

**CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN
SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA**

Samuel Peni Ango

Introduction

One of the much discussed issues in Africa, especially after independence from colonial rule in many countries, has been academic freedom. One of the most significant of such discussions appears in a compendium edited by Mahmood Mamdani (1993) entitled *Academic Freedom in Africa*, in which issues of the influence of capital, historical processes, autonomy and democracy, as well as funding, on academic freedom in Africa are dealt with. Moreover, an Africa Watch (March 1991) report cites cases in 14 African countries of “summary executions of academics and students; torture; arbitrary arrest and prolonged detention without charge or trial; imprisonment under conditions that are cruel and degrading,” and other forms of persecution (pp.2-3).

Restriction on academic freedom is not uniform across Africa.

Bubtana (2006:6), also notes that academic freedom is “largely dependent or linked to the general freedoms prevailing in national political systems,” being more guaranteed by democratic systems and more restricted by non-democratic ones.

While various scholars in different African contexts have addressed the issue of academic freedom, there seems not to be any significant discussion of academic freedom in Christian higher education (institutions or departments that provide education from Christian perspective), or relating to students’ classroom experiences, though many pedagogical theories exist in the world that try to place students at the center of the teaching-learning process.

This paper looks at academic freedom for students in the classroom among Christian seminaries or departments of religious studies in universities in South Western Nigeria, while citing some contributions of radical pedagogy, so as to offer a more student-centered perspective to the discussion of the subject.

While not directly addressing academic freedom, the works of some Christian scholars around the world point to its need in Christian higher education. Holmes' (2001, p.117), declaration that “we need Christian thinking not only about foundational questions, but also about points of tension between faith and knowledge, about theoretical concepts within a discipline, about the ethical issues new knowledge poses...in the twenty-first century” will certainly need academic freedom to adequately address. The suspension and eventual departure of Laricia Hawkins in February 2016 from Wheaton College, Illinois, for expressing that Christians and Muslims share the same God, though she also expressed recognition of the differences between the two religions in questions of salvation and the person of Christ (www.npr.org/sections/the-two-way/2016/02/07/465916095/professor-who-said-christians-muslims-share-a-god-is-leaving-chr), also indicates that academic freedom in Christian higher education needs more serious thinking about.

Christians also tend to express caution about the extent of academic freedom.

In spite of the cautious approach to academic freedom by Christian scholars, however, some radical educational ideas that have gained currency over the years compel the attention of Christians. Of significance to this paper is that they lay great emphasis on students' freedom in the classroom.

Radical Pedagogy

One of the various forms of humanistic education is Radical-Critical humanistic education. It is often identified with the radical education or critical pedagogy of Freire, Apple, Giroux and others. They insist that pedagogy should confront poverty, crime, homelessness, drug addiction, wars, ecological crises, suicide, illiteracy, discrimination against women and ethnic minorities, etc (Aloni http://eepat.net/doku.php?id=humanistic_education). Paulo Freire's work is considered in this paper as a good example of radical pedagogy.

According to Freire, the process of liberation requires the active reflection, through critical and liberating dialogue (2010:65), which can only be achieved through co-intentional education between teachers and students; leadership and people (2010:69). This education must be freed from its "narration sickness" in which "the teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable" (p.71). The contents of the teacher's narration are detached from the experience of the students.

This Freire calls the banking concept of education in which the students only participate as receivers, filers, and store-keepers of the deposits (p.72). The students thus lose their humanity, creativity and power to transform. In contrast, liberation education must remove the contradiction between teacher and students through reconciliation, whereby both become simultaneously teachers and students (p.72).

According to Freire, “Those truly committed to liberation must... abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of problems of human beings in their relations with the world.” (p.79). This problem-posing education leads to consciousness and intentionality, rejecting communiqués and embodying communication. This creates a situation of dialogue between teachers and students.

.

Focus on Students' Classroom Experience

A lot of literature is devoted to how students should be treated in the classroom. For example, Pazmino (1992:140) says categorically: "Every teacher should seek to influence students, but not to manipulate them."

Academic Freedom for Students in the Classroom in South Western Nigeria

The following questions guided an opinion survey among teachers and students of three departments of religious studies of public universities, and three seminaries in South Western Nigeria:

1. What is the extent of academic freedom allowed to students?
2. What are the teachers' attitudes towards critical responses to the information or instruction they give students?
3. How do students perceive their liberty to interact with information or instruction by teachers?
4. What are the chances of radical pedagogy gaining general use as an approach in the classroom in Christian higher education?
5. What are the likely effects of the current state of academic freedom and radical pedagogy on classroom experiences in Christian higher education?

Research Design

An opinion survey was used to find out the extent of academic freedom for students in three departments of religious studies of universities and three seminaries in South Western Nigeria. Two questionnaires containing six propositions each were used to respectively obtain the opinion of teachers on the extent of freedom students should be given in the classroom, and students' perceptions of the actual freedom they receive. For each proposition, four options were provided on a Likert scale as A. Strongly Agree, B. Agree, C. Disagree and D. Strongly Disagree.

