THE PRACTICE OF VIRTUE ETHICS: A STILL WORTHY BASIS FOR PRIVATE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITIES IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT
The kind of standards that should guide one's conduct and what one ought to do under any circumstance, have been worrisome moral issues confronting individuals and organizations alike. Private Christian Universities are perceived as peculiar organizations people look up to for virtuous practices. This study seeks to project virtue ethics, as a worthy basis for organizational operations.
Key words: Virtue ethics, stakeholders, ethics, standards, Christian Universities

INTRODUCTION
The kind of standards that should guide one's conduct and what one ought to do under any circumstance, have been worrisome moral issues confronting individuals and organizations alike. This is so because enterprise owners and workers as humans, lack inclinations, since most of their conducts are not predetermined by past events or inborn threats, even when such events could limit what they can do.

In most cases, they are confronted with choices and because the selection of an alternative is not determined for them, they need to answer which of the alternatives ought to be taken. At the most essential level, it is morality or individual ethical values that dictate what to do or which action to pursue. That is to say that thinking for people isn't instinctive; it is a matter of initiative and must be desired by the person in question. This reaffirms Ralph Waldo Emerson’s old sayings that “Intelect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free ... The revelation of thought takes man out of servitude into freedom” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Fate', 1860).
So when it comes to the exercise of moral and ethical values, the individuals’ will and intent are very paramount as the individual values and methods for reaching a desired goal could even differ from those of the organization or a group within the organization.

Christian universities, though, are entities pursuing their own dreams and aspirations within the same socio-economic environment of business, society perceive the conduct of their activities within a particular paradigm. As moral agents are accountable to their stakeholders, there is no doubt that the only way to ensure consistent decisions that represent the interests of all stakeholders is to require ethical policies. Here, students and employees as stakeholders expect that most of their ethical principles and practices should be coming from duty-based ethics point of view, particularly from religious precept and/or philosophical reasoning.

The fierce competition at the market place among the numerous public and private universities for students and employees, the increasing desire among private University operators to adopt ‘best practices’ elsewhere, all in the quest ‘to be like them’, coupled with the present economic situation of the economy seem to be forcing most private Christian Universities to forget their roots. It appears sight is being lost of the fact that those market principles have the potential of clouding the very basic virtues ethics of fairness, empathy, integrity, trust, commitment and diligence etc. which set the Christian Universities apart.

The Ghanaian Society, now discerning than ever, are advocating through Parliament that these private Universities are not different from other commercial businesses and must pay tax, an agitation which has resulted in a 25% corporate tax proposal by Parliament on private universities (Business News of Tuesday, 16 December 2014). That is to say those, institutions seeking and professing virtue ethics are being perceived as practicing vices, all in their quest to be on top of competition, and by so doing neglecting the aspirations of the communities they serve which possibly ought to have been the basis of their existence. These practices rather have the potential of eroding the competitive edge of being a Christian university. For social innovation that does not have dysfunctional effects, one should have a reflection about values that are involved in the innovation process (Grønhaug, 1988) and hence the suggestion of the practice of virtue ethic as a still worthy basis for organizational operations.

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Virtue is presumed to be the strength of the individual or the corporate entity. For an organization to actualize its dream/goals, it requires ability which comes in the form of care and concern for stakeholders [especially students and workers], integrity, trust, and reliability. On the contrary, it appears corporate entities have compromised a lot on these virtuous and marred their relationships with stakeholders. Aliza (2013) averred that the corporate world is pressured to behave in an ethically responsible manner. Such recommendation was made because many corporate leaders have failed and harm stakeholders due to failure to uphold good practices. For instance, “accountability failures have led to bankruptcies and restatements of financial statements that have harmed countless shareholders, employees, pensioners, and other stakeholders” (Aliza, 2013). The main purpose is to discover the nascent for organizational owners/leaders and workers alike to possess and apply good practices. There seems to be a gap between what corporate entities professed to do and the Ghanaian society’s expectations.
LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Virtue and/or Virtue Ethics?

The virtue is an enduring trait which places it in good condition and enables it to carry out its distinctive work well (Ignacio et al. 2012). Virtue is a state of character concerned with choice. Virtue ethics starts with personal qualities. “Even as virtue ethics has become popular, especially in combination with teleological and deontological approaches, its theoretical development has not progressed much, nor has its practical contribution been well transmitted, compared to other approaches. Given that one of the criticisms hurled at virtue ethics is that virtue ethics does little to help us know who is virtuous and hence, how to determine whose action is virtuous” (Aliza, 2013).

“Based on the factor analysis of the responses to the items on the virtues questionnaire, the following were the resulting virtue or trait factors: (1) Care and concern, (2) Competence, (3) Ambition, and (4) Superiority. The four resulting virtue factors compare more or less with the virtue listings generated in the literature: “Care and concern” is analogous to “empathy” and “respect”; and “competence” seems akin to “integrity”, “trust”, and “reliability” in the literature. The results corroborate evidence in the Virtue Ethics literature that proposes the virtue theory as an improved ethical paradigm for business [Aliza, 2013].

Solomon (1992, p.168) suggests that integrity is not one but a complex of virtues ‘working together to form a coherent character, and identifiable and trustworthy personality’.

History of Virtue Ethics

Ignacio et. al assert that virtue ethics is a practice not new to human existence. Its development dates back to the time of Aristotle, and to Socrates and Plato (2012). However, its academic application to business is barely recent. The great majority of business ethics studies in the early 1990s do not mention virtue ethics (Ignacio et al, 2012). Works of Kahn (1990), Furman (1990) and Williams & Murphy (1990) though published in the early 1990s, but none made reference to virtues. The closest thing to virtue ethics was references to “managerial values” such as honesty, integrity and competence that shape or reflect individual character (Horvath, 1995; Aliza, 2013). The identified gap seems to be disinterest researchers had on the virtue ethics.

