

OUTLINE

ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN THE CLASSROOM, RADICAL PEDAGOGY AND CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH WESTERN NIGERIA

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Introduction

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.

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.

Academic Freedom in Christian Scholarship

While not directly addressing academic freedom, the works of some Christian scholars around the world point to its need in Christian higher education.

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 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. 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).

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.

Academic Freedom for Students in the Classroom in South Western Nigeria

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.

Findings

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.

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.

Implications for Christian Higher Education

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.