The population of the research was made up of all teachers in religious studies departments of University of Ibadan (UNIBADAN), University of Ado-Ekiti (UNIADO), and University of Ilorin (UNILORIN); and all teachers in the Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso (NBTSO); ECWA Theological Seminary, Igbaja (ETSI); and UMCA Theological College, Ilorin (UMCATC); as well as all 400 level students of the departments of religious studies of the three universities, and all 400 level students in the seminaries. While a purposive sampling technique was used for the teachers, whereby all teachers that were available received, filled and returned the questionnaire for teachers at their convenience; a block sampling technique was used for the students, whereby all 400 level students present in a classroom or chapel assembly were given the questionnaire for students to fill and return on the spot. Twelve teachers at UMCATC, 12 at ETSI, 27 at NBTSO, 10 at UNILORIN, 6 at UNIADO and 3 at UNIBADAN filled the questionnaire for teachers. Thirty students at UMCATC, 49 at ETSI, 30 at NBTSO, 49 at UNILORIN, 30 at UNIADO and 36 at UNIBADAN filled the questionnaire for students. Simple percentages were used to analyze the responses.

Findings

While the overall statistics for South Western Nigeria indicate that teachers in Christian higher education favored freedom of students to reject any information given to them, it was majority of teachers in the universities and NBTSO who actually favored such freedom, while the majority of teachers in UMCATC and ETSI did not.

Majority of teachers in all the universities and the seminaries favored freedom of students to present alternative information to that given to them by teachers.

Majority of teachers in the universities and the seminaries agreed that students should be free to disagree with the teacher's declared or implied religious beliefs.

An overall majority of teachers agreed that students are free to demand a different approach to teaching and learning, but in UMCATC and UNIBADAN the majority of teachers did not agree.

While majority of teachers in the three seminaries disagreed that general academic freedom will lead to decline in learning, majority of teachers in the three universities agreed.

While majority of teachers in the three seminaries disagreed that general academic freedom would erode the teacher's authority, in UNIADO opinions were evenly split, and the majority in UNILORIN and UNIBADAN agreed.

Apparently, while teachers in the seminaries were more skeptical about allowing academic freedom to students, they thought doing so would neither lead to decline in learning nor erode teachers' authority. On the other hand teachers in the universities were more positive about allowing academic freedom to students, but thought doing so would both lead to decline in learning and erode teachers' authority. This may be because universities have had a longer history with the struggle for and complexity of academic freedom, hence their acceptance of its importance but skepticism about its results; while the seminaries have not confronted the issue much, hence their skepticism about its importance, yet hopefulness about its results.

Overall, a slight majority of students in South Western Nigeria disagreed that they felt free to reject any information presented to them by teachers, though perceptions were evenly split in UMCATC, and only a slight majority in UNIBADAN agreed, indicating that the overall picture of students' perceptions tended to contradict teachers' opinions.

Majority of students in UMCATC, ETSI and the three universities agreed that teachers encouraged them to present alternative information to that presented to them by teachers. In this there was overall agreement between teachers' opinions and students' perceptions, though majority of students in NBTSO disagreed.

While majority of students in UMCATC, ETSI and UNIADO agreed that they felt free to disagree with the teacher's implied or declared religious doctrine, majority of students in NBTSO, UNILORIN and UNIBADAN disagreed. This indicates complexity in the perception of students about freedom of religious expression against their teachers' views, though majority of teachers had expressed the opinion that students were free to reject their implied or religious doctrines.

Majority of students in UMCATC and ETSI felt free to demand a different approach to teaching by their teachers, but majority in NBTSO, UNILORIN and UNIBADAN disagreed, while perceptions were evenly split in UNIADO. Again here there seemed to be an overall tendency of contradiction between the perceptions of students and the opinions of teachers.

Majority of students in all the seminaries and all the universities disagreed that general academic freedom would lead to decline in learning. Students' majority perceptions agreed with seminary teachers' majority opinions but disagreed with university teachers' majority opinions.

Again, majority of students in all seminaries and universities disagreed that general academic freedom would erode the teacher's authority, which agreed with the opinions of majority teachers in all seminaries and UNILORIN, but not in UNIADO and UNIBADAN.

While the data represents a general complexity of perception about academic freedom among students of Christian religious studies and seminaries in South Western Nigeria, there seemed to be a general tendency towards contradiction between students' perceptions of the academic freedom they received and teachers' opinions of the academic freedom students should get. There seemed to be an overall feeling among teachers and students that academic freedom is important, though skepticism existed among some teachers about its usefulness, and among most students about its availability. This is probably because in Christian higher education the subject of academic freedom had not been much discussed, and may explain the existence of heterogeneity of perceptions and opinions.

Implications for Christian Higher Education

Christian higher education in South Western Nigeria reflects desire for, as well as caution about, academic freedom for students in the classroom among Christian intellectuals. However, there is an overall feeling among students that academic freedom in the classroom is not much available. While some caution in granting academic freedom to students in the classroom is advisable, the ideals of radical pedagogy of empowering students to contribute to knowledge are not likely to be much realized with the current level of freedom, and this will not be favorable to rigorous scholarship among Christians.

Conclusion

While some resistance to academic freedom in the classroom may be justified in terms of protecting useful orthodox systems against destructive doctrines, such protection may best be served when resistance is done with objectivity and rigorous scholarship.

