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Søren Kierkegaard's Concept of Dread: A Panacea to Nigeria Predicament

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Abstract

Effort has been made in this study to examine Soren Kierkegaard's concept of dread as a panacea to Nigeria predicaments. Kierkegaard's existentialist thought is theistic. It pictures man as the central being from whom all things exist. Things are because he is. Obviously, Kierkegaard is a subjective and political thinker. Freedom compels man to assume responsibility for his life; that is to take his destiny in his hands. For Kierkegaard, the only solution to political crisis of his time is religion. Thus, he highlighted the importance of religion in solving political crisis. Christianity is not a matter of giving intellectual assent to verbal propositions but is a challenge to live a special kind of life. It is a matter of life-view, not world-view. As such it is real only when it is lived. Part of the numbness of the established church in the face of modernity is that it has allowed the fundamental ethical quality of faith to be dissolved into theory, and has accommodated Christianity to both philosophy and poetry, turning the question as to the truth of existential witness into a debate about opinion. Consequently, this view of life has deeply affected man in his relationship to economy and politics of the present society. This is the case because man in his attempt to amass the material things of the passing existence seems to be oblivious of the temporariness of the present life. As a way of handling this topic adequately well, the researcher employed the analytic philosophical reflection.

Keywords: Dread; Predicament; Panacea; Crowd; Religious

Introduction

Dread, as Kierkegaard opines, produces simultaneous feelings of necessity and freedom. Freedom and responsibility became a very important topic among all the philosophers of existence.

Freedom can usefully be linked to the concept of anguish, because my freedom is in part defined by the isolation of my decisions from any determination by a deity, or by previously existent values or knowledge (Internet).

Freedom, therefore, entails something like taking responsibility for myself and for my actions. For Sartre, we are what we make ourselves. If such is the case, we have no one to blame for what we are, for our predicaments, for our woes except ourselves

Freedom for man is tied to choice. It is in making a Choice that freedom is realized and is thereby concretely actualised. Freedom compels man to assume responsibility for his life; that is to take his destiny in his hands. Man is a being that is condemned to be free, to employ the words of Jean Paul Sartre.

Kierkegaard's Concept of Dread

Dread plays an essential role in Kierkegaard's thought in that it was one of the factors which deliver him from Hegelianism. Kierkegaard, sees dread as a 'sacred melancholy' and describes it as preserving man from total corruption, and sees in it the proof of our heterogeneity in relation to the whole of nature. He read Schelling, who insists upon the giddiness, the anguish of God (Wahl; 1969). As dread is linked to the idea of possibility, it is also linked to the idea of ambiguity. What we find in dread is a kind of power by which we are attracted and repelled; it is "antipathetic sympathy and a sympathetic antipathy" (Kaufmann; 1975). There is the phenomenon of attraction and repulsion because of uncertainty of the future. We want the future to come if our dream will come true.

What appears here is essentially the idea of ambivalence and at the same time the idea of dialectic. One is drawn towards something which one cannot and does not wish to look at which at the same time one cannot look at.

Dread produces simultaneous feelings of necessity and freedom, and at the same time we are seized by an anticipatory feeling of repentance as it were, because we see ourselves as having committed the act that we did not want to commit. "And all that remains for us to do, even before the act, is to surrender to remorse" (Wahl; 1969). What is to be done with dread? In what way can it be of use to us? 'One must', Kierkegaard tells us, 'school oneself in the most terrible possibilities' He calls himself, 'the student of possibilities.' "We must anticipate our destiny by means of dread, and welcome every terrifying experience that comes our way. Dread corrodes everything belonging to the world finite and lays bare all illusion; it extirpates that which is mediocre in us" (Wahl; 1969). Thus, to know oneself to the utmost, one must have experienced dread to the utmost, to the point of death and annihilation. Dread moulds the individual by destroying all his finitudes; it educates him in an infinite manner. And it is in dread that we demand the presence of God. It is the moment when we believe ourselves completely lost that aid arrives.

Dread according to Kierkegaard, allows us to understand how man has sinned in his freedom, while at the same time allowing us to hold that man is determined. There is also need to differentiate dread from fear. Dread is not related to any definite thing. But fear is fear of something definite. Dread is related to the future. Dread is next day, the anxiety of what the next day holds. Dread is anxious possibility of being unable; Kierkegaard calls it "the nothingness of possibility" (anything can happen). Dread is related to present, future, possibility, freedom and the consequence of decision for the future; in the present, the self faces a future into which the self can freely move. Kierkegaard sees our life as leading irretrievably to death. Death is a fact and brings urgency to our life and causes dread, despair and anxiety. All these can be solved through a leap of faith, where we surrender our lives to God and remain temporally and eternally secured in his hands.

