

A Constructivist Search for Knowledge and Truth

John-Okoria Ibhakewanlan¹

Abstract

This paper is written from the perspective of self-examination rather than a criticism of any individuals or methods, exploring a researcher's Constructivist approach against the background of a religious faith. The author argued that since one's epistemological and ontological views affect how one researches or learns, the academy ought not to play down that connection between epistemology, ontology and pedagogy. He then attempted to reconcile his own faith as a Catholic with the Constructivist paradigm. Hence he argued that the religious activity of searching and seeking for God is analogous to the learning process of constructing knowledge without presupposing a string of truths that are unchangeable and unchallengeable. That analogy became the basis of his Constructivist Faith. The paper then presented some of the practical implications of a Constructivist Faith.

Introduction

A beautiful aspect of being a doctoral student in the UK academy today is the reality of people from different cultural and religious backgrounds pursuing post-graduate studies in the apparently secular environment that is characteristic of most UK universities. It has indeed been a great privilege to be course-mates with some staunch Muslims from Malaysia and Saudi Arabia; Buddhists from Thailand; Hindus from India; pious Christians from Vietnam, Indonesia and Africa. The UK academy provides a neutral context for all such varied religious perspectives. This diversity is reflected in a recent analysis of Britain's immigration figures.

¹University of Nottingham, United Kingdom. E-mail: john.o@nottingham.ac.uk
Phone: +447466601517)

"In a further sign of changing patterns of migration, China accounted for the largest group of immigrants – 40,000 last year, many of them students" (The Times 29-11-13, Ford, p. 12). Certainly, my research class is predominantly Chinese, followed by students from Saudi Arabia. The point here is that the diversity of perspectives currently experienced in the UK student community is a reflection of the wider UK context. It is therefore worth examining briefly this social context.

Context

This wider social context is generally regarded as secular. Similarly, while there are faith-based schools and religious educationists across the UK, the general tone of academic life here resonates with the predominantly atheistic. In a "Special Report" on the British 2011 population census, which had about a quarter of the country's population (14.1 million people) saying they had no religion at all, *The Guardian* (12-12-12, p. 10) pointed out the following: "Claiming the title for the most godless places were the student enclaves of Brighton and Norwich, where 42% said they had no religious affiliation." What the paper described as "The march of the faithless" is a rise of 6.4 million in the number of non-believers over the decade (Freedland, 2012).

That was in contrast to the decline in the percentage of British Christians from 72% to 59% within the same census period. However, that figure must be set against the increase in the number of British Muslims from 3% in 2001 to 5% (2.7 million) in 2011. The rise in the number of Muslims would seem to reflect a growing interest in religion. Yet some have argued that any increase in the number of religious people is mostly due to the presence of ethnic and minority groups. "...ethnic and minority groups in the UK can be synonymous with religious affiliations" (Phillips, 2012, p. 22). It is worth noting that describing British society simply in statistical terms can be seen as unsatisfactory (Levitan, 2011). Even if the percentage rise in the number of non-believers and atheists has undeniably been made less pronounced by the presence of people from other countries, particularly ethnic and minority groups, could that be an indication of a trend towards atheism in Britain?

"But God – or at least the church – is struggling in this country...Non-believers now form the second-biggest denomination, dwarfing the number of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and Buddhists combined. It confirms our place as perhaps the most godless country, the least "churched", in the industrialised world, setting us apart from the US, obviously, but also from much of continental Europe" (Freedland, 2012, p. 4).

It is not certain why the United Kingdom appears to have a high percentage of unbelievers. I can only speculate here. The rich scientific tradition of England may have enabled an agnostic or even atheistic perspective among some of the learned population. The Royal Society remains the oldest scientific academy in continuous existence. One could say that there abides within the fabric of this society the non-theocentric tradition of learning entrenched by British philosophers like Francis Bacon and others. Even non-British intellectuals found atheistic solace here. Karl Marx himself announced his *Communist Manifesto* with the words "Communists of various nationalities have assembled in London" (*Marx & Engels, 2008*) and would later add: "Materialism (understood as a non-metaphysical or non-religious view of reality) is the native son of Great Britain". Similarly, the atheistic Voltaire also found a home in England. Voltaire's *Letters on the English* (Voltaire; Voltaire, Cronk, & Voltaire, 2013) was particularly full of praises for England because he felt this country did not insist on a religious view of reality. "Here was a people that had opinions of its own; a people who had remade its religion, hanged its king, imported another and built a parliament stronger than any ruler in Europe. There was no Bastille here..." ("Voltaire and the French Enlightenment", Durant, 1927, p.226).