Murphy examines the international marketing, listing five core virtues —integrity, fairness, trust, respect and empathy— in multinational and multicultural contexts (Murphy 1999). Later, Murphy, Laczniak and Wood (2007) provide a virtue ethics foundation for relationship marketing, pairing each stage of relationship marketing with a corresponding virtue. In customer relationship management, Bull and Adam (2011) argue that MacIntyre’s virtue ethics allows for a holistic approach which considers design, implementation and best practice issues. Van de Ven (2008) revisits the relationship between corporate social responsibility and marketing. He identifies the strengths and weaknesses of marketing communication tools in building a virtuous corporate brand.

Contrast between Character and Virtue

Character is what we have made out of ourselves, by dint of hard work and a zealous attention to the moral virtues. Building on the ethics of Aristotle, this argues that ethics is not so much about determining what is right or wrong, but rather about building a good character. The
character is informed and sustained by the stories of the community, which embody the virtues. The virtues are learned through practice (MacIntyre, 1981), and good character will lead to good ethical practice.

More particularly, it turns out that the ‘business virtues’ in the Philippines setting revolve chiefly around, on the one hand, Care and Respect which is characterized by sympathy, respect, generosity, support, and friendliness; and, on the other hand, a rather peculiar courage-related characteristic involving a certain degree of ambition, pride, superiority, and aggressiveness (Aliza, 2013).

Virtue ethics, like deontology, subscribes to universal principles, and like utilitarianism, it considers outcomes. But unlike deontology, virtue ethics pays attention to the particulars of agents (motives, intentions, habits, character, relations) and actions (circumstances, community); unlike utilitarianism, it maintains that exception less prohibitions exist [Ignacio et al. 2012.].

Ethical Values and Corporate Objectives

Depending on the mission of a corporate body, objectives are set. Yet, Christian Schools should be guided by the Bible precepts in formulating goals and objectives. According to John 13:34, 35 (Good News version) … “love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.” By implication, Christian Universities’ objectives should be Biblically centered. Prushan (1997) advised that it is prudent to have a focused mission statement than to craft a flowery sounding mission statement.

As a goal of an organization, it might want to minimize societal suffering by helping sick people whereas others might aim at profit. We may distinguish between materialistic and spiritual value orientation. Kasser (2011) finds that materialistic value orientation involves placing a high priority to goals such as money, possessions, image and status. In contrast with materialistic value orientation, Kasser characterizes spiritual value orientation with goals like reducing human suffering and encouragement of compassionate behaviours (2011).

METHODOLOGY

Our work is unique because we are concerned with virtue ethical practices among Private Universities operators; we reviewed several articles relating to virtue ethics; and we incorporated some Biblical verses that are connected with the suggested virtuous.

Our paper was purely based on existing reviewed literatures. As such, conclusion was drawn through an evaluative account of existing knowledge related to the area of study. It sought to analyze Christian virtues and its implication in the world of business.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

As said, the study tried to look at the practices or tactics of private universities in Ghana from civil society’s point of view, to ascertain the kind of ethical dilemma or virtues being shown or compromised on. The following were ascertained; that:

• the universities have helped by filling the educational gap that could not be filled by government and in no doubt had contributed greatly to the human resource development of the country
they are being perceived as Falsifying information for accreditation: using names and qualifications which do not exist to process their accreditation to operate their schools; Charging high cost of fee without appropriate service or infrastructure; Promotion and introducing programs pending accreditation; Imposition of religion on workers and students by religious backed institutions; Affiliation “rush” with known/unknown universities and the resulting milking of private universities because of affiliation; and Influx of Schools, new programs and branch expansion in the major cities.

• Per the university rankings for 2014, three (3) private Christian Universities [Presbyterian University College, Valley View University and Christian Service University College] were rank among the top ten (10) Universities in Ghana including the public universities. The perceptions are that the Christian virtues being projected in their mission statements of the respective schools such as integrity excellence, discipline and service, have contributed greatly to their popularity and acceptance of those schools and hence their ranking.

**Ethical Implication of those Practices or Perceptions**

A deep look at the above comments reflecting the civil society’s perception on the social media and the circumstances may reveal a lot, including the following that:

• the private universities including the Christian or religious based universities are perceived not trustworthy, not committed to their words or relationships, though are trying to work hard (Diligence)

• Standards are being compromised on and wrong virtues are being inculcated into workers and/or students. This has resulted in unqualified persons lecturing in some of the private universities in the country

• The universities are doing ‘everything” within their reach including deception to suffice the competition. This is illegitimate for Christians and may depict a heart directed at following money or following the crowd implying g that such institutions are trying to be materialistic in orientation Kasser (2011)

• The notion of sustenance being ethically earned is central to the Bible approach to wealth and this is supposed to be the guiding principle of every Christian or Christian institution.

**CONCLUSION**

Ethics can be described as a “game of life.” It is found everywhere human beings are located. Therefore, being ethical is important to individuals, organizations and the global environment. Organizational members, be it owners/managers or employees, often meet and deal with ethical issues on-the-job. Similarly, managers and employees must learn how to recognize ethical conflicts and know how to employ Christian virtues to resolve them.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

• University-students partnership to regulate the Universities activities
• Private Christian Universities to be guided by their missions portraying virtue ethics.
• National Accreditation Board should be up and doing and supervise strictly the academic programmes and activities of private universities to detect/protect anomalies (if any)
• Future research may focus on field study approach to gather data from fair representation of all stakeholders

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REFERENCES


