

Introducing Critical Thinking in Religious Education Classroom

Leonard Chidi Ilechukwu
Arts Education, Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka
Email: Chidileo@yahoo.com

Abstract

So many people may wonder what role critical thinking will play in the religious education classroom. By a way of clarification, critical thinking is a tool in the milieu of knowledge which helps to acquire knowledge, skeptically improve our theories and confidently strengthen arguments. Critical thinking therefore improves and enhances. The introduction of critical thinking to religious education classroom is to acquire more knowledge (i.e. filling our basket with good apples), improving our theories and beliefs and also to argue correctly (i.e. with facts and reasons). Religious education is something that should be faced with adequate measures so as not to get people misled. Religion is more of faith than reason. This implies that fewer questions are asked. Most people swallow the fish hook, line and sinker because of the religiosity of man. Critical thinking will be a very advantageous tool in the religious education classroom because it tends toward the perfect, the good which means striking the balance. This is in concomitance with virtue which according to Aristotle lies in the mean/middle. Not just the classroom/school curriculum, also the government as well as the parents have roles to play toward achieving the practicality of introducing critical thinking in the religious education classroom for effective results.

Keywords: Critical Thinking, Religious Education, Classroom.

Introduction

This topic 'Introducing Critical Thinking to/in Religious Education Classroom' brings up some issues and questions like: what is critical thinking, its origin and purpose, relevance or importance, the resultant effect of its introduction into the religious education classroom? What is religious education? What is a classroom? What is the tenability of achieving this above topic? Do we have the human and material capacities and strength to achieve this topic? What is the sustainability of its achievement? These and many more to come are the discussant factors/issues in this article.

As a starting point, one cannot talk of critical thinking without referring to the Socratic environment and age of Ancient Greece and in the East, to the Buddhist kalama sutta and Abhidharma. Critical thinking is an important component of most professions. It is a part of the education process and is increasingly significant as students' progress through university to graduate education, although there is debate among educators about its precise meaning and scope (Brookfield 2000).

"Critical" as used in the expression "critical thinking" connotes the importance or centrality of the thinking to an issue, question or problem of concern. "Critical" in this context does not mean "disapproval" or "negative." There are many positive and useful uses of critical thinking, for example formulating a workable solution to a complex personal problem, deliberating as a group about what course of action to take, or analyzing the assumptions and the quality of the methods used in scientifically arriving at a reasonable level of confidence about a given hypothesis. To add further clarification on what is meant by thinking critically, Richard Paul (1995) articulated critical thinking as either weak or strong. The weak-sense critical thinker is a highly skilled but selfishly motivated pseudo-intellectual who works to advance one's personal agenda without seriously considering the ethical consequences and implications. Conceived as such, the weak-sense critical thinker is often highly skilled but uses those skills selectively so as to pursue unjust and selfish ends (Paul, 1995). Conversely, the strong-sense critical thinker skillfully enters into the logic of problems and issues to see the problem for what it is without egocentric and/or socio-centric bias. Thus conceived, the strong-sense mind seeks to actively, systematically, reflectively, and fair-mindedly construct insight with sensitivity to expose and address the many obstacles that compromise high quality thought and learning. Using strong critical thinking we might evaluate an argument, for example, as worthy of acceptance because it is valid and based on true premises. Upon reflection, a speaker may be evaluated as a credible source of knowledge on a given topic.

We can therefore see that critical thinking is a prerequisite in every aspect of life, religious education classroom activities not precluded.

In order to avoid a lengthy introduction so as not to get the reader bored, let us define some crucial terms that will surely be of use in the essay.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a "reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do." It can also be described as "thinking about thinking." It has been described in more detail as "the intellectually disciplined

process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action" (Scriven & Co 1987). More recently, critical thinking has been described as "the process of purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, which uses reasoned consideration to evidence, context, conceptualizations, methods, and criteria" (Facione 2000). Within the critical social theory philosophical frame, critical thinking is commonly understood to involve commitment to the social and political practice of participatory democracy, willingness to imagine or remain open to considering alternative perspectives, willingness to integrate new or revised perspectives into our ways of thinking and acting, and willingness to foster criticality in others (Raiskums 2008).