Today England may have a global reputation as the epicentre of international football, but the country remains first the home of Darwin's Theory of Evolution. Foremost English atheist Richard Dawkins continues to offer a fierce defence of this theory against those he terms 'creationists' (Dawkins, 2009). A few weeks ago I visited the Cathedral at Litchfield as well as the home of Darwin's grandfather, which was opposite the magnificent Cathedral. Despite competing with the only medieval English Cathedral with three spires, the home of Erasmus Darwin had more features (including audio and video presentations) lined up for the tourist than did the imposing Cathedral itself. Such emphasis on the secular and scientific over the religious may appear trivial but would not be true of many other countries—such as Nigeria where the government provided the funding and the land for the construction of a National Mosque and a National Ecumenical Centre in Abuja. Comparatively, as a Nigerian researcher in the UK, one breathes an unfamiliar air of secularism here.

A foreign student from a religious country cannot be completely untouched by this secularist atmosphere. Furthermore, there is a challenge that comes with holding a religious perspective within such a secular context. From observation, that challenge is often not addressed by fellow overseas researchers.

Hence the academic implications seem to be similarly glossed over. Specifically, many overseas religious students use theoretical frameworks that appear to negate their religious beliefs.

Constructivism and Religious Faith

One common theoretical framework in the social sciences is the Constructivist approach. Admittedly, Constructivism is a complex movement across disciplines and with various facets. A concise characterization of the crux of Constructivism is found in an excellent preface to a rich collection of 15 articles on Constructivism by experts from various disciplines. The collection includes the perspective of Ernst Von Glasersfeld, known as “the father of radical constructivism” (Fosnot, 2005, p.296). In that preface, Catherine Fosnot provides the following concise definition of this approach to learning:

“Constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning; it describes both what ‘knowing’ is and how one ‘comes to know’. Based on work in psychology, philosophy, science, and biology, the theory describes knowledge not as truths to be transmitted or discovered, but as emergent, developmental, non-objective, viable constructed explanations by humans engaged in meaning-making in cultural and social communities of discourse. Learning from this perspective is viewed as a self-regulatory process of struggling with the conflict between existing personal models of the world and discrepant new insights, constructing new representations and models of reality as a human meaning-making venture with culturally developed tools and symbols, further negotiating such meaning through cooperative social activities, discourse, and debate in communities of practise” (Fosnot, 2005, p. ix)

What is vital about the above delineation of the theory is that it manages to assert the essence of what Constructivism means within a wide range of disciplines. The various tenets of the definition will form the basis of the Constructivist ideas expressed here. Fosnot’s book (edited) encompasses varied perspectives such as that of Harvard Professor of Education, Eleanor Duckworth, who studied and worked with Jean Piaget and Barbel Inhelder for over 20 years and served as Piaget’s interpreter for his US lectures.

The above description represents the essence of the Constructivist methodology used by many overseas students in the UK as their theoretical framework for Post-graduate research within their various fields of studies. Many of these students are religious people, mostly of either the Islamic or Christian faith. Significantly, while employing Constructivism as their research paradigm, there seems to be no lack of understanding of what Constructivism means. What seems lacking is a critical questioning of the implication of employing the approach.

As I belong to the Catholic faith and am currently using Constructivism as my theoretical framework, this piece is more a call for self-examination rather than a criticism of anyone. The following is merely an attempt to confront an inherent tension in Post-graduate studies in the UK, which maybe true of other parts of the Western world as well, by sharing a personal experience of that tension. The place of a religious worldview in a Constructivist or Objectivist research framework needs to be clarified by researchers upholding that worldview. The necessity for such clarification will become even clearer in the next paragraphs.