Nigeria Predicament

There is no nation without crisis, but the crisis of Nigeria seems to be taking the lead. The write does not mean to sound pessimistic, but to state a fact. According to Mike Uzochukwu; "Nigeria's biggest problem is corruption" (Uzochukwu; 2015). In Chinua Achebe's line of thought, "anybody who can say that corruption in Nigeria has not yet become alarming is either a fool, a crook or else does not live in this country" (Achebe; 1983). As regards the reason for this situation, Achebe states that;

Corruption prevails in Nigeria because the system under which we live today makes corruption easy and profitable; corruption will cease when it is made difficult and inconvenient (Achebe; 1983)

Economic predicament

Kierkegaard looking at the economic situation of Europe made the assertion that "Europe is on the road to bankruptcy"(Gaarder; 1993). The same thing could be said of economic situation in Nigeria. Nigeria currently is passing through recession.

One can quickly and rightly say that Nigeria is on the road

to bankruptcy if her current economic crisis is not addressed as quickly as possible. "The Nigerian economy is waiting for Armageddon, the judgment of God or Allah – the day all the blessed will move to the right hand of the glory of God and Allah and Christ and Mohammed, the rest of sinful humanity will be condemned to the hottest fire of damnation and hell"(Cole; 2016).

Admittedly, one of the ways to curb this menace which has eaten deep into the fabrics of our nation is to minimize government waste. For instance, the former governor of Anambra State, His Excellency, Mr. Peter Obi, in his speech titled "Cutting cost in governance" at 2016 platform organised by Covenant Christian centre on Nigeria's independence Anniversary, on October 1, 2016, narrated how he was able to save over N75b for Anambra state before he left the office.

According to Daily Trust newspaper, he urged governors to remove the Office of the First Lady which according to him gulps almost N2billion on monthly basis. Furthermore, he stated,

"It costs an average of N2 billion to run the office of the First Lady in every state in Nigeria. Multiply by 36...Nigeria can still function on its income if only we learn how to cut cost...We need to cut the cost of governance. No governor needs a house in Abuja; governors don't live in Abuja"(Obi; 2016).

He stopped people from following him to conferences; he stopped the killing of cow every day in the government house for their meals, since these are excessive expenses on the government coffers. He channelled the money in developing other sectors of economy. He didn't follow the ways of his predecessors which were harmful to our economy despite people's criticism that he is a stingy person. He was never swallowed up in the crowd and was able to achieve a lot for Anambra state so much so that Anambra state was not among the states that owe the federal government or any organization. He spoke like an existentialist philosopher, in the sense that he believed that we have to make a choice amidst economic and political crises or we remain the way we are. The onus of making Nigeria better depends on us. Thus his word reads:

Take back your country, this country belongs to you, it is your future that they are toying with. You must take it back from them, it is not their country and you must take it back from them. And how will you take it back from them? When they invite you, go to your local government and ask the local government chairman who receives N100 million every month, what does he do with it? (Obi; 2016).

Political predicament

Achebe, in his book, "The Trouble with Nigeria" rightly pointed out that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership." He pointed out that "there is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character, there is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else," but leadership (Achebe; 1983). There is nothing to write home about Nigeria politics. Politicians are in the offices they occupy not for the good of the people, but for their own selfish interest. During campaign they make unending promises to the people, once they win, the people that voted for them will be forgotten issues. Very few know why they were given mandates by the people. It is "politics of the stomach" and not "politics of issues"(Ozumba; 2010).

The absence of some necessary leadership qualities, such as selflessness, committedness and uncorruptedness have enormously contributed to the socio-economic and political embarrassing situation that is staring Nigeria at the face. We saw before the present civilian dispensation the depth of moral decay in the society, we were all accusing the military for the moral decadence in our society, but today we have civilians in control and what do we see, but heightening crescendo of crime wave, lawlessness, murder, political thuggery, acrimony, distrust, perfidy, chicanery, dishonesty, embezzlement and other subversive activities and intrigues (Ozumba; 2010). These are carried out by people who profess to know God and are occupying prominent positions in their church and mosques. You begin to see the relevance of Nietzsche's words that "God is dead and we are His murderers." Men have killed God in their hearts and now only move about with a hypocritical, pretentious gait that is devoid of the spirit of true worship. Many Nigerians today are still sulking at the level of what Kierkegaard calls the aesthetic stage of man's development. At this level, men are only interested in the gratification of fleshy or sensuous desires. This is why at the federal, state and local government levels of governance all we find is craving for material acquisition. Until Nigerian politicians traverse the aesthetic, and the ethical stages to attain the religious or spiritual stage where they have personal encounter with the saviour and a change of life, we may never begin to give God the first place in our affairs and the welfare of the masses the important place it deserves. The failure to transcend the aesthetic stage of life is connected by Kierkegaard with the whole question of suffering and its place in human life. "What we have now is assembly of politicians with preponderance of robbers and looters who have no personal, living relationship with the creator of mankind. And as long as this state of affairs continues we may never get out of our present political doldrums and instability" (Ozumba; 2010).