Religious Education

Religious education is the academic field of multi-disciplinary, secular study of religious beliefs, behaviors, and institutions. It describes, compares, interprets, and explains religion, emphasizing systematic, historically based, and cross-cultural perspectives.

Religious education originated in the nineteenth century, when scholarly and historical analysis of the Bible had flourished, and Hindu and Buddhist texts were first being translated into European languages. Early influential scholars included Friedrich Max Müller, in England, and Cornelius P. Tiele, in the Netherlands. Today religious education is practiced by scholars worldwide. In its early years, it was known as **Comparative Religion** or the **Science of Religion** and, in the USA, there are those who today also know the field as the **History of Religion** (associated with methodological traditions traced to the University of Chicago from the late 1950s through to the late 1980s). The field is known as *Religionswissenschaft* in Germany and *Sciences de la religion* in the French-speaking world (Wikipedia).

Classroom

A classroom is a room in which teaching or learning activities can take place. Classrooms are found in educational institutions of all kinds, including public and private schools, corporations, and religious and humanitarian organizations. The classroom attempts to provide a safe space where learning can take place uninterrupted by other distractions.

Most classrooms have a large writing surface where the instructor or students can share notes with other members of the class. Traditionally, this was in the form of a blackboard but these are becoming less common in well-equipped schools, and are replaced by flipcharts, whiteboards and interactive whiteboards. Many classrooms also have TVs, maps, charts, pencils, books, monographs and LCD projectors for presenting information and images from a computer.

The 'Howness' of Introducing Critical Thinking in the Religious Education Classroom.

Every spectacle (both of the literates and the illiterates) sees the import of critical thinking in our daily experiential activities. If this is the case then, the classroom is a more conducive and compulsive atmosphere, condition and place where we can introduce critical thinking for a purposeful effect. This means that the curriculum does it all. Every discipline has its curriculum and as such makes it very easy for the introduction of critical thinking in the religious education classroom. Critical thinking in order to sink deep into the students should never be included in the extra-curriculum activities because of the danger of its neglect.

Critical thinking is very developmental to the intellect and as such, the more critical one is in thinking, the more intellectually productive one becomes, which definitely affects the holistic affair of man.

The Relevance of Introducing Critical Thinking to the Religious Education classroom.

- a. In the religious education classroom, critical thinking helps the students know in proper terms, what the teacher or lecturer is talking about and it helps them relate to the text. It could even make the classroom more interesting. It would also help make the students more productive. It helps the students not to deviate from the subject matter.
- b. When the students' critical facilities are better developed, their ability to explain with greater clarity improves; as does their sense of whether their explanation actually carries the full extent of the concepts they wish to convey or not; and whether it carries the correct emotional overtones. With development of critical thinking, awareness of the subtle differences between various words denotations and connotations are sensed more easily, and one becomes intellectually stable and sound.
- c. Thinking critically helps the students analyze ideas and abstracts from more vantages and not just limit themselves to perceived reality unquestioningly without verifying authentic sources. Critical thinking requires to know about the subject from more angles than one and to consult as many sources as possible to a realistic picture of the said idea could be created.
- d. Someone with critical thinking skills is able to do the following in the religious education classroom

and even beyond the classroom :

- ❖ understand the logical connections between ideas
- ❖ identify, construct and evaluate arguments
- ❖ detect inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning
- ❖ solve problems systematically
- ❖ identify the relevance and importance of ideas
- ❖ reflect on the justification of one's own beliefs and values

The Resultant Effects of Introducing Critical Thinking in Religious Education Classroom.

Below are the resultant effects or what we may call the achievements/end products of introducing critical thinking in the religious education classroom. This can also be called the significance of introducing critical thinking in the religious education classroom.

Rationality

We are thinking critically when we

- rely on reason rather than emotion,
- require evidence, ignore no known evidence, and follow evidence where it leads, and
- are concerned more with finding the best explanation than being right analyzing apparent confusion and asking questions.