In line with Fosnot's definition, Constructivism in my own field of Education is in a nut shell the view that learners construct knowledge/make meaning (Steffe, Gale, & Alternative Epistemologies in Education, 1995) of reality. Accordingly, it could be further said, no other knowledge exists independent of this experience of meaning-making. Hence learning in this schema is not a passive reception of information. At the same time, it is neither a reinventing of the wheel of knowledge, rather an approach that is enquiry-based. Overseas students employing the Constructivist paradigm come to UK universities to join a tradition and a community constructing a world of knowledge and truth – which may end up different from their known world. Hence the Constructivist approach is not presupposing or seeking eternal truths for all ages and peoples; for Constructivist knowledge is itself the product of every people's active learning experience and so subject to change with any future generation of learners or epoch. This is similar to the "dialectical and historical materialism" adopted by Vygotsky – the chief Social Constructivist. "A central tenet of this method is that all phenomena be studied as processes in motion and in change" (Vygotskii & Cole, 1978, p.6).

On the other hand, religious faith is generally an idealist perspective of knowledge and truth. The truths of most religions often claim to correspond to an eternal reality independent of the knower. It is an idealist standpoint based on the revelations of an omniscient God. In the moral order, for example, religions have detailed and specific doctrines about good and evil. These are not just a few general principles, such as a Categorical Imperative.

Most societies and institutions have such basic moral laws that indicate, for instance, that honesty is good and lying is bad for the group. The elaborate theological truths that separate religions are commonly set forth to correspond to an ideal reality and moral order, ordained by God, rather than truths that are subject to various eras or epochs. Consequently, such an eternal approach to truth or knowledge, as a given, may appear to be in contradiction to the Constructivist view.

Acknowledging the Dilemma

The above two perspectives (religious idealism and the constructivist viewpoint) are obviously different. Some may argue that it does not matter whether one holds an idealist or constructivist perspective in life. Indeed, for most people, it is not important to their everyday lives if they consider knowledge to be about a reality independent of them or whether they consider knowledge to be of human making. In fact, many may even believe in both perspectives as they find convenient. However, the argument here is that one's position on both paradigms becomes crucial as soon as one steps into the academy with a religious perspective.

The importance of the researcher's position on the above paradigms lies in the fact that one's epistemological and ontological views affect how one researches or learns. The academy ought not to play down that connection between epistemology, ontology and pedagogy. People's ontological assumptions about the nature of the world could even have an overriding influence on their epistemology. Hence there is need for research frameworks to clarify, not to pass judgment on, the epistemological and ontological perspectives of the researcher. The objective here remains to examine how this socially and contextually constrained approach to truth relates to a researcher who is a person of faith. To that objective I now return. In other words, how do I, as a religious person, reconcile the Constructivist and idealist dilemma?

As a researcher using the Constructivist framework, one has to admit that it is problematic to uphold eternally ordained specific truths, especially about a reality that is understood as fixed and unchanging. Similarly, the assertion that there is no God (atheism) is also a claim to an absolute truth. The atheistic position may argue that life and history present overwhelming reasons to be atheistic. On a personal note, a harrowing experience of bereavement some months before writing this article remains a painful reminder of the reality of evil and the question of the existence of a benevolent God.

However, the very essence of the religious perspective or faith position lies in the sense of triumph for being able to believe in such a God despite experiencing a terrible evil. Across different religious traditions, though variously exaggerated among fundamentalist groups, one finds this adamant quality of faith. Especially, this is the perspective of the Christian faith, best systematized by the theology of St. Paul: the person with Faith is the one who Hopes amidst tribulations in a God of Love. In the end, St. Paul sums up his theology in the famous passage from his First Letter to the Corinthians (13.13): "And so there are only three things that last, faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." That theme of Love will be the culmination of this discussion.

A Constructivist Faith

Taking the above summary as its essence, the Christian faith becomes a journey in hope through whatever context in which one may be immersed. Such an understanding of Faith has no necessity for claims to an endless series of eternal truths but is rather a journey or a seeking in Hope towards Love. This is what is referred to here as a Constructivist Faith, a journey rather than a series of eternal dogmas. It is one that resonates with the age-old humility of the learner. When the Oracle of Delphi (Coplestone, 1962, p. 119) proclaimed Socrates as "the wisest of the Greeks", he responded by saying that the proclamation was only an approval of his philosophy: "One thing only I know, and that is that I know nothing". Far from glorifying ignorance, the position here asserted is one of knowledge as a continuous search, a journey in seeking. Why should not the same humble quest for knowledge and truth characterise religious faith? The problem with religion seems to be its proselytising focus over the centuries.

