen as an antithesis of conventional morality and religious dogma. The readiness of the moral agents to form a contract or pact requires calculated reasoning to determine the benefits derivable from such a joint effort. Here, the moral reasoners (contractees) do not need religious instructor in their deliberation on what ought to count as their overall interests. All they need is a careful consideration of the probable social effects if their actions.

CONCLUSIONS
It is our contention in this paper that rather than passing the bulk, moral decadence in the Nigerian society is traceable to bad leadership which, in the end, begets bad followership. The youths who are always accused of anti-social activities are all products of an already morally decadent society. After all, the leaders and elders to whom the youths ought to look up to for character formation are themselves morally bankrupt! In sum, therefore, the current call for the introduction of religious instructions to schools tends to point to one basic fact, namely, that such government’s programmes as Ethical Revolution, War Against Indiscipline and Corruption (WAIC) and others like them have been dismal failures!

REFERENCES