Self-awareness

We are thinking critically when we

- weigh the influences of motives and bias, and
- recognize our own assumptions, prejudices, biases, or point of view.

Honesty

We are thinking critically when we recognize emotional impulses, selfish motives, nefarious purposes, or other modes of self-deception.

Open-mindedness

We are thinking critically when we

- evaluate all reasonable inferences
- consider a variety of possible viewpoints or perspectives,
- remain open to alternative interpretations
- accept a new explanation, model, or paradigm because it explains the evidence better, is simpler, or has fewer inconsistencies or covers more data
- accept new priorities in response to a reevaluation of the evidence or reassessment of our real interests, and
- do not reject unpopular views out of hand.

Discipline

We are thinking critically when we

- are precise, meticulous, comprehensive, and exhaustive
- resist manipulation and irrational appeals, and
- avoid snap judgments.

Judgment

We are thinking critically when we

- recognize the relevance and/or merit of alternative assumptions and perspectives
- recognize the extent and weight of evidence

Conclusion

Fundamentally, man is a religious being (homo religio) which implies that man cannot be separated from the 'chains' of religion. Religion has a great influence on the people so much nowadays that people are easily deceived. People succeed and go on with their evil and heinous practices under the cover of religion. Many people use religion for a temporal remedy to their problems. This is why Karl Marx, the economic philosopher said that "religion is the opium of the masses".

In its secular usage, religious education is the teaching of a particular religion (although in England the term **religious instruction** would refer to the teaching of a particular religion, with **religious education** referring to teaching about religions in general) and its varied aspects - its beliefs, doctrines, rituals, customs, rites, and

personal roles. In Western and secular culture, religious education implies a type of education which largely separate from academia, and which (generally) regards religious belief as a fundamental tenet and operating modality, as well as a prerequisite condition of attendance.

The secular concept is substantially different from societies that adhere to religious law, wherein "religious education" connotes the dominant academic study, and in typically religious terms, teaches doctrines which define social customs as "laws" and the violations thereof as "crimes", or else misdemeanors requiring punitive correction.

Finally, if critical thinking is introduced in the religious education classroom through the school/discipline curriculum, it will advantageously affect the entire world because every man has a religious belief without which he is no man. So the criticality of man toward his religion will be felt in the world's economy practically. There will be peaceful co-existence, peace and justice will have no bounds, the world will be replete with true brothers and sisters from different mothers, judging from the notion that critical thinking clarifies goals, examines assumptions, discerns hidden values, evaluates evidence, accomplishes actions, assesses conclusions and most importantly makes man become more reasonable.

Recommendations

- a. Government should improve on the material and human resources to enable the teachers and lecturers in general and particularly of religious education achieve judiciously what is contained in the curriculum, critical thinking included.
- b. Parents have to model their children at that tender age because the family is the first and most important school the child attends. The child misses the road if the parents fail in their duties. So the family is foundational to achieving the practicality of critical thinking in the religious education classroom.
- c. The students should be challenged with brain storming sessions in school and outside school to test their technical know-how and their 'how far' in critical thinking as introduced into the religious education classroom.

References

- Brookfield, S.D. "Contesting criticality: Epistemological and practical contradictions in critical reflection" in *Proceedings of the 41st Annual Adult Education Research Conference* (2000)
- Ennis, R.H., "Critical Thinking Assessment" in Fasko, *Critical Thinking and Reasoning: Current Research, Theory, and Practice* (2003)
- Facione, Peter A. *Critical Thinking: What It is and Why It Counts*, in Insightassessment.com
- Okwueze, M. I., *Ethics, Religion and Society* (Biblical, Traditional and Contemporary Perspectives) Enugu: First Publishers (2003).
- Paul, R.W., *Critical Thinking and its Importance* (1995).
- Raiskums, B.W., *An Analysis of the Concept Criticality in Adult Education* (2008)
- Scriven, M., and Paul, R.W., *Critical Thinking as Defined by the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking* (1987).
- Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*