Needless here to mention the negative results of the aggressive conversion missions of the monotheistic religions! Rather, I here link my Faith to my Constructivist approach to learning. The religious process of actively seeking, on a journey, searching for knowledge and truth, is similar to the Constructivist approach to learning defined earlier. Consequently, my Faith is in dialogue with other traditions; in that dialogue may emerge greater knowledge and truth. This is what I mean by a Constructivist Faith.

How does this Constructivist Faith correlate with or relate to my religious and Catholic identity? I have to admit here that I cannot uphold a religion that insists that its book of doctrines was dictated verbatim by God and literarily true for all eternity. That would contradict the Constructivist approach to reality. Any researcher of faith employing Constructivism as their research paradigm must confront this contradiction. Wherein lies the meaning-making activity of the community of learners? My approach to faith as a researcher draws from the Jesuit perspective which is traditionally summarized as “finding God in all things” (Barry, 1991; Manney, 2013). This means dynamism in the faith journey. The process of “finding God in all things” is one of searching and seeking. In whatever context a Jesuit finds himself, rather than being constrained to an unchangeable set of ideas, he is always on a journey to live out his Faith, Hope and Love. Being humble enough to submit oneself to the uncertain nature of the search, one may thus discover a God that cannot be confined. In summary, an understanding of Faith as a journey in no way negates the Catholic position; for that is how I have lived out my Faith over the past year in the context of England.

The Year of Faith

In November of 2012, Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated the “Year of Faith” as part of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. Ending on the 24th of November 2013, the day marking the Catholic Feast of Christ the King, the year was a unique opportunity for us Catholics throughout the world to reflect on our Faith. Coming from a religiously charged country like Nigeria, such declaration of a year of faith by the Pope is taken with utmost seriousness. Hundreds of Nigerians die every year because of their religious faith. Where adherents pay the ultimate price for their particular belief, the Year of Faith takes on a deeper social and personal dimension.

On the contrary, in multicultural and multi-religious England, religion does not possess such exigency as exists in Nigeria or similar parts of the world. Had I lived in Nigeria for the “Year of Faith”, my experience would have been different.

Being in England helped me to appreciate, firstly, that my own faith is indeed a gift – mediated of course by socio-cultural factors. This *gift* nature of faith is easily taken for granted in places where religion is an essential part of life (such as India, Nigeria and the Middle East). Here in the UK, my faith was not as such an identity issue but has been a perspective that guided my search for knowledge and truth in the academy.

It therefore did not make sense to assert or define the peculiar doctrines or practices of my faith in this context of heterogeneity and multiculturalism, where religious language is open to different interpretations and images. While this multicultural reality does challenge faith, it also places my faith journey alongside other searches for meaning among my colleagues and contemporaries. I recently had an insightful encounter with a British lady working at the tax desk of the Nottingham City Council. For anonymity, I will refer to her here as the Nottingham tax collector. While away in Africa for a few months, the City Council had sent me a series of letters, which finally culminated in my indictment for not paying Council Tax as at when due. I needed to resolve the matter urgently.

This lady was so sympathetic and genuinely helpful, that I wanted to know what made her so good – her perspective. After a brief informal conversation, I asked her if she believed in God. “No”, she said, and later added, “I am doing a Spiritual search.” It was a bit difficult for me to understand how she described her “search” – despite her mentioning various books she reads to nurture this spiritual searching. Nonetheless, that encounter, and a few others during the year, enlightened me: this apparently secular society contains a yearning that goes beyond the mundane and the mercantile.

People’s spiritual desire continues to be nourished outside the Cathedrals and religious buildings of this country. The Royal Society or the British scientific heritage has not replaced the various manifestations of a spiritual hunger or quest for God evident in other parts of the world. One finds various pieces of evidence to support this assertion of a spiritual longing in Britain:

“...there is evidence that people want to believe in something. The Enigma shop does a decent trade in healing crystals and New Age books, and there are good audiences when the Ebbw Vale Institute hosts spiritualists and UFO experts” (Morris, 2012).