Religious predicament

Nigeria is known as the most religious country in the world. That notwithstanding, atrocities prevail with increase in the number of churches being established on daily basis by the so-called "men of God." These men of God are wolves in sheep clothing looking for people to devour. These men of God drag God's name to the mud. A good number of them have been caught in compromising situations. When caught, they blame it on the devil. They pretend to be what they are not. One, after looking at what our religious leaders do, will not but subscribe to Kierkegaard's view that people should have a personal encounter with the divine, instead of looking up to the leaders of the church because people can deceive. It was on the account of deceptive character of the leaders of the church that Kierkegaard criticized public worship. He saw these leaders as poet on the stage entertaining people. He took his own advice and ceased to attend public worship, and when asked on his deathbed if he wished to receive communion replied that he would only do so if it could be administered by a lay person (the method of paying the clergy being one of the chief themes of his attack) which was not possible, of course, permitted. At the same time it has to be emphasized that he constantly reaffirmed his faith in God throughout the attack and during his final illness. Furthermore, Nigeria currently is facing a lot of religious

crisis. Some Muslims, under the guise of Boko Haram have sworn an oath to keep this country in tension by carrying out several nefarious attacks on innocent citizens, especially Christians. On 29th December, 2011, for instance;

a Christian couple and their one-year-old son were shot dead by Muslim gunmen in a 'religious attack' in Nigeria (Internet; 2011).

Many churches have been bombed and burnt down by these religious extremists called Boko Haram. Boko Haram implies that 'Western education is forbidden.' The aim of this religious sect is to impose strict Sharia law in Nigeria. To get this task accomplished, they have killed millions of people, burnt down churches, kidnapped and raped women and other nefarious activities they engage in. These people have been brain washed that they are fighting a holy war. That is, they are fighting for God.

Kierkegaard's existentialism, in the main, was a reaction to what Kierkegaard saw as the emptiness of the major Christian agencies of his time. Whether Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, Presbyterian and so forth, were seen as different unsuccessful attempts at objectivising Christianity. The attempt was to showcase Christianity and present an objective pattern through which Christianity can be understood and practiced. All adherents were to follow the doctrinal interpretations of their different denominations as the only way of attaining salvation. Kierkegaard was averse to this way of looking at Christianity because it did not take into cognizance the essential nature of Christianity. Christianity for Kierkegaard is a subjective experience which has nothing to do with the institutional and denominational objectivization which was the normative approach adopted by the interpreters of the Bible. For Kierkegaard, this way of looking at Christianity caused Christianity more harm than good. It led people to sheer mechanical practice of religion.

In Nigeria today, most Christians who belong to one Christian denomination or another and practice the dogma and liturgy (catechisms) of their denominations do so only for outward show but in the secret, terrible heart rending crimes are committed by them. You begin to wonder, why we have so much violence, thuggery, murder, embezzlement, treachery and debauchery in a country where almost everybody professes to be a strict adherent to one faith or the other. Only a personal encounter with the divine can lead to a true transformation of life. Kierkegaard calls this attitude of personal encounter "a leap of faith." The prevalent system of giving worshippers of God false hope of salvation only because of the rip-off by the churches or because of their huge financial contribution to the church is the height of disservice to God and man. Evil doers should be rejected with their bags of money. The truth should be told them that the soul that "sins shall die."

Overcoming the crowd

Following the crowd is one of the major problems that have enveloped our world today, especially our country Nigeria. People find it difficult to speak up in the face of moral crisis because they would not like to be associated with being different from other people's view. Instead they prefer to hide under the canopy of faceless crowd and carry out their evil plans or keep quiet because others are doing so. It takes a courageous person who lives authentically to stand alone in decision making as in the case of Mr. Peter

Obi given above. On this note, Wole Soyinka wrote that “the man dies who keep silent in the face of tyranny” (Soyinka; 1972). In the same token Martin Luther King Junior wrote, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Evils prevail in our world today because people, who are supposed to speak, keep quiet. They would not like to speak because of fear of being crucified by the other people. They now join the chorus without their voices being heard, thereby making things to go wrong in our society. Such people are still under the aesthetic stage of Kierkegaard’s stages of existence chiefly characterized by the absence of decision making.

