

# Radical humanism and true generosity

SOMETIME in 1988, the political group to which I belonged planned a documentary on the legendary Michael Imoudu, Nigeria's Labour leader, Number One. At a stage in the plan, a delegation of two, including myself, was sent to seek support, including material assistance, from Gani Fawehinmi. We went to his Anthony Village Chambers. While waiting to see him I observed that very many people were also waiting. This was to be expected of an extraordinary personage like Gani. But what struck me was that most of the clients and visitors I saw were either students, or young people, or members of the lower classes. I did not notice any "big" person. There were of course a number of people who, like my comrade and me, could speak "big grammar" but were not known to be able to match their education with cash. I later realised that most of the people we met were waiting to see Gani for the same purpose that we had come: not to give something, but to seek free legal representation, or material assistance, or both.

My question to Gani Fawehinmi was direct: "Gani, how do you manage to survive as a lawyer when most of your clients are not in the position to pay and are, obviously, defended free of charge? How do you manage to survive when many of your non-fee paying clients are even supported by you to solve some of their ancillary material problems?" He smiled. His response was so simple that an observer could describe it as anticlimax: "From the proceeds of one big case from a big person, I can have the means to support several cases from poor people and also pursue one or two political or constitutional cases free of charge." He quickly changed the topic to the matter that had brought me. But I confess, I went through the "main" subject only mechanically and was happy when the meeting was adjourned. I

was profoundly struck by the declaration I had just received, and the principles it embodies have never left me.

From this encounter, I drew the conclusion that there was a difference between philanthropy and humanism, and that there were variants of humanism. I was recently reminded of these distinctions. The ordinary meaning of humanism is "any system or mode of thought or action in which human interests, values, and dignity predominate". A humanist is therefore a person "having a strong interest in, or concern for, human welfare, values and dignity". Philanthropy, on the other hand, is defined, again ordinarily, as "affection for mankind, especially as manifested in donations of money, property, or work, to needy persons, or to socially useful purposes".

Going by these definitions, a humanist may be rich or poor. Prophets were not known to be rich; on the contrary most of them were, in fact, poor, very poor. Many revolutionary leaders were poor. Many martyrs were poor. But they could all be described as humanists. It is, however, inconceivable for a person who can hardly feed himself or herself to be described as a philanthropist - however kind or pious he or she may be. Furthermore, whereas a wealthy person who gives a greater part of what he or she has to the "needy" or to "socially useful purposes", but does not show human solidarity in any other way, can hardly be called a humanist, he or she can still be called a philanthropist. Finally, a person who has a "strong interest in or concern for, human welfare, values, and dignity" but does not donate to the "needy" or to "socially useful purposes" - when she or he is in a position to do so - cannot be called a humanist.

To summarise: it is not necessary to be rich to be a humanist, but it is necessary to be rich to be a philanthropist. Dona-

By Edwin Madunagu

tions alone can qualify one to be called a philanthropist, but these cannot qualify one to be called a humanist. From these considerations I would describe Gani Fawehinmi as a humanist, a radical humanist - for there are conservative humanists. The term philanthropist is inappropriate in describing him or anyone like him.

This brings me to the distinction which Paulo Freire made between false charity and true generosity in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. False charity, according to Freire, "constraints the fearful and the subdued, the 'rejects of life' to extend their trembling hands" in supplication. On the other hand, true generosity "consists precisely in fighting the causes which nourish false charity. True generosity lies in striving so that those hands - whether of individuals or entire peoples - need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work, and by working, transform the world". I commend this distinction to all radical humanists. I would describe Gani Fawehinmi and those like him as dispensers of true generosity as distinct from false charity.

Radical humanism and true generosity. But why am I raising this question now, 15 years after the "relevant" encounter? I run a free library in Calabar. I also use the same space to run a male adolescent programme which is supported by some organisations and individuals. The adolescent programme, in turn, supports the library project in the sense that the library space is paid for from the budget of the adolescent programme, and the staff of the programme double as librarians. The library houses about 13,000 books, excluding papers and documents - most of which have been donated by my spouse and me and others by individuals and organisa-

tions, the largest donation in the latter category coming from Comrade P.A. Curtis-Joseph, an 82-year old Nigerian Marxist. Most of the users of the library are students of the higher institutions located in Calabar.

One question which I am made to answer virtually everyday since the library was opened more than seven years ago is this: where do you get the money to maintain and run this huge and rich library? Many of the people asking this question are my friends and comrades. There are also university teachers and operators of non-governmental organisations (NGO) among my interrogators. And some of them ask the same question several times as if the answer is too complex to understand. My answer has always been this: Books are not bread whose consumption cannot be repeated. If a book is well kept and used, and suffers no accident, it can last indefinitely and be read by an infinite number of people. The mathematics books I used at Obokun High School, Ilesha, about four decades ago are in the library, and I occasionally see young people refer to them. What do I lose by placing these books for free use when an agency is paying for the space and the library staff, including myself, receive salaries from another programme? That is the simple answer I repeat almost on daily basis.

Quite recently, a long-standing friend of mine suggested, through a staff of the library, that we could reproduce one of his books and sell. Quite generously, I would say, he also suggested that we could mark up the cover price a bit to make some profit. I was embarrassed and pained to learn that my friend engaged the female staff in a public argument when she tried to explain that "selling" is against the foundational principle of the library, and that if we have extra copies of a book, or

copies that we can spare, or whose costs we can somehow underwrite, we usually give them out freely. My friend's final message to me, through the female staff, was that socialism is not philanthropism. Yes, socialism is not philanthropism. But whatever socialism is, the struggle for it is thoroughly compatible with radical humanism which allows that students who are studying under very difficult conditions be offered the free use of a library and be given free books - if this act is not harmful to public good or to the person making the offer.

Radical humanism and true generosity. Of course, these can be abused, and are often abused, not only by recipients, but also by dispensers. But that is not an argument against them. One common abuse by dispensers is to use humanistic pretences to exploit desperate people. Another is to assume that the mere act of giving can somehow mitigate one's crimes, especially anti-people crimes. Yet another is to hope that the force of example can generalise radical humanism and true generosity and that this, in turn, will lead to the transformation of society. It is also an abuse of radical humanism and true humanism to behave like "Mr. Donatus" throwing money about to obtain instant popularity. Such people are, in fact, dispensers of false charity. I would refer them to Gani Fawehinmi.

As for recipients of radical humanism and true generosity, the commonest abuse is to fake pathetic stories or exaggerate them in order to obtain assistance. They can also be abused through opportunism and cynicism: since the fellow appears not to know what to do with money, let us "obtain" as much of it as possible from him or her. Very provocative, isn't it? But it is not an argument against radical humanism and true generosity.