Like the Nottingham tax collector reading various books and doing good, my own faith needed to be nourished as well. Only a matter of months ago the death of my sister from Lupus, only in her 20s, greatly challenged my faith. That was not the first time that my faith had been so tested. On the 10th of December 2005, sixty of my students died in a plane crash on their way home for Christmas vacation.

The various stories people have shared with me in Africa, of poverty, unemployment, violence, a globally orchestrated war system resulting in economic migrations; all have often left me in despair about the place of God amidst the multitude of prayers in Africa. As already mentioned here, the ‘stuff’ of faith is precisely being able to believe in a benevolent God despite experiencing a deadful evil or godlessness. Over the centuries, the ancient problem of evil in a world created by a benevolent God has already been addressed by philosophers like Leibniz, in his “Theodicy Essays on the Benevolence of God, the Freewill of Man, and the Origin of Evil” (Leibniz, 1965). Leibniz argued that this was the best of all possible worlds, but his essay only provoked Voltaire to write his popular novel *Candide* which mocked the optimism of Leibniz (Voltaire, 2009).

Theologians like St. Augustine, whose views were later systematized by St. Thomas Aquinas, argued that evil is only the absence of good (Aquinas, 2003.) While these and other philosophical and theological works are great achievements, they ought not to be presented as the final word or eternal doctrines. Rather than be content with any single explanation, my Constructivist Faith enabled me to continue to seek God at the deepest point in life’s search. Hence my notion of a Constructivist Faith could also be described as a search unfettered by dogmas. The goal or fulfilment of this search might well be in the activity of searching or seeking, rather than the finality of a desire fulfilled. The unbeliever or atheist need not deny the search or choose the path of mere questioning and expect answers even in unexpected places. Anyhow, this reflection is not about providing arguments to convince an atheist or unbeliever to believe in God. The Nottingham tax collector did not need to be converted. She was kinder and more humane than many religious people I have lived with in Nigeria and elsewhere.

The point rather remains to reconcile my faith as a Catholic with the Constructivist paradigm. Hence I have argued here that the religious activity of searching and seeking for God is analogous to the learning process of constructing knowledge without presupposing a string of truths that are unchangeable and unchallengeable. That analogy is the basis of my Constructivist approach to faith. Just as the Constructivist paradigm is not a passive reception of information nor about reinventing the wheel of learning, rather an approach to learning that is enquiry-based, so too my Constructivist Faith is an active searching within my Catholic and catholic tradition.

The Mission of a Constructivist Faith

If faith is no longer about converting others to one's religion, what is its mission? A lesson from the Nottingham tax collector, faith should indeed not be based on proselytization. A proselytizing approach to faith often leads to wars (of words or of swords) and division. Such approach may have found a place in the era of conquest and rivalry. Maybe influenced by my current research on a cooperation model of education, rather than competition, I hold that faith needs to further enter into a relationship of cooperation or dialogue with the scientific and atheistic or rather agnostic worldview – such as is the perspective that seems to pervade much of British society. It should not be a rapport with science alone but of dialogue with other cultures and religions of the world. This means faith has to be genuinely Constructivist, not presupposing too many sets of knowledge true for both the believer and the unbeliever for all eternity. This may be a difficult position for me as a Catholic. Huge resources and centuries of reflection have gone into defining Church dogmas. Yet an openness to learn from other traditions will only enrich my faith.

Well, one might ask, if there is no common presupposition for this approach to faith, what then is the basis for the relationship of cooperation with other cultures and religions? I hesitate to say at this juncture that Love should be the common ground but will return to this theme soon.

A practical basis for this cooperation and mission today is the pursuit of justice and peace, or of social and environmental harmony, in a threatened world. A Constructivist faith would allow for openness in searching for knowledge and truth towards achieving that mission. In this mission, Faith also allows one to remain hopeful in the face of current injustice and conflict.

The one without faith may be unable to remain so hopeful in the reality of today's world. As a Catholic, for whom faith is a Divine gift, I should not fault anyone who has not received that gift. Why blame someone for not receiving something that has been deemed a complete gift? In 2013 Pope Francis confirmed in his encyclical *Lumen Fidei* that "faith, received from God as a supernatural gift, becomes a light for our way, guiding our journey through time" (n. 4). At the same time, one remembers that Church teaching upholds the doctrine of human freewill. Yet I cannot fault the atheist for not praying to receive the gift of faith, for many a Christian saint like Paul made no effort to receive this gift.