People don’t want to live their lives again. They prefer to live like the other person forgotten that man is unique. They compare themselves with the other people because they think that’s the mode of living accepted by the society. The desire of acquisitive and envious comparison expresses mankind’s degeneration, its degradation to copies, numbers’ (Kierkegaard; 1978), and ultimately leads to a regression to the animal herd-instinct which Kierkegaard regards as the real ‘opium of the people’ (Pattinson; 1999). He wrote that ‘...the numerical transfers mankind to an exalted state just as opium does and he is so tranquillized by the trustworthiness of millions’ (Kierkegaard; 1978). To identify with the millions, the majority, to become one of the crowd, is, Kierkegaard believes, the surest way to defend oneself against the demands of religion and ethics. The crowd makes the individual irresponsible. “...but the crowd understood in its very essence –is untruth, in that a crowd either completely renders the individual impenitent or irresponsible, or weakens his sense of responsibility by making him a part” (Kierkegaard; 1988).

The most significant contemporary form of the crowd in modern times is, in Kierkegaard’s view, not a street mob but ‘the public’ a faceless, invisible abstraction which is everywhere and nowhere. Thus he writes:

The public is not a people, not a generation, not one’s contemporaries, not community, not a society, not these particular people, for all such are only what they are by virtue of their concrete form; not one of those who belongs to ‘the public’ however has any essential commitment. ...The public is some monstrous something the abstract wasteland and void which is all nothing... it is the most dangerous of all powers and the most meaningless... (Kierkegaard; 1978).

Kierkegaard was deeply perturbed by the role which he saw ‘the public’ coming to play in bourgeois politics. When he speaks of humanity entering a period which can be characterized as the tyranny of the masses, of the crowd, he is not thinking of ‘the masses’ in the Marxist sense, but of ‘the public’, which a bourgeois phenomenon (Pattinson; 1998). “Politics carried on in the name of the public soon reveals itself to be another form of the ‘deification of statistics’ constantly invoking the aid of opinion polls and the silent majority” (Pattinson; 1998). The root of it all is, as we have seen, the basic cowardliness which flies from responsibility and enviously and fearfully, tries to be ‘like the others’ by thinking as the public, this ‘all and nothing’ thinks (Pattinson; 1998).

Evaluation and Conclusion

Nigerians of today should know that they are free to create a better Nigeria. John Odey, in his book *"The*

Amalgamation of 1914 And the Scapegoat Mentality: Religion and Politics in a multi-Ethnic Society", highlighted how Nigerians instead of blaming themselves are blaming the colonial masters for Nigeria woes. People always find a means of escapism instead of taking responsibility for their actions; they push the blame on the person or unseen forces. In Nigeria, the leaders do not admit that they can make mistakes. Most of the African leaders have thus turned the entire continent into a liberal stage for the enactment of the biblical story where Adam and Eve instead of accepting their mistake and beg for God’s mercy, decided to push the blame on another and Serpent. This however, brought curse to them and humanity. As John Odey rightly pointed out that “it is in the nature of man to look for a scapegoat on which to heap the burden of his sins and then feel free to parade his acquired innocence” (Odey; 2015).

The colonial masters have come and gone, yet Nigerians keep on blaming them for the predicaments of Nigeria. Surprisingly, the so called African scholars that are supposed to know better than others still share the view that colonial masters are responsible for our nation’s predicaments instead of rising up to the challenges facing us by looking for a way to better our situation.

As Igbo proverb says “a man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body.” One should think and rightly too, that it is high time we look into ourselves and discover where the problem lies within ourselves and accept the fact that we are sick instead of looking for whom to blame or denying the sickness that is killing us. A sick man who cannot admit that he is sick, possibly because of the nature of his sickness, is simply heading for the grave. Similarly, a person who suffers from malnutrition but, possibly out of shame decides to tell those who would have offered him some food items that he is suffering from headache, will hardly come out of his predicament

We should abort this escapist approach to put all the blames for our inability to live in peace and manage our resources well on the colonial masters or the past administration (Odey; 2015). Nigerians should realize their potentials, therefore, free themselves from the stranglehold of the European colonization, masquerading as trade union through which they still determine and dictate the stand of our product.

Conclusion

If Nigerians have proper concept of dread, the absurd and death, may be their attitude to life will change. When we begin to appreciate that there is judgement after our earthly existence, this will instill the appropriate fear in us which will destroy the craze for materialism. People live as if what matters is how much of this world’s goods one possesses. The appropriate dread or fear will lead to an accountable life which will make us to serve humanity with eternity in view. To this extent, we depose that a proper understanding and application of Kierkegaard’s existentialist philosophy will go a long way in reshaping the moral lives of Nigerians.

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