Even where this gift was given and the person somehow refused to accept it, could it be because of the way this faith has been presented by the Church over the centuries? Here I think of Gandhi who greatly appreciated Christianity, could have become a Christian himself, but was rather appalled by the atrocities of many Christians of his time. Today there has been enough evidence of clerical scandals to suggest that the actions of religious officials may have also discouraged many from embracing the Christian faith. Putting all blames aside, what is the fate of those who do not profess faith, such as the Nottingham tax collector who was full of goodness? The Pope added in the same encyclical that "anyone who sets off on the path of doing good to others is already drawing near to God, is already sustained by his help, for it is characteristic of the divine light to brighten our eyes whenever we walk towards the fullness of love" (n. 35). I would add that the purpose of this divine gift is not only for us to help others and create a world of justice and peace but also for us to experience the supreme fulfilment of Love. It may be the ultimate answer to our search and quest for joy or happiness: Love, without which, I believe, no amount of intelligence or economic development will make us happy.

A Faith Rooted in Love

What is this Love? I earlier hesitated to say Love should be the common ground for the relationship of cooperation among cultures and religions. The natural response would have been 'what is this Love?'

There would have let loose all the dogs of dialectical wars since Socrates, who first insisted that his students define their terms. Having concretely stated above what I see as the practical mission that should form the common ground for cooperation today, namely the pursuit of justice and peace in a threatened world, I may now briefly examine Love as the end of all searching.

Although I consider it to be the most important thing in life, Love does not seem subject to any narrow definition– but a Constructivist approach should not be seeking narrow definitions anyway!

When people try to represent Love, they draw a heart. While the heart may be the center of Love, the heart itself is not quite heart-shaped; As Julian Barnes points out, after death the heart becomes more like a pyramid (Barnes, 2009). As with art, so we grapple in poetry and prose for the meaning of Love. After thousands of years, we still do not fully know what Love is. Worse still, we misrepresent Love. In movies, one often hears “I love you.” We must beware of the use and abuse of the word *Love*.

I believe we act out of Love only when we do so in Faith. Again, Faith here includes a commitment to Justice and Peace – striving to uplift the suffering and seeking to end a culture of violence.

If Love is the end and goal of the Constructivist Faith, maybe it should be taught as a subject in schools, just like Maths or Language? I believe Love is the only treasure that will survive us. I have heard people in my home town of Benin-City say “The British invaded our Kingdom and took away all our historical treasures!” Of what ultimate value are such artefacts if there is no Love among the people? The truth is that those relics are only symbols of self-importance. When the history of the world is ultimately told, the only artefact that will survive is Love.

Like the heart, the shape of Love may not always be clear to us. Worse still, the path of Love may be rough in a world tormented by past mistakes of senseless wars, slavery, colonization, various other forms of oppression and injustice. Only Love can heal these pains. For the Jesuits, the religious order that has shaped the heart and mind of the current Pope, their mission to the world has always been understood in terms of the greatest exigencies or ‘What is most expedient at this time’(SJ, 1549). Herein may rest the meaning of Love in the world of today: The Jesuits have currently made justice and peace two of the greatest exigencies today.

That may not be the case tomorrow, and thus the mission of Love changes accordingly, succumbing to the flux that guides the journey to Knowledge and Truth. This is Constructivist Faith in action. Until the exigencies of the time again change, in this endless process of progress, let this Faith animate cooperation in our common or current mission of justice and peace towards a future of Hope and Love.

Love or Die or and Die

While contemplating why an expanding universe
 On that hill, friend, suddenly one became two
 As Auden's 1st September 1939 to me came
 Realizing it's the how of death, not its fact.

A Loveless death worse than death
 Such were the yesteryears now replayed.
 By a fireside, anticipating a universe retreating
 Swiftly, my dear, two have become one

When the 24th of June upon medescended!
 Should the third bombs fall from lessons unlearnt
 Please, let it survive us that love which no one can buy
 Pray the search for Justice and Peace be not in vain.

I want no millions but an answer to my question:
 Why would love fail us - if it does?

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